

Cartoon
Kari Lynn M.

Published by Kari Lynn M. at Smashwords

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Acknowledgements

Well, I guess I did it. I wrote a book. I actually wrote a book.

It's been a really crazy ride writing this novel and there's so much I could say here about that journey and everything... but I'll make it short, I promise.

Well, maybe.

Anyway, I think this is where I'm supposed to say my 'thank y'all's' and express gratitude for the people who kept me going and motivated while I slaved away at my keyboard during seventy percent of my time as an eighteen-year-old. So, thank you Sir Mix-a-Lot for creating the hit Baby Got Back, which I'll confess I listened to on repeat more times than I probably should have while writing this story, and to both General Mills and Betty Crocker for making and distributing Hamburger Helper Microwave Singles to college students like me who religiously eat cheeseburger mac in their dorm rooms while studying for chemistry tests well past midnight. Or, in my case, for the girl who *should* have probably been studying for her chemistry test... but somehow ended up working on her 100,000+ word novel instead.

Okay, okay, now for real.

Thank you to my family and my friends for reading my story... or, really, for begging me to finish my story and publish already so they *could* read it! Thanks especially to wonderful father for being my #1 fan right from the very first day I even mentioned having an interest in writing and for being the one that really pushed me to even get this far and publish my first book! And... thanks, of course, to everyone who is reading this right now; readers are the real reason I write. I mean, who would want to write a ~500 page book and not have anyone to share it with?

Also, thank you so much to everyone who has befriended me on Wattpad or read any of my stories on that website! I really do love that community and definitely believe that I would have never even thought of pursuing writing if I had never joined it.

Okay, I know, this wasn't really all that short... but, again, I just wrote a 100,000+ word story; did you *really* expect short from me?

I hope you enjoy my story and thank you all so, *so* much for reading it! <3

-Kari

Chapter One

"Oh..." I groaned.

One small bit at a time, I could feel myself begin to awake.

And it was more painful than waking up before nine o'clock.

I leaned my upper body forward and focused my eyes on the situation around me as soon as they were opened.

At least, opened enough.

"What..." I muttered to myself.

I had to blink a few times at what I saw.

A few stiff, unmoving bodies were laid face down all around me. Each one had at least one stain of blood to cover their clothing.

"Um..." I whispered, now looking around to observe the room I was in.

No windows, no furniture. Plain and simple.

Suddenly, a soft, static-like voice arose from what seemed like nowhere.

"Hello? Agent Wolf? Come in..."

I took a guess as to where it came from, and then slowly gazed over to its direction.

"Come in, please..." it continued.

Only then did I realize it was coming from a Bluetooth-type of device, which was just kind of thrown onto the floor a few feet from my right.

"Uh..." I mumbled, again.

The voice repeated itself a few more times, so I eventually decided to respond.

I began to reach out toward it but stopped when a sharp pain struck me in the back of my head.

"Ah..." I softly sputtered out, quickly following up on the sound by pulling my hand back to touch my, apparently, wounded scalp.

I felt around where the source of my sudden pain was, and then brought my hand back into my view. I swiftly saw that a few drops of blood were laid upon my fingertips.

Whether or not they were actually mine, I had no clue, but I definitely knew something, besides my brain, was wrong with my head.

"Hello?" the static voice reiterated, for the millionth time.

"Ugh..." I muttered, brushing the thought of my injured head off. Or, at least, attempting to.

I continued my efforts to retrieve the Bluetooth receiver and pulled my body up to my knees. I then reached forward with my right hand, again, and snatched the device from the ground in front of me.

I brought it up to my mouth.

"Um, hi..." I began.

"Who is this?" the blurred voice snappily replied.

"I-I'm... This is..." I tried to answer. "Well, I can't quite remember that right now, but I will be sure to get back with you on it when... when... when I do."

"Where are you?" I could now make out the voice as being more feminine.

"I'm... Well, I'm not sure of that, either, but I know I'm not home. Or anywhere near home, probably." I glided my eyes around the room a little more before continuing. "And I'm a little confused as to, um, how I got here..."

"That doesn't matter right now. Listen, you may be in danger..."

"Yeah, I... I kind of got that..." I remarked, scanning the number of unmoving bodies scattered around me.

"You need to get out, and we'll help you..." the woman said through the device. As she continued, I placed the Bluetooth speaker securely over my ear, making it hands-free, as I assumed it was supposed to be. "Listen closely... There should be at least one hand-held gun nearby, and you'll probably want to grab it before you do anything else."

"Gun?" I echoed, my eyes nearly bugging out of my head with the ring of the word.

I then stood slowly and raised one eyebrow along with the rising of my position.

"Yes..." the woman assured me. "Do you see one?"

"Uh, well..." I shuffled toward the closest body near me, which was a tall man in a dark suit, laid face down on the tile. Soon after I had spotted him, a shiny silver glare next to one of his hands caught my eye. "I think I have, possibly..."

"Take it," the woman commanded.

I stepped in front of the man, and then crouched down to scoop up the silver gun that sat next to his body.

"O-Okay, well..." I muttered, more to myself, as I rose again. I uncomfortably situated the gun in my hands.

"I've never exactly done this before, I..." I trailed off and played my fingers around the trigger of the pistol.

Of course, though, I kept the gun pointed downward.

"I'm not..." I continued to mumble, searching the gun in my own way.

Suddenly, the pistol spat out a fast bullet at the floor beneath me.

"Oh! God, look at that..." I half-yelled out. "Well, now that that's taken care of..." I redrew my attention to the task at hand.

"Never touched a gun before?" the woman half-humoredly questioned.

"Well, you know... not exactly..."

The girl let out a small giggle, and then continued.

"Well, you'll learn fast... Now... is there a window around?"

"Window..." I whispered, whipping my head back and forth as I did so.

"Ah..." I muttered, stopping abruptly to touch the injured area on the back of my head. "N-No..." I eventually replied.

"How about a door?"

I locked my eyes onto the closed exit almost directly in front of me.

"Sure is," I responded, tilting my head slightly.

"Go through it. Actually, by this time, you probably won't need the gun, but I still don't want to take any chances with you..."

"Yeah, I get that a lot..." I quietly remarked as I approached the door across the area. And, once I had reached it, I carefully opened it by a small, common knob-like handle.

I took my time as I stepped through.

"Tell me what you see," the woman said, her voice blurring a little now.

I didn't reply very quickly, probably on account of the fact that I was attempting to enter an unknown area with a gun and absolutely no clue as to why or how I was in my current situation at all. Instead, I cautiously made my way into some sort of hallway, one foot at a time.

I gazed from one direction to the other.

No one was around.

Luckily.

"Hello? Can you tell me what's there?" the woman repeated.

"Oh!" I snapped my head permanently into the right direction, just by a random choice. I began to walk forward as I continued. "Um... Well, there's a bunch of doors around... It's a very long, narrow room... I'd say it's most likely a type of hallway."

"Good," the static voice replied. "You aren't far, then."

"Far from what?" I questioned but didn't quite receive the answer I had hoped for. Actually, I kind of didn't receive an *answer* at all.

"Take one of the doors on the opposite side of the hall, down by the end of the left direction."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Oh... Uh, okay..." I muttered as I slowly turned myself around to face the complete *opposite* direction.

I silently sighed as I began to walk toward the end of the hallway.

"W-Which... um, door?" I awkwardly asked.

"Whichever one leads to the stairs," was my specified answer.

"Great..." I mumbled, finally now approaching the area of my probable destination.

"Remember, it's on the opposite side from where you came... So, on the right..." the feminine voice prompted me. Like I would have forgotten.

Actually... I had.

"Okay," I said back, readying myself to test out the first door on my right. I quickly turned my body in front of it, and then reached out to twist its low handle.

"Oh, God..." I whispered shakily, unassured of what could be on the other side.

Slowly, I closed my eyes, scrunched my face, and rotated the handle a smooth ninety degrees.

And then practically threw the door out in front of me.

I shot my eyes open as I clasped both my hands around the pistol I possessed.

It was just an empty office room.

I sighed.

"How uneventful," I commented, relaxing my hands from the gun and reclosing the door. I then slowly pivoted back around and continued onward to my next attempt.

The Bluetooth girl remained silent as I began to wrap my fingers around the next door handle. Only when I began to turn my wrist did she pipe up again.

"How many more doors do you have to go?" she inquired.

I paused my body's motions a second and peeked to the left to count.

"Two."

She didn't ask anymore of me, so I looked back and started to open the one door in front of me. I was much calmer this time, and I figured it would, at worst, be just another empty office room.

But I had to freeze once the door was open and when I realized that it was, in fact, *not* a very empty office room.

It was an actual office, organized much like the last one, but I wouldn't say that it was completely empty on account of the man facing my direction and sitting in a chair behind a desk, right in front of my bugged-eyes.

"Hey!" he suddenly yelled, as soon as he noticed my presence.

"Sorry!" I immediately screeched out, slamming the door closed in front of me.

"What?" the girl on the Bluetooth urged out, apparently noting my distress.

"Whoops," I mumbled, now rushing to the next door in line. I fumbled to grasp its handle, but it didn't even matter, because it turned out to be locked.

I darted to the last door to be tried.

"Please, please..." I muttered, my shaking left hand already outstretched toward it.

Once I had actually reached it, I noticed there was a large plate slapped directly in the center of the wooden frame. I shot my eyes across it, and read one bold and entirely capitalized word:

STAIRS.

"Oh, really?" I snickered at it as I twisted at its knob. Before I could blast it open, though, a strong, manly voice yelled at me from my right.

"Stop right there!"

I paused and snapped my head into its direction.

"Who is it?" the girl in my ear added to the intensifying situation.

I looked over the large, but otherwise average-looking, office guy with shot-wide eyes. He was frozen, keeping one arm out by his side, and the other out only to point his index finger at me.

"A man..." I whispered back to the girl.

"Does he have a gun?" she questioned.

I kept my body stiff and my eyes locked on him while I replied quietly.

"No..."

"Show him yours. But don't shoot him. Tell him to back down," the girl instructed of me.

I complied and threw my hand with the gun up and outstretched in front of my face.

He immediately threw both of his hands up in the air.

Honestly, I had forgotten about the gun for a while...

"Don't..." I began to yell back at him, but lost track of what I needed to say. "D-Don't... Tell me-what... to-do..." I stuttered out, eventually.

After receiving and understanding my statement, the guy just squinted his eyes in confusion. And, at the same time, I heard a faint sigh in my earpiece.

"Just... make sure he doesn't follow you," my instructor told me.

"Don't follow me!" I awkwardly added right after, barely even listening to myself.

The man continued to stay frozen and dazed.

"Okay... You can keep going, now," the girl in my ear said.

"I-I'm going to... just... go, now..." I then slowly stated aloud.

Without another word uttered from anyone, I backed up until my body hit part of the left wall, and then ungracefully darted my head over toward the 'STAIRS' door.

I stepped toward it and grabbed for its handle with my free hand, the gun still held up by my other. And, before I completely opened it and stepped through, I looked back at the man down the hall once more.

"Be good," I commanded of him, making an odd gesture toward him with my pistol.

I then whipped myself to the left and nearly jumped into the stairwell. I soon relaxed my arms completely and looked around as the door shut itself behind me.

"Okay... Um, now what?" I asked, directing my question to the woman whom I still didn't actually know much about.

"G-Go t...to th...floor..." she responded in an extremely electronically chopped sentence.

"What?" I confusedly questioned, now reaching my left hand up and across my body to play around with the Bluetooth fixture.

"Th...gr-ground fl..."

"Ground floor?" I patched and repeated her words. "As in, like, bottom floor, right?"

I received no answer, but rather, a static mess.

"Okay, let's just hope..." I whispered to myself, as soon as the electric static faded back to silence. I then turned to the right, where the stairs led downward. I took a few trots down them and kept my eyes alert to my surroundings, which were currently only dirty cement walls and rusted railings.

I continued down approximately three flights and, eventually, got to a landing at the very end.

"Now what?" I asked, completely ignoring the fact that the person I was attempting to communicate with was unavailable at the moment. I began pacing around a little, and then continued to speak to myself. "Through the... door?"

I stopped my movements when I received an unexpected response through my earpiece.

"Yes, through the door..." the woman replied, her voice nearly crystal clear now.

"Oh, wow, you're there..." I mumbled, just loud enough for her to perceive.

Slowly, I began to open the door before me and peeked my head through it. I looked around and observed what seemed to me to be an upscale Holiday Inn, hotel-motel kind of lobby.

Although, I had a feeling this was not a hotel.

"I need you to pick up a file for me," the voice in my ear said, abruptly.

"Oh, really?" I replied, barely even subconsciously, as I carefully stepped out into the empty, lobby-like area.

"Yes, please. It's in one of the rooms at the back of the building, on this floor. We don't know which one, but they should all be empty—"

"Okay, but—" I began to cut her off, but it didn't seem to be of much help, because she turned around to do the exact same to me.

"Please; this is extremely important. And, we're sending someone to come get you in the meantime."

"Okay, well..." I started, again. I then turned my body in nearly every direction around me while I continued. "I would... like to know... where to go then, for that area... please."

I eventually stopped spinning myself all over, and just decided to wait for more directions.

"Go to the back of that floor."

"And... where would that be?" I raised each of my eyebrows and observed the area even more carefully, noticing that it was all walls, desks, chairs, plants, and space.

No doors.

The woman then sighed some and tried to explain further to me.

"There should be another door, behind one of the desks, on the far wall. Take that one, and it should land you into another hallway, and that's where the back rooms are."

"Okay, but I don't see any doors, actually, so, I think..." I slowly trailed off as I began to walk toward the desks along the far wall. And, once I became close enough, I spotted one, solid-wood door, practically hidden behind a tall, potted plant.

"Oh," I quietly commented as I began to approach it.

The woman spoke no more words, so I gently reached out and pulled the door open.

I walked through and was immediately greeted by the scent of newspapers and the sight of a hallway that was much similar to the one from upstairs.

And too many doors.

"Okay, well, here I am," I declared, not noticing that I was actually making hand gestures with the gun I held.

The door soon closed behind me and my instructor spoke up, again.

"Okay, good. Now, it's more likely to be one of the rooms at the far end, so start there first...."

I began walking into the far direction while she talked.

"Each door is locked with its own special code, so you'll have to be specific when you tell me which you're planning on opening."

"Um, well, I want to open... this one, then," I replied, stepping in front of the door farthest from where I came, on the left.

"Specific," she responded.

"Okay, well... its wooden, painted cherry-brown, if that's a thing, and..."

I heard the woman chuckle, just a little.

"Okay, come on, now..." she said, with a little more emotion than before.

I made a short smile, and then spoke.

"It's the farthest door, and on the left side... I think."

"Thinking isn't a good enough promise. Are you one-hundred percent sure?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Okay, get ready, here's the code..."

I quickly looked downward, toward a number pad attached to the door handle, and lifted my free hand outward to it.

"Eight, zero, five... Nine, zero, one... Two, zero, six."

I punched each number on the pad as she said it, and then waited for it to unlock, or make a noise, or something.

"It's not doing anything," I said, staring right at the handle.

"Did you try opening it?"

"Oh, well... no," I stated.

I then pushed down on the vertical knob with my hand but, surprisingly, got no feedback from it.

It was still locked.

"It's locked," I declared.

"Okay, then try it again. Eight, zero, five... Nine, zero, one... Two, zero, six."

I complied with each number, and tried the handle again, but to no avail.

"It's still not..." I began, but never finished.

"Okay... Well, try a different one. Try the one across the hall."

I didn't speak out again, at least until I had whipped around to face the next door.

"Okay... what's the code?"

"Farthest door on the right: Two, one, three... Five, seven, nine... Three, zero, two," she said.

I entered each number correctly, and then jiggled the handle.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head slightly.

"Try it again. Two, one, three, five, seven, nine, three, zero, two."

I tried again, but this time, as soon as I punched in the last number, a loud, sharp alarm-like noise began to ring all around me.

"Whoa... 'kay, that was not it..." I mumbled. Or, at least, it seemed like a mumble compared to the screaming alarm that infused the air in the area.

"Shit..." I could faintly hear the woman profane.

I stepped back a moment and looked back to the other end of the hallway, where I noticed a flashing red light had appeared, directly above the door where I had come.

"We need to get you out of there; your ride is almost there... Get your gun ready, and stay where you are," I was quickly instructed.

"Okay, but, um..." I started, as I slowly backed up and into the small, plain wall behind me. "I, uh..."

"You're going to be fine; Ace will be there in a few minutes."

"Who?" I questioned.

Suddenly, the far door shot open, and a large man in a casual, blue suit appeared. And, of course, he was pointing a large gun directly toward me.

I let out an unpleasantly sounding screech.

"Hands up; put your weapon down!" he yelled at me.

"Shoot him!" the woman in my earpiece barked.

Once my scream had ended, the back of my head began to throb, once again, and I began to fall backward. I didn't actually fall at all, though, because I already had had myself pinned against the wall. At the same time, as well, I threw my gun down on the ground below my feet and swung my hands up and into the air.

I took a deep breath and brought myself back to full consciousness as the man started to slowly pace toward me.

"What were you doing here?" he shouted, over the loud alarm system.

"I don't, I don't..." I stuttered out.

"Why were you here?" he yelled, even more loudly.

"I don't, I-I don't know," I stammered.

"Why?" he screamed, now only two feet away from my face.

"I don't know!" I half-whined back.

"I'm going to ask you one more time, girl... *Why* were you here?"

"I honestly have no clue, sir... h-honest, I really don't, I—"

Abruptly, a loud shot rang through the hall, and the man halted with a shocked expression upon his face. Immediately after, he fell forward and toward me.

I let out another awkwardly high-pitched and unnatural sound as he collapsed below me. My eyes then flew up, and I became face-to-face with another, younger, armed man, who was holding his own pistol at the man's body.

He gazed up at me.

"Hi, I'm Ace, nice to meet you," he introduced extremely fast. He then turned to my side and bent over to retrieve my abandoned shooter.

I studied him as he did so and noted his causal jeans, green tee and short, but messy, blond hair.

"Now, I know it's probably been a long, hard first day on the job, but..." he said as he brought himself back up to stance. "Rule number one is..." He held the pistol back out to me. "This guy's your friend."

He smiled.

My wide eyes never left his face as I reached forward to receive the gun.

"So, do you have a name?" he asked, now placing his hands on his hips.

"No, I... I mean, I do, yeah, but, um..." my mouth stumbled out. "I-I just, I can't quite seem to... remember, right now..."

I pursed my lips and finally looked away from him.

"Can't remember your own name?" he inquired.

"Yeah, I can't... um... remember anything, really, right now, I'm..."

"Don't worry," he shot back, placing his one free hand onto my left shoulder. I slowly gazed back up as he finished. "I'll call ya 'Amnesia'."

He winked, and then spun himself right around.

"Follow me, Amnesia!" he yelled out as he began to walk down the hall.

I looked his, actually, well-toned body up and down for a quick moment.

"Well, okay..." I whispered, pretty much just to myself, and then began to pace straight behind him.

I stopped at the same instant he did, right in front of the far door.

"So, where you from, Amnesia?" he inquired as he reached down to twist the door knob. He then looked over his shoulder, giving himself a better view of me. "Or have you forgotten that piece of personal information, also?"

He gave a small laugh.

I gave a quirky smile back.

"Actually, I'm from... upstairs," I responded, thinking of my reply as almost perfectly clever.

He blankly stared at me.

"You know... like, upstairs... of the building?" I continued.

He lifted the corner of his mouth slightly.

"Nah... But, that's cute, though..." he finally said, making a type of gesture with his pistol.

He then slowly turned back around.

"I see you've met Ace," the woman in my earpiece piped up, catching me off guard.

"Oh, god!" I partially yelled out, throwing my free hand up to my chest. "You scared me, sorry..."

"Huh?" Ace questioned, spinning back around.

"Oh, no, not you..." I began. "It's just the... the girl... in my ear..."

"The girl in your ear? Damn, you really have lost your mind, haven't you?"

"No, I.. " I reached up and quickly brushed my hair behind my ear, revealing the Bluetooth piece attached to my head. "*This.*"

"Oh, yeah... Is that Mel on there?" he suddenly leaned forward and aimed his mouth toward my ear. "Hey, Mel!"

"Oh, God," the girl, 'Mel', laughed. "Do your job, Ace."

Ace leaned back and turned around again before she even finished, so I assumed he didn't even hear any of her response.

"Alright, let's roll," he said, pulling his handgun up by his face and reaching down to turn the door handle.

I pushed both my arms down by my sides and tightened my right hand on my own, unused gun.

Slowly, he pushed the door open in front of us and stepped carefully through. He looked around alertly as he walked, keeping his gun in a ready position.

"Alright, 'Nesia, we're good," he declared, now resting his arms.

I then stepped out after him and relaxed myself as I let the door shut behind me. I looked around a little, but the area still looked like a hotel lobby to me.

"Okay, we need to go up a floor and get out the same window I came in," Ace proclaimed.

"Why not the front door?" I asked.

We both began to make our way toward the stairwell, across the room.

"Because..." he started, looking up and around observantly as he talked. "We would need—" He abruptly stopped.

"Nesia!" he suddenly yelled out, grabbing my attention.

I shot my head up and saw only a glimpse of another armed man, dressed in average office clothes and standing behind a desk by the stairs, before Ace jumped toward me and pushed me down to the ground.

"Ah!" I shouted, tumbling down behind one of the sofas.

A gunshot rang out in the room.

"I think we just might have company..." Ace mumbled, safely crouched beside me.

I began to pick myself back up to my own crouch position, and Ace poked his head and pistol over the armrest of the couch.

Another shot shouted out, but this time, from him.

My body froze with both my sweaty palms clamped onto the gun in my lap.

A medium length silence then followed.

"Okay," Ace began, his eyes slowly surveying the area from behind the sofa. "I think we're good, now..."

"You *think*? Or do you actually *know*?" I half-mouthed out to him.

He looked over to me.

"Rule number two, 'newbie': you never know. You may know what you think, and you may think you know, but you never know."

I looked at him confusedly.

"Simple," he added, raising an eyebrow. He stared back at me a second, then continued. "Now..." He snapped his look downward and began reloading bullets from his pocket into his gun. "We need to get upstairs. Up and out."

I didn't say anything else and waited for him to cautiously stand back up.

"Come on," he said, partially whispering this time.

I silently obeyed and stood up behind him. He began to leisurely walk toward the stairway's door, and I followed a little more swiftly after him. Once we had reached our destination, I gazed over to the desks against the wall. I looked behind them and saw the armed man from before lying face down on the hardwood floor.

"Hey, Amnesia, you've already lost your memory, so let's not lose the rest of you here, too. Okay?"

I flipped my gaze back toward Ace, now noticing that he was holding the door open for me, while already standing halfway on the stairs ahead.

I didn't give any reply and looked downward as I stepped through the doorway.

Ace let the door go once I was near him, and then began up the staircase. I remained close behind him and trotted upward until we reached the door to the next floor. Once there, Ace opened it in front of us, but took his time to get through it.

"Stay close," he commanded, holding the door open for me to follow through.

I looked around to see a large, cubical-filled area with dimmed lights and long pathways. Ace began down the path pointing left, and I kept myself near behind him. I also remained alert as we walked, busying my eyes to search around us and tightening my hands on my pistol.

"That room, I think," Ace piped up, pointing his gun at the farthest of three doors on the left wall.

"*Think...*" I echoed quietly.

"God..." he muttered, a small chuckle added to his voice.

We both approached the door, one of us on each side. Ace then reached down with his free hand and began to twist the handle.

"It's locked," he declared.

"Huh?" I shot back.

"Locked..." he softly repeated, now leaning over to study it.

"W—" I started, but abruptly became cut off.

"Weapons down!" another random, deep voice yelled out from behind us.

I snapped my head into its direction and saw yet another armed man, dressed identically to the others I had seen previously. He held up his own gun toward us with one hand and reached for a radio-like device on his belt with the other.

"Second floor; I found 'em," the man said into the radio, as soon as he was able to retrieve it. He then slowly placed it back and returned his full attention onto us. "I said drop 'em!"

I remained still and looked over at Ace from the corner of my eye.

"Mm..." I heard him begin to respond. "Nah."

Without another instant passing by, Ace threw his shooting arm up and let his pistol spit out a single bullet at him.

I shot my head from Ace to the man and watched as the bullet struck him directly in the chest. He let out a short-lived yelp, and then tumbled down to the ground.

"Oh my God..." I mumbled out.

"Whew, close one..." Ace said, turning back around toward the door. "Okay, now..."

He reached back down to the door knob, and tried to twist it once more, but with no success. Afterward, he released it from his grasp and stepped back a few steps. He looked it over a moment, and then ran and jumped into it, making it basically collapse inward.

"Must have been a weak door..." I commented.

"Please... no doors can withstand me," Ace remarked.

I narrowed my eyebrows at him and almost smiled, even though he was looking in the opposite direction.

Not even a millisecond later, though, *another* voice shouted out from somewhere on our left.

"Put your guns down!"

Without even giving me time to look in its direction, Ace grabbed my arm and pushed me through the broken doorway.

"Go!" he yelled at me as I fell onto a scratchy, carpeted floor.

I heard a few gunshots scream out from behind me, and then Ace jumped onto the ground beside me.

"Get out the window," he ordered.

I poked my head upward and looked around until I found the source of the room's light, which was a half-opened window on the right wall.

I quickly threw my hands out in front of myself, and then used them to push my body back up into a standing position, losing my gun somehow in the process. I then sprinted over to the window with a feeling that Ace was close behind.

I peeked out and through the opening, and then looked downward to notice we were a fair amount away from the ground with nothing but the roof of a dark car below us.

And, of course, there was no way to climb down.

"And exactly *how* did you come in here?" I inquired, turned my head slightly over my shoulder toward Ace.

"Just jump!" he urged.

"What?" I yelled, now looking directly at the car below.

"Come on, 'Nesia!" Ace shouted back, behind me.

He then grabbed me by the back of my waist and pushed me forward. I practically flew out of the window, screaming out until I landed, mostly on my side, onto the top of the car below.

Ace quickly fell, in a crouch position, beside me.

"Okay, now, get in the car!" he yelled out.

"Oh..." I whined, already feeling a sore kind of pain in my side and back.

Ace resituated his legs, and then slid safely off the car and onto the ground below. I rolled my head over to see him better but didn't move the rest of my body immediately.

I watched as he began to approach the driver's door, and then stared blankly as he turned back to me.

"You comin'?" he asked.

"I—" I began to respond but stopped short when a bullet bounced off the car roof, directly beside me.

I let out a short and hideously high shriek, and then slid myself down to the gravel on the passenger side of the vehicle.

And I immediately got in.

"Not supposed to get in strangers' cars..." I muttered through heavy breaths, intentionally just for my own amusement, as I reached over my shoulder for the seatbelt that I figured I would probably benefit from using.

"Hey, at least you're remembering something," Ace commented, both slamming his door and pushing the car into drive at the same time.

I didn't even have time to click my seatbelt into its place before he floored the gas pedal.

"Whoa-'kay!" I yelled out, suddenly releasing my seatbelt and grabbing onto the sides of my seat instead.

"Yeah, hang on!" Ace shouted back, his body firmly hunched over the steering wheel.

I obeyed his command as he sped past a few more tall buildings. I looked outside through the tinted windows and soon saw that we were slowly becoming surrounded by a number of trees. Ace then gazed up into the rearview mirror and gradually let up on putting the pedal to the metal.

"No one's following us," he pronounced.

"Well, thank God, right?" I said, looking over into his direction.

He smirked.

"Sure. Kind of takes the fun out of it, though, doesn't it?"

"Fun?" I questioned, tilting my head down a little and my eyebrows up a little more as I did so.

I shook my head a little and looked back toward my passenger side window.

"How do you..." I began to add. "How do you... do this... all the time?" I gazed back to him. "I mean, this is what you do, right?"

He smiled a smirk-y smile, again.

"You mean kill strangers that have threatening weapons and/or demeanors and save damsels in distress? Yeah, I do it all the time. Well, the first part of it. It's just my job."

"But... But, how, exactly, do you do it?" I rephrased.

Ace paused a moment, then answered.

"You know, I like to pretend like I'm in a cartoon."

"A cartoon?"

He looked back and forth between me and the road ahead as he continued.

"Yeah, like I'm in one of those crazy violent video games, or a James Bond movie, or a crazy violent James Bond video game... Or, to categorize all of that... a cartoon."

"And I'm the one who's bumped my head?" I joked.

He laughed a little, under his breath.

"You asked; I told. Anything else you need to know?"

I moved my eyes down to the buttons on the car radio between us.

"Well, nothing I need to know, but I—" I started.

"Good," Ace shot out, right in the middle of my sentence. "Because your new, temporary home will be coming up shortly on your right."

Chapter Two

I slowly stepped out of the car.

"Okay, so, um, exactly where is this 'home' of yours?" I asked, looking around to perceive nothing but trees, wilderness, dirt, trees, plants, leaves, and more trees.

"Look a little closer," Ace responded, walking over to my side and gazing around himself.

"Okay..." I said, continuing to observe.

After a few uneventful moments of silence, I decided to resume speaking.

"Wait a minute, I think I've got it..." I turned directly toward him and slid my hands up to my hips. "You live in a tree house."

I cocked my head to the side and gave a slight smile.

"Against your previous assumptions, I'm sorry, but my medical records do not indicate that I am an orangutan," Ace shot back.

He gladly returned the smile.

"Okay, well then... I'm stumped," I stated, turning and kicking weakly at the base of a recently cut tree.

I immediately began to laugh, and then turned back to Ace as I pointed to the tree *stump* in front of me.

"Wow, Amnesia," he flashed another smile and shook his head. "Aren't you funny?"

"Yeah, well, you know... I try," I responded, now looking more closely around me.

"You *are* getting a little closer..." Ace assured.

"Yeah, sure..."

I observantly spun myself around.

"Here, let me show you something..." he piped up, as soon as I had turned to face him once more. He then stepped past my side and made his way to a random tree a few feet in the opposite direction.

I twisted myself back around and slowly chased after him.

"Watch," he commanded, bringing one hand up into view. He held his palm toward me a second, and then moved it toward an area of slightly discolored bark on the round tree in front of him. He pushed on it gently, then brought his hand back as the bark began to flip itself upward, revealing some type of simple keypad hidden underneath.

"Well, that's... fancy," I commented.

Ace smirked a little, and then continued to enter a long code of numbers into the pad. As soon as he was done, he reached up and flipped the fake bark back down into its place.

I looked around for a moment.

"I don't think you did it right," I said.

"That's the point," Ace replied, now turning toward the left and pacing over to another tree.

I didn't follow him this time but watched as he knelt down and reached for something on the ground. Whatever it was that he ended up grabbing, he pulled it upward, bringing a large, square hidden door up with it. He then pushed the door away from himself and allowed it to fall backward on its hinges.

I remained still, a few feet away from him, as he suddenly stepped down into the new hole created in the ground set before him.

"Well, um, okay, then..." I whispered to myself while he quickly walked down and into the hole on what I assumed to be stairs.

I paced over to the hole, and then peered down into it.

It was definitely a hole full of stairs.

"Come on, 'Nesia!" Ace yelled from somewhere that was out of my sight, his voice strongly echoing.

"Okay, okay..." I whispered, again mostly to myself, and then started to trot down the stairs. They seemed to be made of cement, or maybe just something really hard, and there were moderately bright lights implanted in the 'ceiling' above them along the way. After a few long, laborious moments, I eventually made it to the bottom.

I stepped off of the stairs and looked up and around at the same time. I was now in a humungous room filled with desks, computers, cabinets, and pretty much every other type of furniture that constitutes an office. The whole area was brightly lit and extremely clean as well as very white.

Two young women, one with dark, kinky hair and one with wavy blonde, were standing in the middle of the room, next to the largest and messiest desk. Next to them stood Ace.

"And there she finally is..." he announced, beginning to walk toward me. "Ladies..." he gazed back over at the other two women as he finished. "May I introduce to you Amnesia: the girl who can't even remember her own name."

I looked from him to them.

"Well, I mean, I do remember... Or, I mean, I *could*... remember..." I stumbled out.

"Sure, okay, whatever..." Ace shot back, now approaching me and turning to place a hand on my back. He began to push me forward, toward the women.

" 'Nesia, this is Mel..." he continued, pointing with his free hand at the dark-skinned, dark-haired girl. "And Katie," he finished with moving his finger toward the other.

By now, we had stopped in front of the two.

"Hi," the blonde, Katie, greeted first, a big, pretty smile on her face.

"Hello, 'Amnesia'," the other, Mel, added.

I instantly recognized her voice.

"Oh, wait, are you—" I began to question.

"This girl?" she completed for me, reaching out and removing the Bluetooth from behind my ear, the one of which I had completely forgotten.

"Oh my God, I completely forgot..." I stared at the receiver as she took it back. "About... that..."

"Not surprising," Ace remarked.

"Uh-huh," Mel replied to him, on the verge of some kind of sarcasm. "Tell me, though, Amnesia... How do you actually lose track of your own name?"

I pursed my lips at her.

"Well, um, you know... I think I may have possibly injured myself... I, uh, bumped my head or something, so—"

"Whoa, let's see," Katie interrupted me.

I replied to her by turning around and making a circling motion with one hand over the very top of my head.

"In this region, possibly... I believe I have an injury... of... some sort," I said.

After a long, quiet second of probable observation, Ace piped up.

"'Nesia, there isn't even anything there."

"Wait, what?" I questioned, now turning back and touching the area with my previously used, motioning hand.

"Well, there is, actually, but it's just a small bump. It's nothing serious," Katie explained.

"Honestly, though, I don't think that would be the cause of your memory loss."

"Oh, really... Wow, um..." I mumbled, my eyes moving around widely. "Well, you know, I don't actually... don't remember nothing, I mean, anything, so..."

"It'll come back to you soon enough, you've just been through a lot," Mel reassured. "Ace," she turned toward him. "Show her around and make her more comfortable."

"Yes, ma'am..." Ace responded, along with a slight head bow. He removed his hands from behind his back and rotated himself toward me. "Please, come with me, miss."

He smiled and began to walk over to the far left wall.

I paused for a moment, looking around a little more.

"Okay," I eventually whispered, and then decided to follow after him.

I stepped a little wider than usual as I tried to catch up, and once I did actually reach his side, he was already standing at a door, waiting for me.

"We move a little fast," he commented. "And you might be here a while, so you should really start taking notes."

"A while?" I shot back, completely ignoring the rest of his statement.

He pushed down on the door handle in front of us, and then pushed the heavy, wooden door inward.

"Well... *duh*," he responded.

He started to walk again, through the doorway and into a long hallway.

"What do you mean, *duh*? Don't I, like, get to go home later, or something?"

I continued to walk behind him.

"Well, *like*, you could, I guess, but you even don't remember where you live," he let out a short-lived laugh and stopped by another door in the middle of the corridor, one on the right.

"Well, actually, I do remember... I live in a house... on a street... in some town... with the zip code... eighty-something... two." I gazed up to look directly back at his confused face.

He cocked his head to the side for a moment, and then shot another remark back at me.

"As does seventy-one percent of all humanity. Why don't you try again later?"

He then grabbed the handle of the door by his side and pushed himself into it, almost disappearing into the dark room on the other side.

I looked the dark opening in the wall up and down a minute, and when a light finally flickered on from inside, I stepped through.

"You know..." I began, again. "I was just kidding..."

I walked toward the center of the room, where Ace now stood, waiting for my approach.

"Kidding or not, 'Nesia... You *are* something," he gave with a small chuckle.

I gave a good smile back, and then allowed an almost too long of silence to fall. After a few seconds, I slowly slid my gaze away and turned to observe the areas around me.

After taking note of a small, cot-like bed in one corner, a practically unused desk in another, and an older-looking dresser against the wall opposite both, I decided to break the silence.

"So, what, is this my new cell?"

I remained with my body facing a different direction than Ace's, but I looked back at him from over my shoulder as he replied.

"Actually... it's *ours*."

"What?" I asked, suddenly feeling my face become slightly flushed.

Ace paused a second, then began to smile, and soon after gave way to a laugh.

"Just kidding," he said.

I half-rolled my eyes at him and smirked some. He began to walk past me and toward the door.

"On with the tour?" he suggested, or more commanded, since he was nearly in the hallway again before the words escaped his mouth.

"Kidding or not, *you're* really something..." I muttered, even though he most likely didn't hear.

I spun back to the door and made my way out of the room, instinctively flipping the light switch as I exited.

Ace began to quickly pace toward the door at the very end of the hall, opposite from the one we had originally entered from. I gave a good attempt at keeping up with him, but I obviously must not have been in as good of physical condition as he was.

"This room's my favorite..." he stated, now grabbing at the far away door's handle and throwing it forward to open the doorway.

Once I was close enough to be able to, I peeked inside and saw that the room was an oversized kitchen and dining area.

"Oh, wow..." I commented as I stood in the doorframe behind Ace.

"Hungry?" he questioned, gazing back at me while still holding the door open in front of us.

I smiled, just a little.

"Well... I mean... kind of, yeah..." I tried to reply.

"Good, because I didn't want to have to eat in front of you," he said.

Suddenly, he turned into the room and released the door to swing back at me. I pushed my hands slightly out in front of myself and caught it, and then stepped inside to let it slam shut behind me.

Ace walked over to a fridge on the left wall, and I made my way over to a seat at a large table close by it.

"I'm no chef, but I can make a pretty damn good ham and pickle sandwich," he kind of shouted out with his head stuck in between the doors of the refrigerator.

"Oh, God, no pickles..." I yelled back as I sat. "They just... make me..." I paused for a long moment before finishing.

"Irritable..." I said, much more quietly.

Ace slowly turned around to face me, his arms full of refrigerated items.

I swiftly looked away, attempting to avoid eye contact.

"Oh... kay..." he elongated his response.

As soon as he had twisted back around, I scrunched up my face.

"Well... would anything else be acceptable on your sandwich, then, 'Miss IBS'?" he remarked.

My jaw slightly dropped at his comment.

"Uh, n-no..." I eventually began to answer. "I mean, yes..."

I reached up and ran a hand through my hair, uncomfortably.

Ace roared with a laugh while he threw plates and ingredients around on the counter in front of himself.

"God, teasing you is just too much fun..." he said.

I relaxed myself a little and smiled at the back of his head.

After a few more short moments, he turned around with a small sandwich on a plate in one hand. He stepped over to my side and carefully placed it onto the table before me.

"Ham, cheese, and mustard. Is that good enough for you?" he asked.

I looked it over a second, and then nodded.

"Sure," I said, without looking up at him.

He turned back around silently and approached the counter once again.

I reached out and lifted the top slice of bread from the sandwich, and then studied the mess of meat, shredded cheese, and bright yellow mustard.

I wrinkled my nose; I actually hated mustard.

But I wasn't going to comment on that, too.

"So, Amnesia, somehow I highly doubt you still don't remember your name..." Ace conversed, squeezing out an almost empty bottle of who knows what.

I looked up at him, across from my seat at the table, and slowly brought my legs up to cross underneath my body in my chair.

"Well, you know..." I started. "There's a possibility that I could actually remember... But... I just... don't exactly *want* to... remember..."

"Why not?" Ace spun around and placed his own sandwich at the seat directly across from me.

I looked back down at my food and started to tear some of the bread's crust away.

I could hear Ace taking a large bite from his sandwich.

I then gazed back up at him and gave a slight smile.

"You know, Ace isn't my real name," he said through a full mouth.

"Oh, really?" I interrogated.

"Well," he swallowed. "It is now, but it wasn't always. I got it legally changed a few years ago."

I tilted my head to the side a little.

"What was it before, then?"

"Well," Ace took another chunk from his food. "Tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine."

I pursed my lips a moment, and then looked around the table a bit.

"Okay..." I slowly agreed. "My real name... It's...uh..." I closed my eyes.

Here goes.

"Mable-Ann Rosemary Brown..."

As soon as I opened my eyes, Ace burst out in laughter.

"Damn! No wonder you forgot all of that."

"Okay, yeah," I rolled my eyes at him. "And what name did you have that was so God-awful that it needed changed?"

Finally slowing down his laughs, Ace took a deep breath and responded.

"My old name was Dylan; it wasn't that it was a bad name... I just liked Ace better."

After his reply, he stood up and walked over to the fridge to retrieve a beverage.

"Want one?" he asked, holding a tall, blue Gatorade for me to see.

"Sure."

He grabbed another, and then brought the two drinks over to the table.

"So, do you have any kind of nickname to shorten that mouthful?" Ace asked as he sat back down.

I smiled.

"Amnesia," I shot back in response.

Ace giggled.

"Nothing else?" he asked.

"Well," I started. "Really, my friends would call me Mae. But, that's not much better to me, either..."

Ace took a few more small bites of his food and, afterward, began to open his Gatorade bottle.

"I'll just stick to 'Nesia. It fits you a lot better," he said.

I moved my head to one side and smiled a little, once again.

"Thanks," I said, finally deciding to pick up my sandwich.

Ace took a drink, and then smiled back. After looking away to take his last bites, he decided to make another remark.

"Amnesia Brown..." he muttered through chews. "Sounds like some new, weird intestinal disease..."

I sunk my front teeth into the mess in my hands, and then raised my eyebrows at him as he looked back up at me.

"Is that what pickles give you?" he questioned.

I stopped myself, mid-chew, and immediately shot a wide-eyed look at him.

Of course, he began to yell out in laughter.

I then resumed chewing and gave a very subtle giggle.

"Oh, God, sorry..." he chuckled out, now slowing down with his self-amusement.

He slowly stood and picked up his dirtied plate of mustard splatters from the table.

"I'm just too funny," he muttered, turning around and placing the plate into the sink by the fridge.

After that, he twisted back around and snatched his blue Gatorade from the table as well. He took a long drink from it, making it almost emptied, and then looked back at me and spoke.

"So, I gotta go do something. But I'm sure Mel and Katie will want to talk all that 'business' junk with you when you're done."

He quickly swallowed all that was left of his beverage, and then turned around to escort it to the trashcan.

"So, have fun!" he yelled as he walked himself over to the room's exit. He then grabbed the door's handle, whipped the door open, did a full three-sixty turn around while waving to me, stepped out into the hallway, and let the door slam shut behind himself.

Very elaborate.

I slowly looked back at the mustard-oozing chaos in between my hands, and then shook my head a bit.

"Not today," I murmured as I released it back onto the plate underneath.

I stood up from the table, walked the sandwich over to the trash, dropped it in, and then turned my plate into the kitchen sink, right on top of the other one. Afterward, I made my way back to the table and reached across to retrieve my bottled drink.

I took a small sip from it and flared my nostrils a bit.

"Yeah, never really liked that, either," I whispered to myself, tossing it into the trashcan and making my way toward the door.

"Hey, you're still here!" Katie yelled at me from across the humongous room.

"Yeah," I partially shouted back with a slight laugh.

I began to walk by a row of computers and into her direction.

"Might have to take that one back after this, though, huh?" I could faintly hear Mel whisper by Katie's side.

Slowly, I approached the two comfortably sitting women. Each were in their own swivel, office-like chair while facing a large plasma television, which was hung on the wall in front of them. Both also had their own desktop computer sitting on the long desk set before themselves.

Instantly, the two swung themselves completely around in their chairs to face me.

I looked curiously past them, though, and observed the pictures displayed on the big T.V. and each of their computer monitors. The television showed a street map of some city; both computers exhibited e-mail-like programs.

"Nosy much?" Mel inquired.

I flickered my gaze back to her and Katie.

"Oh, God, sorry, I just..." I trailed off a moment, and then let my eyes wander for another few seconds. "A-Actually, I don't have any good excuse for... that, right now..."

"You're lucky that we're good sports," Mel continued. "Because that all," she paused a moment, and then made a wiping gesture with one hand toward the number of screens behind herself.

"Right there; that's all confidential stuff!"

"Oh, I... s-sorry!" I blurted out, now forcing my eyes awkwardly downward.

The two girls began to laugh.

"I'm just kidding!" Mel giggled, reaching forward and playfully tapping my elbow afterward.

"Here, pull over a chair..."

She stood and reached to her left, pulling a seat identical to hers from a different spot at the long desk and pushing it over to my side.

I forced out a small laugh, and then took the chair to place where I had stood, in front of both Mel and Katie. Once I had eventually sat, Katie began to speak in a much more serious tone.

"Okay, now..." she began strongly, but then slowly trailed off a bit. "*Am...ne...sia?*" she slowly sounded out my fresh, new nickname, and then awaited my response to it.

"Uh, yeah..." I swiftly responded. "All of..." I made a pointing gesture to both of the girls in front of me. "*You* all can just call me that; it's a lot easier than..." I paused and looked down at my lap. "My, um, *real* name."

I took a hard swallow and very sluggishly gazed back upward.

"But you do remember your real name, now, don't you?" Katie interrogated.

"Oh, well, I didn't say that, exactly... It's just..." I switched my eyes quickly between each of the two. "Easier to say *that* name, specifically, than... yeah."

Both women gave me puzzled looks.

"Well, here's the thing, *Amnesia*, we kind of need to know as much about you as you can tell us. I mean, you've been gone from your home for quite a while and there may be people out looking for you, and this place is kind of... *secluded* for a reason, so we don't really want anyone showing up here," Mel now began. "If you tell us some information that you can remember, like your name or why you were in that... *certain* building earlier, then we can help you out." She studied my face for a moment. "Just don't try to hide anything from us; that's something we've dealt with too many times before."

She added a small laugh with her last line, but that didn't allow me to relax any.

"Oh, well then... um..." I started to respond, my eyes looking behind her and instead toward the television on the wall. "Actually, you know what? I do remember, just a little bit..." I returned my focus onto the two sitting across from me and forced out a tiny laugh, but both girls remained still.

"Okay then, well..." I began again, with a small sigh. "My name... is..." I looked downward. "Mae. Mae Brown."

"Your last name is Brown?" Katie suddenly shot out.

She leaned forward, intently.

"Uh... Yeah. Is that... not a real last name, or something?" I asked back.

"Are you sure your last name is Brown?" Mel now inquired, ignoring my previous comment.

Katie spun herself around in her chair, and then began to type on her computer keyboard.

I looked back and forth quickly between her and Mel.

"Well, you know... I guess I'm not *super* sure, but..." I allowed my voice to trail away.

Mel leaned back in her chair a moment to observe Katie's computer screen. After a while, though, she turned back to me and continued to speak once more.

"The Brown family, they... They're a very wealthy family, and... and they actually own that one building you were in earlier."

I studied her face and processed a reply.

"Oh, no, that's... that's not my family, then. I'm not... I-I'm not rich, I'm sure about that. I... I think I'd actually remember *that*, if I were."

Before Mel even had time to speak again, Katie interrupted her.

"Mel," she mumbled, simply staring at her laptop screen.

Mel then followed her directed gaze. I attempted to follow suit, leaning to one side of my seat and trying to catch a glimpse of the screen from behind Katie's head.

However, it didn't really work out well for me.

"*Mae*, is there... *anything* else that you can remember?" Mel asked, after a few seconds, snatching my attention back.

I quickly straightened my posture before she gazed back toward me.

"Um... like what, exactly?"

"Like... Do you know *why* you were in that building, at all?" she slowly generated.

"I..." I paused, squinted, and let my eyes wander around a bit. "No..."

"Do you... remember anything about... where you live, then?"

I shook my head.

"Your parent's names, maybe?"

I shook my head, again.

Mel didn't ask another question, and, after a few seconds, she continued to look over Katie's shoulder. At the same time, I resumed my pretty much unnecessary gazing around.

I washed my eyes over the television map another million times and the other blank and turned off computers around me a few million more.

And then, suddenly and conveniently, it hit me.

"Wait!" I abruptly blurted out, grabbing the edges of my chair as I did so.

I looked up as the two women twisted their heads back at me.

"I... I remember, now... At least, why I was there..." I continued. "Well, actually, I remember... that I wasn't supposed to be there..."

Both Katie and Mel gave me a 'go on' type of look.

"And I don't remember really why, exactly, but I know I just wasn't supposed to... And I only do things I'm not supposed to do... when I'm mad. So, I was mad. I don't really have a clue why I was mad, either... But, I know I was, and... I was getting away from home, because... well, because I was mad. And... my home... I remember it; it's not very big. It's an apartment... But, like, the upstairs-downstairs type. And, we live on the upper floor... me and my parents... But, I don't remember where, exactly, the apartment place-thing is... And my parents, I know what they look like, but I don't remember their names. Probably because I'm just used to calling them mom and dad all the time... and..."

I stopped, looked around, swallowed, blinked a few times, and then looked back at the others.

"Yeah, that's all I remember right now..." I finished.

Just then, a loud beeping noise sounded throughout the large room, making me jump in my seat.

The two in front of me gazed past my backside and, after a few moments, I twisted my body to follow their lead with my own eyes. I then noticed, from behind a few computer-less desks, that Ace was coming down the stairs that led to the front entrance.

"Well, then..." Mel started, forcing me to turn back around to face her. "Mae, thank you for telling us what you remember; we'll take care of what we can for now."

Katie then turned back around to her computer monitor and Mel looked back over to Ace, across the room.

"Ace!" she abruptly shouted out.

I gazed over into his direction, from over my shoulder, as Mel continued.

"Can you please take Mae outside for some fresh air? And, maybe help her remember things more clearly while you're at it?"

"You know... just be helpful..." I could hear Katie faintly mumble as an addition.

Ace stood still, at the bottom of the staircase, as he replied.

"Who the hell is 'Mae'?" he yelled back.

I looked back at Mel; she rolled her eyes.

"If you're referring to the girl sitting right in front of you," he continued, now taking a step forward. "*Amnesia*... then yes, I would be... absolutely more than happy to take her outside and throw random questions in her face for an hour in hopes to jog her long, lost, and forgotten memory."

"Good luck," Mel whispered in my ear, as my neck was still craned into Ace's direction.

I smiled, even though she couldn't see it.

"However, I will not do any favors for any girl named *Mae*," I watched Ace take a few more steps over to a random desk while he finished.

"Okay, okay!" Mel yelled out. She then placed a hand on my shoulder, and I looked over at her once more. "You can go on out for a bit," she said directly to me.

I nodded in response, and then began to stand.

"Come on, 'Nesia," Ace said, now in a much quieter tone.

Without speaking back, I slowly made my way around a few desks and over to where he stood.

"You're never going to be able to keep up with me," he muttered to me as he whipped himself around, toward the bottom of the stairs.

"I..." I began to mumble back, but quickly lost my words.

"You what?" he shot out, now making his way up the first few stairs.

"I... I'll come up with a comeback later..." I replied as I took a few steps behind him.

"Yeah, *no*, you won't," he said.

The two of us remained silent, then, while we reached the top of the staircase. Ace then reached one hand upward and pushed the flap-like door at the end open. After that, he took a noticeably deep breath, and then climbed his way out.

"Ah, fresh air," he said as I climbed out after him.

As soon as I had taken one step onto the moist, green grass, a very strong and potent smell struck my nostrils. Hard.

"Oh, God..." I choked out, throwing both hands up to cover my nose and mouth.

The stench was undeniably from a skunk.

"What? You're not a nature person? Or... do you not remember that?" Ace remarked.

He then walked over to the open passageway, behind us, and shut the sort of camouflaged door on the ground.

"Oh, please..." I began, now removing my hands from upon my face. "I used to go camping all the time."

"Oh, did you, now?" Ace turned into my direction, crossed his arms, and leaned up against the nearest tree. "Then why does a little scent of the woods bother you any?"

"Well, that's just because..." I looked around a little bit. "Well, I've never woken up with a dead skunk on top of my sleeping bag."

Ace paused for a moment, then spoke.

"Wow, you're getting better at that..."

He then looked over to the left for a short moment and I smiled, just because I was assuming he was referring to my generation of remarks, not my ability to wake up with the absence of woodland creatures.

"So, Amnesia," he began again, now gazing back at me. "I guess it's time for me to start hounding you with questions. We've already established..." His thought seemed to trail off momentarily, but it soon found its way back. "Your name. So... how old do you think you are?"

I stopped to think a moment, putting my hands on my hips as I did so.

"I... I'm... Sixteen."

He studied me a second.

"Years," I added.

"Really?" Ace started to question. "I don't know if I believe that."

I rolled my eyes.

"I still get handed kids' menus at every restaurant I go to... And, if I can remember that, then I think I can remember my *real* age."

"No wonder, then," he responded. "You don't look a day over nine."

"Okay... I don't look *that* young... And how old are you, then? You don't look a day over... being a senior citizen..."

I lost my comedic confidence just as fast as I had actually gained it.

Ace raised his eyebrows at me, and I let my hands fall down to my sides.

"Actually, if you do just have to know, I'm nineteen, going on twenty," he remarked.

When I didn't immediately reply, he decided to go on.

"*Years.*"

"Oh, okay," I started. "Well, if we're going to be... all fancy about it, then I guess I'm sixteen going on seventeen."

I made my way over to a tree next to Ace, and then began to lean against it, much like how he had.

Soon after I had gotten comfortable, though, he started to whistle a familiar tune.

You are sixteen going on seventeen, baby, it's time to think...

I gave a small smile and cocked my head to the side.

"Okay, okay..." I said, now making him stop. I looked around at the other surrounding trees for a quick minute, then decided to continue. "Any other questions?"

"Mm..." Ace picked up the conversation. "Yeah. Wanna go out?"

I widened my eyes.

"*What?*"

Ace nodded his head toward the left. I gradually gazed into the direction he gestured to and noticed that there, past a number more of trees, sat a road and familiar car.

"Out of the woods," he said, recapturing my attention to him.

I looked him over a moment.

"Quite frankly, I'm still a bit hungry, and there's a super awesome ice cream shop not too far away," he then added. "So... Wanna?"

I gave a sort of sideways-smile.

"Yeah, why not?" I finally answered.

"Damn right," Ace partially mumbled, now pushing himself away from his leaning tree and turning into the direction of the road.

I then quickly followed his footsteps until the two of us reached the edge of the woods.

Afterward, I made my way over to the passenger side of the sports-like car and prepared to open the door.

I had to wait a few seconds, though, because Ace needed to search every one of his jean pockets for the keys.

"Hold up," he commanded as he rummaged.

"I don't... think I have much of a choice," I muttered, mostly to myself, but I'm sure he could hear me clearly.

"Oh, wait..." he began, again. "You know, I think I left the keys in the car."

"Oh, really?" I commented, throwing my hand down from the door handle.

Just then, though, Ace reached out and opened the driver's door in front of himself.

"Wait, what?" I confusedly asked as I, too, reached down and attempted to open the door before me. However, mine was actually locked, so I stepped back and leaned over to peer into the tinted passenger window.

I could both see and hear Ace get into the driver's seat and slam the door behind himself. I then watched him grab the keys from a cup holder by the steering wheel and start the engine.

I looked down and tried to open the door, again, but to no avail.

"Hey, you know, the door's locked!" I yelled out, over the sound of the rumbling vehicle's combustion.

I peered back into the car and saw Ace leaned back comfortably in his spot with his right arm hanging over the back of the vacant passenger seat.

"No, it's not!" I could faintly hear him shout back.

"But, it is!" I replied, now giving the door handle another yank.

Shockingly, the door magically opened.

I swung it out in front of me, looked around a short moment, and then squatted down to take a seat inside.

"It really *was* locked, okay..." I mumbled, closing the door.

"Sure, and it really was just your memory that you lost," Ace retorted with a chuckle, now shifting the car's current gear into drive. He then pretty much floored the gas pedal and whipped the steering wheel completely to the left, making my body fling into the door that I had just barely closed.

I stayed pressed up against side of the car until he had managed to spin it a full one hundred-eighty degrees around within a matter of approximately seven milliseconds.

"God! Can't you ever just... at least... wait until I get my seatbelt on?" I forced out, now grabbing for the worn belt at the side of my seat.

"Amnesia," he called my attention while he pushed the car into an extreme amount of acceleration. "How old did you say you think you may be, again?"

I clicked my seatbelt into place before responding.

"Sixteen... years."

"Yeah, here's the thing about that..." he paused to focus on his driving for a moment, which seemed surprising. "Sixteen-year-olds usually aren't the..." He gazed over at me and finished. "'Safety first' kind of people."

He then flashed a cheesy smile and returned his eyes to the road.

"Well... that's... just..." I trailed off.

"What?"

I searched his face a minute.

"Offensive..." I attempted to finish.

He laughed.

"Come on, 'Nesia... Even though you've only known me a few hours, do you think there's really ever a time when I'm *not* offensive?"

I smiled, but then looked away.

After about a minute or two of staring out the window, though, a loud, weird heavy sound began to boom out from the car speakers.

However, I quickly picked on what the sound was.

Ace turned the heavily-based and curse-spitting rap song down as I glared over at him.

"Really?" I questioned.

"What, not your style?" he shot back.

I raised my eyebrows and turned back toward the front windshield.

"Damn, okay," he softly spoke, reaching down to press a button on the car radio system.

"Another non-natural response from the so-called sixteen-year-old..."

After he had managed to complete his sentence, a different song began to play.

I smiled as soon as I heard the beat begin.

"Maybe my *eighties* CD will please you a bit more," Ace said.

Won't you come see about me? I'll be alone, dancing, you know it, baby...

"Better..." I quietly commented.

"You know, this song's perfect for you," he started, again. "Because you can't remember a whole lot, but I guarantee you'll *never forget about me.*"

I let out a small giggle, and then gazed back at the window on my right side for a long, long while.

—

My hand was pressed up into a fist, under my chin, and my elbow was resting on the ledge of the car door. Also, my eyes were most definitely closed.

At least, until Ace slammed on the brakes and screeched the vehicle to an abrupt stop.

My arm then slid forward and my head flew ahead even farther.

"Here!" Ace yelled out and, soon after his statement, the car engine fell silent.

I shot my eyes open and flung my head back up, now putting myself in a better-postured sitting position.

"Where... *here...*?" I mumbled out, only now gazing over at Ace.

He looked back at me, his keys now in-hand, and laughed a little.

"I know you're excited for ice cream, 'Nesia, but..." he began.

"*What?*" I questioned.

He chuckled some more, and then pointed a finger at his chin.

"Right here," he said, making a nod toward me as he did so.

I immediately reached a hand up to touch my own chin.

I quickly felt a moist substance on my fingertips, and then looked down to expectedly see a glob of drool slapped on them.

"Oh, God..." I whispered, now rubbing the rest of my spit away with the back of my wrist.

"I'd just love to see how you look at the end of the ride back..." Ace commented.

"Okay... well..." I started to reply as I wiped my wrist on the top of my jeans. "I'm... obviously... tired..."

"Okay, well, I hope you're hungry, too," he responded, now turning, opening the car door, and stepping outside.

After he exited, I looked up and out of the windshield while I reached for the passenger door's handle.

I instantly saw that we were parked in a parallel parking spot on the side of a street that was surrounded by small shops and food booths. Every other parking space that I could see was occupied by some type of vehicle, and there were a lot of people walking the large sidewalks beside them. And, on top of all this, I could see a number of tall, skyscraper-like buildings in the distance ahead.

Oddly, all of it seemed very familiar.

I finally looked back to my right and opened the door in front of myself.

"Can I just... ask..." I began as I stepped out and onto the sidewalk, beside where Ace was waiting for me. "Where, exactly, am I?"

I shut the door behind myself and looked up at him, squinting a little on account of the strong amount of sunlight.

"You don't know?" he asked back.

I shook my head.

"Well, then, if you must know..." he answered, twisting toward his right a bit and placing his hands on his hips. "This is the great city of Chicago."

He turned back to face me, and now threw one hand up to shield the sun from his eyes.

Chicago.

"Wait..." I looked down and tried to think. "I... I live... near... Chicago..."

"Really?" Ace resumed. "Me, too."

I shot my eyes back up to him.

"Yeah, but—" I began.

"You need to know the time, too?" he interrupted. "Because it's time for ice cream."

He then started to walk along the sidewalk and made his way past me.

"Oh, okay," I uttered.

I turned around and followed him, passing by a few groups of people and three store doors before I could catch up to his side.

"But, you know..." I resumed as I struggled to stay at his quick pace. "I haven't always lived... around here."

"Oh, really? Where else you been crashin' at?" Ace responded, now slowing and turning toward the right.

I followed him through a few groups of people, and then spoke again.

"Well, actually..."

"Let me guess..." Ace began, before I could finish, and halted behind a line of people to an open, busy food booth. "You can't remember."

I stopped alongside him and gazed over at the counter at the front of the line, which had a large sign hung above it displaying the words 'Scream Creams', written in large red lettering.

"Um..." I twisted toward him and refocused my attention. "Actually, I *do*... but... now I'm not going to tell you."

I cocked my head to the side and faintly gave a smirk.

Honestly, though, I really didn't remember.

"Okay," Ace said, turning back to face the front of the line without a care.

I opened my mouth and raised my eyebrows at him but couldn't quite manage any speech.

"Banana split... hot caramel sundae... turtle brownie sundae..." Ace mumbled to himself as he squinted and stared ahead.

I then slowly glided my eyes away from his physique and gazed over at the groups of people walking on the sidewalk behind us. I observed a clique of five high school-aged girls, a cluster of children and parents, as well as a set of two, young businessmen before I became uninterested and turned back around.

"Rocky road... orange sherbet... superman... cookie dough... chocolate marshmallow..." Ace continued as he stepped forward in the moving line.

I followed after him while he went on.

"Napoleon... coffee caramel... blue raspberry... peach cobbler... white chocolate... coconut... watermelon... peppermint..."

The both of us had by now stopped behind the only other, but rather large, group of people at the order counter.

"Cotton candy... cookies and cream... or key lime pie," he finally finished, turning to me. "It's tough choices here."

I looked him over.

"I just want a cone-thing," I said.

Ace nearly rolled his eyes.

"You're original."

I opened my mouth for a second as I thought of a reply.

"I'm just—" I began.

Of course, though, my reply was quickly cut short.

"Don't worry, 'Nesia, I'll order for you."

"But, I—"

"I know exactly what you'll want," Ace again interrupted, his 'I' overlapping with mine.

I gave him a slight glare as the people in front of us began to clear away. Ace then twisted away from me and stepped up to the small ice cream booth's counter in front of us. I stepped forward, after him, while he began to place an order.

"We will take two turtle brownie sundaes... two double-decker cones, both with a scoop of chocolate marshmallow and with cookie dough... Oh, and I'll take one of those chocolate caramel candy bags..." he completed, nodding slightly to the big tray of clear, candy-filled bags on the counter, next to the register.

"Okay, that'll be thirty-two twenty-five..." the young, blonde woman across the counter totaled with a small smile.

My eyes widened, and I could see Ace pull out his wallet from the corner of them. He then handed over the exact amount of money requested, and the girl took it to place in the cash register before walking away to a different area of the booth.

I then turned and stared directly at Ace.

"What?" he questioned.

"You..." I looked him over a second. "You're going to get us both fat!"

He smirked.

"Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing, at least for you," he replied.

I tilted my head to the side right before he decided to go on.

"You wanna know why? Because..." he paused a moment, then smiled. "Because... *An elephant never forgets.*"

I couldn't help but at least smile at him.

Then, suddenly, I heard a loud, masculine voice yell out from far away.

"*Mae!*" it shouted, catching my attention.

I whipped my head into the direction that I at least *think* I had heard it from and allowed my smile to quickly fade.

I then snappily looked over an oddly cleared sidewalk by the end of the ice cream booth line, a confused look upon my face.

And then an abrupt gunshot rang out.

Chapter Three

I instinctively dropped to the ground and let out a scream, as did a number of other people around me, Ace being included.

And then I heard another shot.

I screamed out, again, and threw my hands up by the sides of my head.

Nearly everyone else around me was screaming in terror.

"Shit!" I could barely hear Ace yell out, by my side. Soon after that, I felt a hand gently touch my back and his voice continue to yell more toward my left ear. "We gotta go!"

The hand on my back then migrated upward, grabbed my left upper arm, and jerked my entire body up, forcing me to stand. I then dizzily snapped my head over to Ace and opened my mouth, even though I couldn't possibly begin to formulate any words in that moment.

"Nesia, come on!" he shouted, looking back at me and tugging on my arm.

Suddenly, another shot exploded.

However, this time I did not scream out and, instead, lunged forward to get beside Ace.

"Good job," I could faintly hear him mutter.

He then placed one hand on my back and the other back on my left upper arm, making him now stand on the side where I had heard the bullets from. He quickly pushed me forward, and I complied, the both of us beginning to run away from the ice cream stand. He kept his hands on me and his body hovering over and to the side of mine as we did so, as well.

More gunshots rang out, but, this time, they were shot in a set of three, making them sound as if they were coming from a machine-like gun, which was completely different from the previous ones. I screeched out once again when I heard these ones, but I continued to sprint alongside Ace as I did so.

My heart was beating way out of control, and my lungs were way out of air. And, after about the first fifteen long strides on the sidewalk, my feet began to stumble a bit.

And that's when I heard another quick set of shots, which is also the exact moment when I stumbled a bit too much and fell onto the hard ground with my entire right arm smashed against the concrete.

I kept myself still a second, my head now pounding. After that second, though, I pushed my other arm, which was now detached from Ace's grasp, under my body and lifted my head slowly upward.

"You okay?" Ace yelled at me, still having the need to overpower the screams of other people, wherever they were at this point.

He then stepped in front of me and hastily crouched down to grab at my left arm, once again.

"Come on, 'Nesia..." he more mumbled this time than anything.

He next re-found his grasp on my back and under my arm, and then gently heaved my aching body up to stand. After that, he basically had to carry me as he ran off again. He didn't have to

haul me far, though, because he soon found an alleyway between a few empty stores on our right that he could throw us into.

"Okay..." Ace muttered as soon as we had both swung around the corner of the closest store. He then gradually released his hold on me as we walked into the empty alley.

"Now..." he continued to mumble as he completely let go of me and stepped farther away.

I, too, walked, but I kept myself at a much slower pace than him in order to catch my breath. I looked around and saw nothing but two long brick walls on either side of us, which were connected by another shorter wall about thirty yards in front of me. I also noted that there were no dumpsters or fire escape staircases anywhere in sight, which was very much the opposite of what I'd expect from a slightly sketchy alleyway.

"Here!" Ace shouted, now running over to a side door at the end of the right brick wall. Shouting was not so much a necessity at this point, though, since most of the screams outside of the alley had slowed to a stop or had become distanced farther away.

I watched him as he made his way to the door, and then decided to pick up my pace and catch up with him. After he had approached the door, however, his attempt to open it proved unsuccessful. I then stopped by his side as he began to look it over.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Okay," he simply stated. Immediately after his statement, though, he abruptly threw his foot upward and slammed it into the bottom of the large, metal-framed door.

My body jerked back a little at the sight of his action.

"Ugh," he spat out, throwing another kick.

The door had caved inward a tiny amount but was still far from breaking.

"God..." he shouted out at the same time as another one of his blows to it.

"Damn..." he yelled, again in-sync with his next throw. "It!"

He finished with another powerful kick.

The door remained, for the most part, intact.

Ace then took a deep breath and studied the door, again.

"Ugh!" he suddenly yelled out once more. As he screamed out with frustration, though, he threw his body back, and then slammed all of himself into the door, instead of just using a kick.

I stood back and watched as he stumbled through the now opened doorway. He soon regained his balance and turned back to me.

"Come on," he said, holding his hands out to me.

Boom.

Suddenly, another gunshot.

I immediately jumped forward and practically crashed into his arms.

"Okay," Ace muttered out, afterward reaching forward with one hand to close the door in front of us. His other arm remained preoccupied with wrapping itself around my back.

Once the door was shut, a complete darkness and silence fell around the two of us.

I took a deep, shaky breath, and then slowly eased out of his grasp.

"Wha... What's going on... ou... out there?" I forced out.

I looked around slightly, but my eyes couldn't pick up anything out of the blackness surrounding me, so I eventually decided to tightly cross my arms in front of my body and stand still.

"I don't know," Ace started to answer.

I could hear his feet shuffle around me as he went on.

"It's just Chicago."

I remained unmoved by his response and began to focus on keeping at least a few steady breaths under my belt.

After a few seconds, a dim light flickered on by my right side. I looked over at it and realized it was coming from a small cell phone in Ace's hands.

"Nice," I whispered.

"I've only got five percent," he commented, now shining the flashlight from the back of the phone in my face. "So let's find a real light."

I squinted at the bright ray that was shoved in my eyes.

"Shine that thing somewhere else," I said, reaching out to push it away.

Ace complied and shone it over the rest of the room in a quick scanning motion. We both contently observed a mess of metal racks and stacked boxes scattered everywhere. There were also a number of foreign objects thrown all over, even though I had a strong guess that most of them were just different types of car repairing tools and parts. The room itself was also not very large, or at least it didn't seem so with the mess of car merchandise everywhere.

"Light's over there," I declared as I stared at a light switch next to another door on the far side of the room.

"Okay," Ace said, now returning the light to in front of himself and stepping over a box on the floor next to my side.

Once he had passed by me, I turned myself around and started to follow his trail around to the other side of the room.

"So, on a scale of one to ten, how great has this day been for you?" Ace asked while the both of us tromped through a large crowd of boxes.

"Well, you know..." I had to pause a moment to push a big empty box out of my way. "I think it's probably been just about the most excitement I've had in my whole life... Then again, how would I know that?"

My voice then trailed off as my feet trailed on, so Ace finished my reply for me.

"So... thirty-three, right?"

He finally had the chance to step over to the light switch, so I stopped a few feet away from him.

"Sure," I responded.

Ace then leaned over another pile of filled boxes and reached out for the switch, but before he could flip the lights on, I felt a bulky, sweaty hand suddenly grab my mouth from behind my back.

I instantly threw my hands up and let out a loud, muffled scream.

At the same time, a bright overhead light in the small room flashed on.

I looked over at Ace to see him return his hand from the light switch and whip himself around.

"Hey!" he shouted out, dropping his phone and practically leaping over to me.

I screamed out again and began to grab at the hairy arm wrapped around my left shoulder.

"Let her go!" Ace yelled, now close enough to also grasp the arm that held me.

"Let her go!" he repeated, now throwing his free hand back in a clenched fist.

He froze when I heard a familiar clicking sound by my right ear, as did I.

"I'd take a step back if I were you..." a deep, masculine voice with a thick, Russian accent spoke from behind me. Or, at least, I think it was Russian.

Ace lowered both his eyebrows and his fist slowly.

"Go on," the man's voice growled beside my ear.

Ace cautiously obeyed and stepped back with only one foot.

"*Miguel!*" the man then shouted out, his boisterous voice making my muscles jump a little under his clutch.

I then heard the hard rustle of boxes from far behind where I was placed.

"*Eh?*" a similarly-accented voice spoke out.

"*Por qué están ahí?*" the man holding me angrily mumbled in an unfamiliar language, although it was a language that I had a strong feeling wasn't Russian.

"*Por qué pensarías que yo sé algo al respecto?*" the other man, presumably Miguel, grumbled out.

The man keeping me captive and still let out a sound of frustration before Miguel decided to continue.

"*Qué quieres hacer con ellos?*"

I attempted to take a deep breath from underneath the hand smeared over my mouth and glanced up at Ace, who was intently looking between each of the two men in the room.

"We don't want any trouble, okay?" he abruptly piped up. "Really."

"Then tell us what you know," Miguel shot out.

"What do you want to know?" Ace questioned.

"What you know!" the same man yelled back.

Ace seemed taken aback for a second.

"We don't know anything," he eventually replied.

"Certain about that?" my captor chimed in.

Soon after, I felt a cold, round surface gently nuzzle against the side of my head, but I didn't want to think I knew what it was.

I began to breathe more heavily and looked back toward Ace, who looked much more tense at this point in time.

"Tell us..." the man holding me breathed out by my ear. "Why you're here."

My eyes began to water as Ace took a deep breath.

"We were out for ice cream," he calmly began to respond. "And then there was just... a... bomb, or something," he stumbled on his last few words.

"Bomb?" the other man, Miguel, suddenly stepped into my view and began to approach Ace.

"You know about a *bomb*?"

His voice was uncomfortably tense and he looked a lot smaller than he had sounded. We can say he's not exactly what I had expected to see.

"I mean a shooting," Ace quickly corrected.

"*La bomba no debería de estar ahí aun!*" my holder shouted out.

"I know!" Miguel turned around to spit back. He then twisted back around and took another step toward Ace, making the two of them nearly inches apart by this point. "Tell us what you know about the bomb!"

"There's a bomb?" Ace innocently asked, himself now taking half of a step backward.

"Don't act like you don't know," Miguel shot back.

Ace squinted at him a moment, and then gazed over at me and my situation for a shorter moment.

"Tell us!" Miguel continued. "*Talk!*"

He then abruptly reached out to push Ace down, or something of the sort, but before he could, Ace swung at him with a large red, pipe-like object.

Without a sound, the man was struck in the head, forcefully, and his body swiftly tumbled to the hard, cement ground. Ace watched him fall down only for a second, and then switched his attention over to where I stood.

"Ey!" the one holding me captive yelled out.

His grip suddenly lightened up a small amount, and I took the change as an opportunity to begin to at least attempt to wiggle my way out of his grasp. After only a second or two of struggle, though, I caught a glimpse of Ace throwing the red pipe my way.

I instinctively closed my eyes and flinched.

However, I soon realized the hard, strong object had hit my captor somewhere in the head area, on account of his immediate collapse and simultaneous release of me.

I slowly opened my eyes to the newly quieted environment.

"Whew," Ace whispered, stepping over to the last fallen man by my feet.

I turned around and watched him bend over to retrieve the gun that had been thrown on the floor.

"Wh... What's going on?" I nearly screamed out in distress.

Ace stood back up and looked over his new weapon.

"I don't really know," he calmly replied.

I studied the unconscious man on the ground near my feet a moment, observing his large, round belly, hairy, dark arms and sweaty, dirtied white tank top. Oh, and I also took notice in his deep, bleeding head wound.

"Are you okay?" Ace asked, immediately drawing my attention back to him.

I looked over his concerned expression a long time before giving a simple answer.

"Yeah."

I then quickly turned my head away and loosened my shoulders in an attempt to look as if I were actually fine.

Ace paused.

"Well," he eventually picked up, again. "We *really* need to get away from here."

I twisted myself back to face him, but when I realized his back was toward me, I took the chance to wipe the subtle tears away from under my eyes. Once I had finished that task, I saw him begin to walk toward the door next to the light switch on the near wall.

I took a deep breath, and then followed after him.

"I'm going to go check it out; you stay here," he said to me as soon as I reached his side by the door.

"Okay," I, for some reason, whispered.

Without another word, Ace quietly clicked the door knob into its open position, cracked the door about a foot or two outward, and then slid out. He pushed the crack back a few inches after he had pushed his way through, but I could still see a bit through it.

I watched through the small slit of doorway as Ace waved his pistol back and forth in odd, but slick, motions. I then faded my gaze from him a little and noticed the large room that he was currently in was nearly dark, receiving only small increments of light from the windows at the very far wall. There were also numerous shelves and tables set up all over the area, each stocked with metal mechanical parts, which were unsurprisingly similar to the ones I had seen in the storage-like room that I was still in.

Ace next turned back around, snatching my attention back.

"Okay," he said, basically spitting through the door crack as he did so.

I didn't respond but placed my hands both on the door handle and doorframe once he had twisted back around. I then glanced over at the two, unconscious guys sprawled out on the cement floor to the right and shuddered a small amount at the sight of the one's continuous bleeding.

"Well, it's..." I inaudibly whispered, my head facing the direction of the men but my eyes averting to the floor beside them. "It's been... fun... but..." I looked back at the two for a spilt second. "Bye."

I then immediately turned back toward the door and pushed my way through it, also unintentionally stumbling into Ace in the process.

"Oh, God, sorry," I muttered.

He nearly jumped a foot forward.

"Damn, 'Nesia," he shot out.

"I'm—" I began to reiterate my apology, but Ace quickly cut my 'sorrlys' short.

"Sh... just be quiet and follow me."

He then took a few steps forward and around the nearest table.

"Oh... o-kay..." I half-stuttered, half-whispered in response.

I began to make my own footsteps behind him. I kept my eyes on him, then, as he cautiously swung his gun left and right in observance of the area, even though part of me felt like he was over-exaggerating his motions just to seem cool. Then again, I should have just assumed that his over-emphases were normal for him; I mean, this probably wasn't his first rodeo.

"Okay, we're just going to go back to the car," Ace kind of whispered as he stopped to stand by a cash register near the front of the room.

I looked the register over, and then gazed at the closest window to us. Although shaded with slightly cracked blinds, I could see an empty sidewalk through the glass.

"I think it's safe out, now," Ace went on, now pacing toward the windowless door by the window that I was searching.

"Are you... sure?" I questioned, not stepping away from the cash register area.

Ace stopped in front of the door, reached out to the handle with his free hand, and looked back at me from over his shoulder.

"No," he simply stated.

Before giving me a chance to even think about saying anything more, Ace twisted the door handle and pushed the door into the outside air, his body quickly tumbling after.

"Ugh," I let out a mutter and began to make my way over to the doorway. Before I had completely reached it, however, Ace stepped halfway back inside, looked me over, reached out his hand, and grabbed my wrist.

"Come on!" he yelled, pulling me forward and straight through the doorframe.

I stumbled onto the sidewalk behind him and let the door close itself behind me. I then quickly looked around the area and saw absolutely no one in sight but a handful of cars parked parallel to the street in front of us.

"Where's every—" I started to formulate a question, but Ace answered it before I could even manage the entire thing out.

"Don't know, but we should probably go, too."

Immediately after that, Ace tugged on my wrist, again, and pulled me up to a running speed behind him as he made his way down the sidewalk on the left, taking us back the way we had

originally come. And, after rushing past a tad bit familiar stores and a loud, odd silence, we eventually came up to a recognizably deep blue sports car.

I instinctively proceeded to open the passenger's side door but paused before getting in once I saw that Ace had not chosen to follow suit.

He instead stood, frozen, in front of the car's right headlight area, staring back at the sidewalk which we had just sprinted across.

"Ace," I called for his attention, softly, though, because there was no reason to yell through the silence we were standing in.

He snapped his head back toward me, his look seeming to be in some kind of weird daze.

"Get in," he commanded to me, now walking toward the opened door by my side.

I looked him over a quick second, and then obeyed by ducking under the roof of the car and taking a seat in the passenger seat. He then approached the still-opened doorway space by my right side and grabbed the edge of the car door.

"I'll be right back," he said, hovering over both the car and myself.

I focused on moving my feet completely into the vehicle before looking over and up to him.

"Why?" I questioned, a small hint of confusion added to my voice.

"Just stay here," he hurriedly instructed and slammed the car door closed in front of me. I flinched at the harsh push he had given it, and then gazed back up at him through the window.

I watched as he backed up onto the sidewalk and turned back toward the mess we had just fled from. He then began to jog away, down the sidewalk, with the gun he had still in hand.

"What?" I mumbled, just to myself, naturally.

Ace then turned into an alley of some sort, not too far away, and ran out of my sight.

"Oh, great..." I said with an only slightly large sigh.

I then looked away and searched the area around me from the other windows.

Still, I saw nothing and no one.

I let out another, softer sigh and repositioned myself in my seat with my back more slouched and my arms more... well, crossed across my chest. I sat in a cloud of impatient silence for about another sixty seconds or so before I started to look around again.

"Should have at least gave me the keys or something..." I muttered, reaching out my left hand to fiddle with the unresponsive buttons on the car radio system. Then, when it became very apparent that I wasn't going to escape the silence with music of any kind, I returned my hands to my lap.

I gazed out of the front windshield, again, and continued to see no sign of any lifeforms or such around.

"Well..." I took a deep breath and stretched my arms out a bit, hitting my right elbow on the side door in the process. I looked over toward it a moment and spotted the passenger seat belt from the corner of my eye. "*Safety first.*"

I pulled the belt across my front and clicked it into place. I began to slide my hands across its surface after it was secured, but then the glovebox above my knees suddenly caught my attention.

I stared at it a second, and then reached out my right hand and pulled it open by its small, round unlocked handle. I peeked inside slowly and immediately saw a bulking heap of papers and folders.

"Whoa..." I whispered, now reaching in to remove a few of the topmost sheets of printed documents. I scanned them loosely and found a lot of information that I really didn't comprehend and just disregarded; a lot of it was just random codes and different sets of numbers printed out. However, once I had gotten farther through the stack, I found a few that contained a bit more material.

One was dated as March thirteenth, two-thousand fourteen and looked to be formatted as a letter, addressed to someone named Jeremy Barker. The body of the letter was brief; it literally only said: 'So glad you could finally join us.' The rest of the page was entirely blank, except for a barely legible signature at the very bottom right. From what I could make out, though, it looked like it was signed by some 'Munjrghieble Butihngytish'. That's just my interpretation, though.

The last four pages following that appeared to be part of a big contract with the words 'AGENT AGREEMENT' splattered across the top of the first. Under that, there were a lot of numbered paragraphs listing terms and conditions to what I assumed constituted to the agent's job, or whatever it would be called. The rest of the pages were created in the same manner, and at the bottom of the last paper, the name Jeremy Barker was signed once again. Beside it, a witness's name was also signed as Anna Harris, and both were dated as March tenth, two-thousand fourteen.

Under that in the glovebox stash was a plain, manila folder. I pulled it out, set it on top of the papers in my lap, and flipped the top of the folder open. Expecting to find more revealing paperwork, I instead discovered a different type of revealing papers.

It was a thick magazine with an image of a young, blonde woman plastered on the cover who dressed in nothing but... well, *nothing*, sitting sideways on the ground, and posing with her hands covering her chest. At the top read the headline 'Legally Boned' and smaller printed subtitles were supplied along the edges of the book.

"Oh, wow," I came close to shouting as I flipped the top of the folder shut once more.

Before I had time to think or say anything else, a far-off yell from somewhere in the silence caught my attention.

I snapped my head back up to center and stared out of the front windshield with wide eyes.

I then heard another, longer shout in the form of some kind of incomprehensible sentence. Soon after that, though, I saw Ace appear from around the corner of the same alleyway he had went into not too long ago. He was sprinting toward the car at full speed, and I noticed that he no longer had a gun in either of his hands.

I hurriedly looked back down at my lap and shoved everything I held back into the glovebox, all at once. I afterward heard more shouts, this time slightly a bit closer, and once the glovebox compartment was returned shut, I gazed back up to see another, unfamiliar man running right behind Ace.

Then, seemingly all of a sudden, I heard the more familiar sound of a gunshot ring out.

And I saw Ace suddenly stop running.

I let out a gasp and threw my hand up over my mouth.

Then, I watched Ace stumble over and onto the ground, his one hand clutching his left shoulder, and heard him let out a loud scream.

I removed my hand and took in a few heavy breaths as I looked back over to the man, who was now approaching Ace slowly and pointing a small pistol directly at him.

My eyes darted back to Ace, who was struggling to pick himself up from the sidewalk.

I then looked back at the other man and watched as he yelled out something that I could neither understand or completely hear.

He suddenly halted his walk and began to re-aim his gun at Ace.

"Ace!" I instantly screamed out, turning toward the right and throwing the car door open in front of myself. When I proceeded in my attempt to stand, however, I became restricted in movement by my seatbelt.

"Oh, God," I muttered as I reached back and clicked the belt out of place. Immediately after that, I shot up to a stand and jumped onto the sidewalk beside the car.

"Stop!" I shouted out as I began to run into Ace's direction.

The man snapped his look over to me and paused a moment. And, once I had nearly reached Ace's point, he pointed his pistol toward me as well.

I drastically slowed down and threw my hands down by my sides.

Ace then screamed out in pain, again, distracting the man, who redirected his gun at him.

I then took the opportunity to sprint over the man's side, which was only a few feet away now, and instinctively threw myself at him, pushing him onto the ground. I then fell on top of him, and it took me a second to pull myself onto my knees beside him.

"Arg!" he yelled out in anger, rolling himself toward me and aiming his gun into my direction with his hand farthest from me.

"Ah!" I more innocently screamed back and reached out with both of my hands to grab his wrist. I then found struggle in trying to hold the gun away and the man began to push it even more toward me.

He yelled out, again, and I looked his hand over, now making my focus on pushing my thumbs in between his hand and his weapon, somewhat in hopes that I could slightly loosen it from his grip. After another few moments of battling his strength, though, I caved in and fell backward, onto the pavement. I let out a small mutter of pain when my body smacked against the ground.

He fell over as well, though, and I could hear his gun crash onto the hard earth somewhere by my right side, which was farthest from him. I snapped my head over to it and saw that it was close enough to reach. When I went to throw my hand out to grab it, though, the man rolled himself onto his knees and snatched it right back.

I gazed back at him, seeing that he was basically hovering over me. Then, when I tried to push him back with my free hand, he grasped it, as well, and looked me in the eyes.

He smirked at my bewildered look and pushed my both of my wrists into the clutch of his right hand. He then looked over to the gun and reached out toward it with his left.

"Ugh!" I then yelled out, suddenly kicking my knee up and forcefully striking him in his abdominal area. He let out a grunt, released his grip on my wrists enough for me to escape, and fell backward a bit.

I quickly pushed him back as much more as I could with my partially still-held hands, and then ripped them completely free. I afterward twisted back toward the thrown pistol and successfully snatched it up into my own grip.

Once I looked back, the man was preparing to reach out for the gun once more. He began to yell out and lunged toward me, but before he could conclude his motions, I aimed the pistol at his chest and pulled its trigger.

The loud shot screamed out and the man soon enough fell silent. He then fell off of his knees and sprawled his limp, upper body across my legs.

I could only stare in shock.

"Ah!" Ace yelled out once more, forcing me out of my trance.

I refocused my eyes over to where he had collapsed on the sidewalk, just a yard or two away from the bottom of my feet.

I then pulled my legs out from underneath the lifeless man's heavy body and attempted to push myself up to a stand. Before beginning to make my way over to Ace, though, I studied the pool of blood seeping out from under his midsection.

"Oh, God..." I muttered, dropping the gun onto the ground and bringing both my hands up to my face.

A mess of both dizziness and nausea swept over me, all at once.

"Nesia!" Ace strained to scream out.

I took a deep breath and gazed back over to him.

He began an attempt to stand from his knees and spoke, again.

"We... need... to..." his voice trailed off and he fell slightly aback.

I immediately rushed over to his side and reached out to grab his right arm, the one unaffected by the bullet.

"G... Get the gun," he mumbled out.

"Oh," I whispered back, gently releasing him and turning back to retrieve the weapon. I avoided looking at the man's body as I did my duty, and then hurriedly returned to Ace's side.

"Remember, that... that's your friend..." he painfully uttered.

Without response, I tucked one arm under his and grabbed both his shoulder and the gun in my other hand. I then tried to pull and guide him up to a stand.

"I... I got it..." he said.

I carefully backed away and let up on my hold on him. I then stepped in front of him and watched him try to take a step forward. However, he quickly winced in pain, grabbed his shot shoulder, and stumbled to the side a little.

"No, y-you... you don't," I commented to him, now reaching out and replacing my grip on him.

He didn't object to my help again, so I slowly assisted him to walk toward the car. He remained silent, for the most part, and once we were almost to the curb of the sidewalk, I paused for a moment and looked the sports car over.

"*You* can't drive..." I murmured.

"What?" Ace urged out.

I took a deep breath and started to guide him toward the open passenger side door.

"No, I'm..." he began to reject. "I can drive!"

I slowly lowered him into the seat and released him. He tried to stand back up, though, and I had to push him back down a little.

"Nesia, stop!" he barked.

"You're shot!" I yelled back, pushing his legs forward and stepping back to grab the edge of the door.

"You can't drive!" he shouted.

I then slammed the door shut and took another deep breath.

"I know..." I whispered to myself, now turning and stepping my way around the hood of the car. Once to the driver's side, I swung the door open, stepped under the roof and took a seat.

A silence fell after I pulled the door shut behind myself.

I studied the large wheel in front of me, the dashboard of currently inanimate lights and meters, and the stick-gear-shifter-thing by my side. I then gazed up to the windshield and realized that I could barely even see the street in front of me.

"Um... how do I move the seat up?" I asked.

When Ace failed to answer, I looked over to him.

He slowly looked back, examined my expression, turned back toward the window, and reached out for the door handle below it.

"I'm just gonna drive," he declared as he commenced his opening of the car door.

"No..." I opposed, stretching my hand across him and pulling the door closed once more.

He gazed back at me, again.

"It's nothing; I've done this before," he said, his voice much less stressed than before.

"I... I don't care," I sluggishly and uncertainly replied.

"Just let me..."

"No, you... you *can't* drive," I stated, now looking around for a way to get my seat into a more comfortable position.

"What makes you think you have to take care of me all of a sudden?" Ace suddenly spat out.

I widened my eyes some and snapped my head back toward him.

"This... This is my God damn job..." he continued, unnecessarily. "I've been shot before, I've driven a damn car before... I know how... how to take care of myself; I don't need..."

His voice soon lost its way and he began to look... just unhealthy.

"A... A-Are you okay?" I stammered out.

Before he could even think over a reply, his eyes rolled shut and his head plunged forward, toward the dashboard. I swiftly threw my arms over into his direction and, luckily, I caught his shoulders and was able to push him back in the seat.

"A-Ace?" I shook him a little, but he was unresponsive.

He was still breathing, though, thank God.

"Great..." I grumbled, now letting his body slouch over in the seat. I studied him a moment, then decided to stretch a hand across his chest and buckle his seatbelt for him.

"You're probably gonna need this..." I mumbled as I clicked it into place.

I then returned myself to a forward position in my seat and placed both my hands on the wheel in front of myself.

"Seat..." I whispered, now resuming my search for a way to bring my seat upward. I felt around the area both underneath and beside the driver's seat and eventually found some type of button that, when I pushed it, lifted the seat up just barely enough for me to see over the dashboard.

"Good enough," I muttered, now locking my own seatbelt in place and replacing my hands on the steering wheel.

I paused for a moment before figuring out what I needed to do next.

"Keys."

I then began to almost frantically search for the car keys, not realizing until after a short while where they were most likely to be. I slowly halted and looked over to Ace and, soon after, proceeded to reach into one of his jean pockets. I fortunately pulled out not only the keys, but also a small, slightly familiar cell phone.

"Yes, yes..." I murmured out as I brought the phone into my lap and the car key toward the ignition. After twisting the key in and successfully starting the car, I redirected my attention to the cellular device.

It had a touch screen and only one button at the bottom, much like what most cell phones seem to resemble. However, this phone didn't have any brand imprinted on it or any writing of any sort. When I pressed the home button, though, the screen illuminated and displayed the time, six thirty-five, the words 'Fingerprint Scan Accepted Only', and the number ten printed underneath a battery-like symbol in the upper right corner.

So, there was more than a five percent battery charge.

And, I really didn't understand the fingerprint thing, but I had a good idea of what it meant.

I looked back over to Ace and reached out to grab his hand closest to me. I then examined his fingertips and decided to press his thumb onto the screen.

I watched as the dark screen changed into a bright white, and then let Ace's hand fall back onto his lap. I brought the phone back into my closer view and saw that there were only five icons shown on the home screen: one for texts, one for a contact list, one for phone calls, one for tools, and one for internet browsing.

Honestly, this had to be a prepaid phone.

Nevertheless, I continued to select his contact list and searched through the surprisingly short list of common names. I passed by only a Dan and Harry before reaching a more familiar and potentially helpful name: Katie.

I took no sluggish time in hitting the call button by her blank contact picture and throwing the phone up by my ear. The small ear speaker quickly made a chiming sound, followed by a quiet ringing noise.

"Please..." I whispered after the first two rings.

Ring, ring.

Two more.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

I began to bite down on my lip and wiggle in my seat a little.

Ring...

"Hello?" a soft voice asked through the speaker.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hi, Katie, um..." I started, glancing back over to Ace. "Th-This is... Uh, *Mae*. I'm with Ace, and..."

"What happened?" Katie's recognizable voice questioned.

"Well," I studied Ace's wounded shoulder. "It's not... good... I think... well, actually, I *know*... Ace is... um, shot... and..." I looked back to the front windshield and began to explain things a little faster. "I don't know where I am or what exactly to do or where to go and he can't exactly help me because... well, because he's not currently conscience right now and I need to get him to help, like at a... a..." I stumbled upon what word I needed to use. "A... health fair, or something, or wherever you go for a... a treatment for something like that..."

"Okay, Mae," Katie responded. "You can calm down, okay? It'll be fine. You just need to get him back here; we'll know what to do from there."

"Okay..." I uncertainly answered back.

"Are you in his car? Can you drive?"

"I..." I looked over the dashboard of meters once again. "I don't know... I mean, I'm in the car and everything but I don't exactly know... If I know *how* to drive."

"Oh, you'll be fine. It's easy. Just... well, first, I kind of need to know where you are so I can get you going in the right direction," Katie eased.

I raised my eyebrows and slowly gazed out of the driver's side window.

"*Where I am?*" I asked.

"Yeah. Just tell me something you see outside, even like... a store or a building or, I don't know, trees or... just something."

"Oh, well then there's a lot of stores; there's one called..." I squinted my eyes at a small, two story building across the street. "*Gift shop?*"

Katie paused a moment before replying.

"Okay, Mae, you're gonna have to give me some more than that."

"Oh, okay, yeah, um..." I switched my gaze over to the passenger window, right by Ace's side.

"What about... *Walgreen's?*"

"A little better... Are you on a long street with a bunch of old-looking shops and food stands and stuff?" she questioned.

"Well... yeah," I answered.

"I figured. Go on ahead and turn the car around and head back... Or, just start by going whichever direction goes away from the city skyline."

I looked out of the windshield, once more, and saw the same distant view of skyscrapers that I did when I had first arrived here.

"Okay..." I said, now placing my one free hand on the steering wheel. "But, um, I can't exactly have both hands on the wheel, right now, so is there, like, a speaker phone or so—"

"I'll let you go in a minute," Katie spoke, cutting me slightly off. "Just get on the right side of the street, away from the skyline, and... The left pedal is the brake and the right one is the gas, just don't push that one too hard, okay? And, to turn the car on..." Even though I had that part figured out, I allowed Katie to continue. "Put the keys in the little key switch by the right side of the wheel, turn it over to the right and let up on it when you hear the engine start up; kind of like a gas stove, if you've ever used one of those. And, to get it out of park, push down on the brake pedal and move the shift stick down to where it's labeled as 'drive', or an abbreviation of that, or something of the sort. Or, put it in reverse, if you need that, too. And... I think that's it. Any questions about that?"

I stared down at the shifter as she spoke and attempted to give a convincing response once she was done.

"Oh, no... I... I think I'm good."

"Okay, good. Now, once you get going away from the city, just go through... Just two stop lights. Then, turn at the third light, and you should see one of those green signs that says however many miles to places, and you should see a place called 'Homestead' on there. That's basically where you're gonna be going, but you won't get all the way there. Then, just follow that one road for about... Say, fifteen minutes, and then you'll turn by a sign that says, 'This way to Homestead's Hillbilly Honeybee Farm'. From there, just drive straight until you come into a woods, and then I think you can figure... that you'll be here. Just call me back when you get to that point. Okay?"

I pursed my lips a moment.

"O-Okay," I eventually responded.

"And Ace will be fine, just... Don't take a ton of time getting him here. Are you okay to get going, now?"

"I hope so."

"Okay. We'll be seeing you soon..."

Katie waited a second for me to reply again, but when I didn't, she finished the conversation.

"Bye!"

"Bye," I more quietly parted, probably after she had already hung up, too.

I took a deep breath as I set the phone down in the seat by my thighs, and then looked down at the shift stick by my side.

"Okay..." I mumbled while I reached out toward it. I then tried to pull it down into drive, but it seemed frozen in place.

"Oh, yeah," I recalled, now throwing my right foot onto the brake pedal and reattempting to drop the stick into drive.

And I was successful, this time.

"Okay," I breathed as I gently placed each of my hands at both ten and two o'clock of the steering wheel. I next eased my foot off of the brake pedal and hovered it over the gas accelerator.

I looked out of the windshield and saw no cars around whatsoever, except for, of course, a few parked up the street. However, those were out of my way, so I began to gently work the car forward and began my attempt at a turn around.

"Okay, okay, okay..." I constantly repeated through the process. Soon enough, though, I was facing away from the city skyline and beginning my drive down the correct side of the long, nearly deserted road.

Or, at least, I had really hoped it was the correct side.

"Okay," I began to finalize my not so comforting murmurs. "I can do this."

Chapter Four

"Homestead's Hillbilly Honeybee Farm..." I whispered, slightly resisting a giggle as I cautiously turned the car onto the road beside the unusual sign. I could instantly see a forest of trees beside both sides of the street in the near distance.

"Mm..." I heard a small moan come from Ace's direction.

However, I looked over at him and saw no sign of consciousness, so I continued to channel my focus solely on driving toward the woods ahead.

Of course, though, the attention I gave would not last long.

"Ah!" Ace abruptly screamed out, painfully, as he jumped awake in his seat.

I jumped quite a bit as well and jerked the steering wheel over to the right side more than necessary, forcing the car to weave between the edge of the road and the grassy path beside it.

"God... Ow!" Ace continued to yell out.

As soon as I had put the car back into a stable state, more in the middle of the road, I shot a quick glance toward him and saw that he was hunched over and clutching his shoulder once again.

"Are... Are you okay?" I questioned of him.

Completely ignoring me, he screamed out in pain once more.

"Okay," I mumbled, now guiding the car a little into the wooded area and toward the side of the road.

"It... It doesn't hurt that bad..." Ace suddenly grumbled out.

I slowed the vehicle down, drastically, and gazed over at him for a moment.

"It... doesn't?" I asked, my eyebrows narrowed.

"No, I'm fine," he confidently stated.

I pushed the brake pedal and reached down to push the control stick into park.

"I'll just..." Ace continued, removing his hand from his blatantly bleeding wound and gritting his teeth a little as a form of wince. "Rub some dirt on it."

I gave him a concerned look.

"I don't think that's sanitary..." I muttered.

He gazed into my direction and gave an extremely weak smile, even though I honestly wasn't even trying to be funny.

After a second or two, he looked forward once more, and then turned back to me and spoke.

"You know that you need to pull forward more?"

I snapped my eyes back to the road.

"Oh, okay..." I quietly replied, reaching down and pushing the shifter out of park.

I then slowly rolled the car a number of feet forward, only stopping when Ace instructed me to.

"This is good," he eventually said, unbuckling his seat belt and opening the side door before I could even get the car back into park.

"H-H-Hang on..." I, for some reason or another, stuttered out.

"No need," Ace stated as he slid himself out of the passenger seat. He then made another sound of pain and went to grab his wound, but quickly retracted and attempted to just ignore the stinging.

I quickly twisted in my seat and swung open the driver's car door, following up this motion by jumping onto the poorly paved road below my feet. I then slammed the door shut behind myself and swiftly walked around the front of the car. When I approached Ace's side, however, he ignored my presence and made his way into the woods in front of us. So, I made the decision to just follow him loosely by his side until he found the hidden keypad in that one special tree. After he entered whatever code he needed to enter into it, he walked over to the concealed passageway, opened it, and began making his descent down the staircase within it.

I began to step onto the stairs behind him, paused, and then looked back at the hinged door that he had swung open.

"I should probably shut this..." I whispered, really just to myself, as I reached out to grab the oddly-shaped handle on the inside of the door.

I pulled the point of entry closed behind myself when I took the first few steps down the stairs, and then looked forward to see Ace reach the bottom step and walk out of sight. I promptly followed his footsteps to the room ahead, stopping to momentarily look around once I had accomplished my trek there.

I quickly saw Ace trying to push past both Mel and Katie by the closed door on the left wall.

"I'm fine," he suddenly spat out at them.

"Ace..." Mel coaxed as she attempted to guide him to a nearby chair. One of the 'spinnny' chairs, actually, to be specific, which I would have been completely okay with taking a ride in at that moment because... well, why not?

"Ugh," Ace grumbled out and, soon after, he pulled away from her soft grip and reached out to open the door by his side.

"Ace, stop," Mel now commanded.

Ace ignored her and promptly vanished through the cracked doorway.

Once he had disappeared and the door had slammed shut behind him, I took a step into the two girls' direction.

Mel then placed her hands on her hips, looked down at the ground in front of the door frame, and let out a short, but frustrated, sigh.

I took another step forward, but in my mid-step, Mel abruptly stepped around the door beside herself and whipped it open, like it had been once before. She then disappeared through it just as swiftly as Ace had.

I paused my step and looked the passageway over as it re-closed itself.

"Well..." Katie began, now turning to face me. "*She* can take care of him, then."

I gave her a slightly weak smile.

She gave a faint smile back, and then began to pace toward the most front and center-placed desk in the large room, the one it seemed that her and Mel always occupied.

"So, how has your day been?" she inquired, a small stab at starting a conversation.

"Um, well... I've had better, probably," I replied, turning around to face the direction where she was now stationing herself. "I mean, I may not remember much, but I think I'd remember if I'd had another day as eventful as... you know, *this*."

Katie let out a pretty well-sized laugh and took a seat at what I assumed to be her place at, assumedly, her desk.

"Yeah, enduring life-threatening danger twice over a five-hour period with... well, *him*," Katie gestured toward the side wall and raised her eyebrows for a quick moment. "That can be quite the experience. Even without the element of severe danger, I would be... just exhausted."

I remained in my place of stance and gave a small laugh.

Katie looked me over a few quiet seconds, and then spun around in her spinny chair to look over a few papers on top of her computer keyboard, all placed on top of the desk in front of her.

I awkwardly pursed my lips and leaned to one side while she silently searched the documents.

After what had to be at least two whole minutes, or something like that, Katie finally piped back up.

"So, are you okay with staying here tonight?" she asked, her head still pointed downward at her desk.

"Uh, yeah, I think," I answered, now taking a few steps into her direction.

"Good... Because, I mean, it's kind of your only option..." she slowly looked up and turned to place her eyes on me. "Isn't it?"

I finished making my way over to the left side of her desk before responding.

"Kind of... I guess... Yeah, actually... Or, at least, my only *good* option."

Katie laughed, and then turned back around in her chair.

Before another silence could begin to fall, I stepped closer to her side and grabbed the chair next to her for myself to sit in.

As soon as I had taken a seat, Katie let out a long sigh.

"Oh, God..." she mumbled.

I opened my mouth to form the simple inquiry of 'what', but before I could, she went on.

"I tell you; this is a stressful job."

This time, when her voice quieted, I jumped in to ask my question.

"What is it?"

She then reached forward, her eyes not leaving the paper in front of herself, and grabbed a black ink pen.

"Well, actually, that's a good question..." she muttered, now scribbling some notes at the bottom of one of the pages underneath the one she was intently studying.

I kept silent and looked her over as she stared at her paper, or at least until she spoke once again.

"I don't work for the government, though, so you can keep that clear."

"Oh," I said, actually forcing my voice to sound a bit amused.

"That's just something that can be kind of confusing..." she continued to explain, beginning to flip through her papers instead of write on them. "Then again, that's just what I think would be confusing... I've never had to explain my job to someone before, so..." She kind of shrugged, and her voice trailed off for a few seconds before returning. "It's actually something I'm not *supposed* to tell anyone; maybe that's why I don't know how to explain it."

She picked up her pen, wrote a few more items on one of her documents, and then stopped to throw it down and spin into my direction again.

"You don't have to explain it to me, then... you know, if you're really not supposed to," I said.

Katie smiled.

"But don't you want to know?" she interrogated.

I studied her a short moment and, afterward, responded.

"Well... I mean, kind of... a little, yes."

She cocked her head to the side a bit.

"Okay... I'll tell you," her smile turned into a small smirk and she twisted back to her desktop. She then reached under her pile of papers and pulled out one from the bottom of the stack. "Here, look at this..."

She handed the single page to me and I immediately began to search it.

At the top of the page read the date of June second, two-thousand sixteen and the headline 'Mission: Flow Control'. Underneath that, the name Jeremy Barker (of which I did, in fact, remember from seeing on a few papers in Ace's car) and the word 'briefing' was printed. And, below that, a few, good-sized paragraphs were written. I began to scan the first few sentences, which read: *Once again, our absolute favorite group of businessmen have discovered the information on the whereabouts of section twenty-two. Again, we need your assistance in locating this information and testing its accuracy.*

Before I could read any further, though, Katie interrupted.

"You know what that is?"

I glanced back up at her and paused before replying.

"Maybe..."

Katie extended a hand out and gently took the paper from me.

"Well..." she looked it over quickly with her own eyes. "It's a type of... mission document, I guess. I don't know what else to call it, but do you get the general idea of it?"

I squinted at the paper as she held it, but when she gazed back up at me, I glanced back and nodded.

"I make these all day," she went on, now replacing the paper atop the others on her desk. "Not just that kind of document, specifically. I do others, too... And I research a lot. A lot of... 'top secret-kinds' of stuff."

She returned her full attention to me.

"But no, I do *not* work for the government. I work for this agency, right here," she finished, waving one finger in a circular motion at our surroundings.

I slowly opened my mouth as I observed Katie a second, and then decided to speak.

"So... um, who is Jeremy Barker?" I bluntly asked.

Katie chuckled a tiny bit.

"Oh, that's just the code name of our best agent around here..."

I gave her a puzzled look.

"I'm talking about Ace," she explained.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Oh!" I responded.

"And, actually," Katie began to continue. "Pretty much our only agent, right now..."

"That's not very... reliable," I softly commented.

Katie smiled.

"Yeah, especially with someone like *him*."

We both fell quiet for a short moment, at least, until Katie decided to continue speaking.

"I mean, we had two other agents last year, but they both retired from the job... And yesterday, we hired a new agent, but on his first mission today..." she paused for a second and looked around a bit. "Well, we can just say that *you* came home instead of him."

I had to study Katie's expression for a long moment before it hit me.

"Oh my God!" I quietly exclaimed.

Katie gave a weakened smile and resituated herself in her chair.

"Yeah, but... that happens, sometimes. I just think he wasn't as experienced as he said he was. And the mission today was a lot more dangerous than usual... Usually, a gun isn't even required."

I bit my lip a little and just listened to Katie talk.

"But there's always a risk involved... That's just a part of the job."

She then ceased speaking and turned back to her desk. I waited a few long moments before attempting to speak again.

"So, why—"

Before I could fully state my question, though, the door on the left wall swung open and Mel's voice began to fill the air.

"Well, I at least got a band-aid on him... but that's all he would let me do," she declared.

I looked over my shoulder and witnessed Mel make her way over to where Katie and I sat.

Katie let out a half-laugh/half-sigh, and then replied.

"That's not surprising."

Mel stepped behind Katie's chair and both myself and Katie turned to face her. Mel and Katie then exchanged almost annoyed glances and, afterward, I piped up.

"But... But he... he was shot, wasn't he? Isn't that, like... kind of a big deal, or something?"

The two gazed over at me.

"Yes, it is, actually," Mel answered, slowly. "But try telling that to Ace."

I then fell to silence as she looked back to Katie, shook her head, and paced toward the right of the desk.

"Where is he, now?" Katie inquired, after about a minute had passed, while she twisted back to her unorganized stack of papers.

"Trying to sleep, already," Mel shot back in reply.

Katie looked up and studied a clock on the left wall, past my head. Or, at least, I assume that's what she was doing.

"Well, that's a new record," she commented, returning her eyes to her endless paperwork.

The room then fell silent, again. I studied Mel as she leaned up against another desk and placed her forehead in one of her hands, as well as Katie as she began scribbling on numerous documents, it seemed like, all at once.

"Um..." I unsurely started. "I think... I think I'll go to bed, too. It's probably late... Past my bed time, you know. If I have a bed time, that is, which I'm not really sure of... Which is also why I should sleep, so I can just, like, remember that... And a lot of other things, too, really..."

I quickly stood, and then Katie spoke.

"It's only seven thirty," she said with a slight laugh.

I paused for a second and stared at her, thinking of a reply.

"Yeah, that's my bed time," I responded, now turning around, toward the left.

"You don't want anything to eat?" Katie asked.

"No, not really... Not right now," I answered, probably because that didn't really go so well last time.

"Okay, well goodnight, then!" she added.

"Yes, thank you!" I kind of yelled back, now approaching the door on the near wall.

I had to stop once I had reached that point, though, and look back over my shoulder at the two women.

"Am I going the right way?" I asked.

They both looked back, but only Mel began walking after me.

"Yes... This way," she stated, once she was by my side. She then reached out and opened the door before us. "You probably need someone to come tuck you in, anyway, don't you?"

She gave a small, but much needed, laugh and stepped into the long hallway in front of me. I began to follow her and gave a small laugh back, but only to make her feel better about her... joke, or whatever it was.

"This room's for you," she said as she approached one of the doors on the right side of the corridor.

"Oh, yeah, I remember, now," I mentioned while she opened this door for me as well.

Both of us then stepped into the area and Mel flipped the light switch on by the doorway. I looked around at the small bed, desk, dresser, and empty space that I had observed once before.

"Oh, and there's a bathroom right next door, on this side," Mel informed, pointing to right wall of the small bedroom. "With a shower, too. If baths are your thing, though, then sorry."

I walked into the center of the room and turned toward her just in time to see her show a smile.

"We'll work out... all the 'stuff' that we need to take care of tomorrow, don't worry. We'll take care of you... And you're safe here, I promise," she finished.

I looked her over a second and attempted to give her a warm smile.

"Thank you," I proclaimed.

"Welcome," Mel returned as she turned toward the doorway. "Goodnight; sweet dreams!"

She stepped out to the hallway and gently closed the door behind herself.

"I'll try to... have them," I inaudibly mumbled back.

I then gazed over to the bed for a moment and, after that, walked back to shut the light off. Once that was accomplished and the room became completely black, I tried to make my way over to the bed. However, I somehow managed to trip into it and hit my head on the metal headboard above it.

"Ow..." I whispered.

After a few, tough seconds of breathing through the pain, I sighed and reached down to pull my sneakers off of my feet. Once they were thrown onto the floor, though, I realized I was wearing an uncomfortable pair of restricting skinny jeans.

"Oh, well..." I muttered to myself, throwing my body back onto the bed mattress and pulling the few blankets above it over myself. "I guess I'll just be sleeping tight tonight."

A ball of mucus lodged itself in my throat, forcing me to make a gross, choking sound. And, immediately after I had cleared it away, my eyes fluttered opened. I gradually adjusted them to the darkness of the room, and then looked around at the semi-familiar pieces of furniture. After my eyes realized there was no clock, window, or even sundial around, though, I began to wonder

about what time is really was. However, I slowly rolled over and quickly came to the conclusion that it was sometime before nine a.m.

Why?

Because the current process of waking up was painful.

I closed my eyes, once more, and sluggishly stretched my arms above my head. As soon as I began making these small movements, though, an urgent feeling struck me in my... pelvic area, I think.

I really had to pee.

"Oh..." I grumbled, keeping my eyes closed as I threw the blankets off of my body. I then turned onto my right side and pushed myself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Only then did I actually open my eyelids and carefully stand.

I began to head for the door and, once eventually there, I reached out and swung it inward. Somehow, though, it struck the tip of the biggest toe on my right foot while taking its path.

"Oh..." I whimpered, now hunching over in the doorway while I held my foot off of the ground. I grabbed the door handle with both hands and used it to support my weight during the time.

After keeping myself frozen for what had to have been... just a few minutes too many, the throbbing pain in my toe slowed to a halt. I cautiously placed my foot back on the ground, and then released the door from my tight grip.

After that was all finally over, I took a deep breath, and continued my journey into the hallway. I looked around at the other shut doorways, and then turned toward my right.

"I hope..." I mumbled under my breath as I approached the closest door to the one I had just come from.

I extended a hand to it and leisurely twisted its doorknob. After pushing it inward, I efficiently observed the new room and safely distinguished it as a form of restroom.

"Yes, thank you..." I whispered as I entered it and pulled the door shut behind myself. Promptly, I followed up by flipping the lights on and making my way over to what I recognized as a toilet. Once there, I turned, pulled my jeans and underwear down to my ankles, and sat myself upon the clean white throne.

I began to release what needed to be released and, without exactly meaning to, closed my eyes, again. They re-opened themselves when my head started to droop and veer to the side, though.

After what was, honestly, an entire minute, my urine stream turned into a drip. And, after a few more seconds, the dripping turned into... well, nothing, so I grabbed a wad of toilet paper to wipe away any excess remnants and pulled up my pants to where they belonged.

I then turned to flush my excrements away, placed the lid of the toilet over the rim, and stepped over to the sink by the toilet's side.

"One way to save a life..." I remarked, to myself, as I slightly turned the sink's handles and reached out to pump a healthy-sized amount of anti-bacterial hand soap onto my palms. "Without shooting and killing others..." I lathered the wash onto my hands and rinsed it under the water faucet. "Is this, right here."

I shut off the sink's water supply and patted my hands dry on a nearby towel. I then turned toward the door and commenced my exit, both turning off the light and closing the door in the process.

Once back in the hallway, I took my time in returning to the side of the bedroom door.

Before I even reached it, though, I heard a loud, but distant, almost pop-like noise, followed by a recognizably deep voice shouting, 'yeah!'

I paused my plodding motions and scanned the hall both in front of and behind me.

After one short moment, I picked up the sound of another pop. No yell accompanied it, but I could tell that the noises were coming from one of the rooms at the front of the corridor.

I started to walk into the suspected direction, and then heard yet another pop. This one, however, came from behind one distinct door, so I much more swiftly made my way over to that specific one.

Once there, I grabbed the handle and leaned my body against it, but didn't enter right away. I listened for another sound from within, and after another pop sounded off, I felt I had the clearance to go in.

I slowly creaked the door open and peeked past it. I allowed my eyes to observe what was inside, but they didn't receive much information, though, because another, much louder pop shouted out and scared me, apparently enough to make me jump back into the hall and slam the door shut.

I stood still for a second, and then heard a voice yell from inside.

"Hey!" it exclaimed, more excited than anything else.

I waited until the door miraculously opened itself before me and revealed Ace's tall figure.

"Good morning, sunshine!" he said with an abundance of enthusiasm.

I raised my eyebrows from my sleepy expression and looked him over; he was sporting baggy, camouflaged pants, a white v-neck shirt, and a small black pistol.

"Wh... What's going on... in there?" I stumbled out.

"See for yourself," he stated, spinning himself around and making his way back inside.

The door began to shut behind him, so I lunged forward and slipped into the room as well. Once inside, I saw that it was, in fact, a huge room with shelves of weapons and ammunition on the walls, a number of ringed targets against the farthest wall, and a long counter close to, but not against, the nearest wall.

Ace walked over to near side of the counter and picked up a pair of headphones to put over his head. He then grabbed another pair close by and extended them out to me.

"Here, this helps!" he yelled, barely even able to hear himself speak.

I paced over by his side, took them, and put them over my own ears.

Ace then repositioned his feet so that one foot was slightly in front of the other and raised his gun in his right hand toward the targets across the room. He steadied his extended arm for a short moment and, afterward, pulled the pistol's trigger back.

Pop!

The force of the shot was still loud, even with the softening of my headphones. I jumped back a few inches when the shot was actually fired, but I somehow managed to stay put when Ace let out two more bullets. I did have to grab the earpieces of my headphones, though, just as a sort of comforting measure.

After all three shots had rung out, Ace set the gun down on the counter in front of himself and reached up to remove his headphones. He then turned to me and moved his mouth in a common talking motion, but I didn't really know what it was he had said, on account of the fact that... well, I still had yet to remove my own pair of headphones.

"What?" I yelled, now pulling the earpieces away from my head.

"See that?" he, I assumed, repeated.

I looked from him to the far-off targets, and then studied them for bullet holes. However, I didn't think any human could actually have 20/20 vision from... 50-ish feet away. That's just an estimate, though, because even though I couldn't remember much, I could remember that math was never my strong suite. Or, at least, that it's not for very many people.

"No, not really," I eventually answered.

"Well, I can..." Ace voiced. "And all three of them are perfect bull's eyes."

I slowly looked from his expression to the targets, and then back to him as my thumbs rubbed the headphones I held by my waist.

"Oh... That's nice," I, more quietly, said.

Ace gave a small smile.

"What, you think it's easy?" he interrogated.

"No," I immediately responded. "Well, maybe... just a little."

Ace partially rolled his eyes.

"Well, then, in that case..." he started, now turning to swipe the gun from the counter beside himself. He then looked back at me and held it out with the handle facing upward. "It's your turn."

I opened my eyes a tad more, looked the gun over for a moment, and then gazed up at Ace.

"Well, then... okay," I confidently stated, although my thoughts were definitely not as highly esteemed what-so-ever.

I then went to grab the gun, realized the headphones were still in my hands, put the headphones onto my head, and gently took the gun from Ace's hand. I turned toward the counter, stepped over to where Ace had shot from, and cautiously raised the gun with both of my hands.

I found it difficult to aim, though, not because it was hard to see the center of any of the targets, because I could actually make that out, but because my hands were shaking a great amount.

I took a deep breath, and then decided to pull back the trigger, even though the center target wasn't even in my range.

Snap!

The gunshot rang out in the room and bounced off of the floor somewhere, I suppose.

I threw the gun back down on the counter, removed my headphones, and placed them next to the pistol.

"Wow, look at that..." I mumbled, turning around to notice that Ace was already standing right behind me with his headphones pulled off. I halted, studied him a second, and then continued. "You know, I don't think this is really my thing..."

"Well, *duh*, it's only your first try," Ace replied.

"Actually, now it's like... the third, or something, so..."

I took my eyes off of him and attempted to step away from the counter area, but he stopped me before I really had a chance.

"Come on, 'Nesia," he pleaded, throwing his arm into my path of exit. He only continued when he gained my eye contact. "Try again."

I paused a second, took a deep breath, and then turned back around. I reached out to my abandoned headphones, but Ace stopped me from returning them to my ears. Of course.

"Without those," he ordered. "You've gotta get used to loud noises."

I tilted my head to the side and glared at him from over my shoulder.

"And... what... what if I don't want to?" I questioned.

He stared back at me a moment and sighed.

"Well, if you're that insistent..." he began, now walking over to one of the cabinet shelves on the wall opposite of the door. He didn't take long looking for whatever he was searching for, picked up another, bigger hand gun, and then paced back over to my left side. "Here."

He handed the weapon to me.

"What's with this?" I asked as I took the gun into my own hands.

"It's silenced," he swiftly answered. "You know... so it's not too loud for your deathly sensitive ears."

I glanced from the pistol to him.

"Uh, yeah, I already knew... that," I said as I turned back toward the counter.

Obviously, I didn't.

I took a decently sized inhale, again, and extended the newer gun in my arms, pointing it toward the center target on the very far wall.

"Steady," Ace coached by my ear.

Surprisingly, this time, I kept my trembly hands under control, but that sure didn't mean my aim was kept in control, too. I soon pulled back the trigger, which was also easier to pull than the other, and spat a bullet at... somewhere in the room.

I let my arms droop down after the more quiet shot had rung out.

"Okay..." I started, now reaching out to place the gun on the counter, by the other. "I think that's enough for me for today... or really, for... ever."

I turned around to face the door and took a step into its direction, but Ace stopped me in my tracks yet again.

"Come on!" he reiterated, reaching out to grab my right wrist. Once he actually had a hold on it, I was jerked backward about a foot, and then almost forced to peer at him from over my shoulder once more. "Just try again."

I studied his hand on my lower arm for the quickest moment in history, and then turned my body back into his direction and spoke up.

"Well... Why should I?"

He took a moment to think of a response.

"Because I hate people who give up; that's why."

Before I could even come up with some kind of objection to his statement, he pulled me back over to the counter and went on speaking.

"Now, come on. I'll even help you."

He released me from his grasp and I finally got a chance to talk.

"Oh, really?" I questioned.

"Yes, really..." he replied, now leaning against the counter on my left side. "Now, pick that guy back up and stand back a little."

Like I knew anything about picking guys up.

"Okay..." I complied with a small sigh. I snatched the slightly larger gun back up into my right hand and then took one tiny step backward.

"More," Ace commented.

I looked over at him and saw he was making a gesture toward the wall behind me, so I took a bit of a larger step back.

"Good," he declared, now pushing himself away from the counter. "Now, point it directly at the center of that target..."

I looked away from him and instead across the room. After another breath, I wrapped my left hand over my right and brought the two upward.

I slowly shut my left eye and tried to focus on aiming the gun at the instructed target.

"Okay..." Ace more or less muttered, this time.

I could hear him take a few steps around me, and after the sound of his footsteps had ceased, I could feel him touch my right hand on the gun.

My shoulders jerked a little at the feeling of his hand, but after another second or two, I got them to relax. Well, kind of.

"Here," he abruptly spoke, now stepping behind me but, at the same time, keeping his grasp on the gun above my hands. He afterward poked his head around my left shoulder and reached out his other hand to mine as well.

"Try to hold still while you aim..." he added, now adjusting my aiming angle with both of his hands.

I could feel his chest pressed against my upper back and his breath nearly on my neck, so, yeah, it was kind of hard to hold still.

"Okay, now..." he continued, by this time complete with fixing my aim. "Give it a shot."

I held my breath a moment and pulled back the gun trigger.

It instantaneously flew across the room and lodged itself directly in the center of the smallest ring of the target.

I began to open my mouth into a strong smile as Ace let go of my hands and stepped back from me.

"Told you," he remarked.

I lowered my arms and turned around, lowering my high expression in the process.

"Well, I mean... it's not hard, so..." I started to comment.

"Well, I mean, I also helped you out a lot, too, so," he partially mocked.

I gradually cocked my head to the side and slipped a small smile.

"Yeah, thanks... for that," I softly stated.

He forced a smirk-like smile back, and then looked away and walked over to the counter, but to the area of countertop a few feet away from my right side. I then turned myself around, again, and set the gun I held back down. I observed Ace for a moment while he seemingly organized a few small boxes of ammo and, afterward, I took a few steps into his direction.

"So... Uh, how's your shoulder?" I piped up, a bit randomly.

Ace sorted a few stray bullets into their appropriated boxes and took a few silent seconds before answering my question.

"Fine."

I studied his blank expression a moment.

"Well, that's... That's good; that's okay..." I went on. "You know... you're alive; you—"

"Survived, as always," Ace cut in and finished for me.

He then picked up the boxes of ammunition he was handling and carried them over to one of the shelves on the wall.

"Yeah," I continued. "You're... You're pretty good at that."

Even from where I stood, I could hear him let out a quiet laugh.

"Sure am," he said as he turned around to make his way back over to the counter.

"Yeah; I don't think I could ever... do that, I mean, if I were..." I paused a moment. "Ever like... like *you*."

"What is that, an insult?" Ace joked, now stepping around me to grab a few other, randomly scattered ammunition containers.

"No, n-no..." I began to stammer out. "I meant, like... all of this, the stuff you do."

Ace gave another tiny laugh.

"I know, but," he started while he walked by me, again. "You know, you've been through all of the same stuff that I have in... well, a day." He stopped by a different cabinet and placed the boxes he now held onto another crowded shelf. "And, remember how I told you I have to pretend that I'm in a cartoon?" He turned back to face me and took himself off-subject a second. "Or is your short-term memory still just as bad?"

I smiled, then replied.

"Yes, I *do* remember, actually..."

"Good," he continued, now taking a few steps over to the counter area between the two of us.

"Well..." He stopped briefly before guiding his words back on track. "Do cartoon characters ever die? Or... don't they always survive?"

My smile faded a bit as I looked him over. He looked back at me and leaned against the countertop when I started to respond.

"Yeah, but... I don't think that's really how... you know, *how* it works."

"And yet," Ace began to object as he reached out to grab the gun I had recently set down. "I'm still here."

He then pulled the pistol inward, threw it into his opposite hand, pointed it at one of the far-off targets, and shot another, most likely, perfect shot.

"Training helps a lot, too, though," he added, gazing back over at me.

Then, suddenly, a noise nearly louder than the gunshot spoke up from somewhere behind me. I whipped my head into its direction, and then realized it was just the sound of the door opening. But that's kind of just an assumption, because Mel had just miraculously appeared.

"Good, now pretty much everyone's accounted for," she relieved, now stepping away from the cracked doorway. "I'm not so sure I'm completely with it, today, though."

"Hey, look who it is," Ace commented as Mel made her way over to the two of us.

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?" Mel shot back with a slight smirk on her face.

"Just that I was waiting to see my favorite smiling face this morning," Ace responded.

I looked over at him and saw him give a familiar cheesy smile.

"Yeah..." Mel speculated, staring back at him for a moment. "You're not my favorite, though. Sorry."

I didn't look back at Ace's reaction, but he remained silent until Mel decided to continue.

"Anyway, breakfast's ready. Katie made it, so at least be nice to her and just try it." Mel turned to face just me when she finished her news. "She's not the best chef, but cooking is the only real hobby she has, so we like to pretend her food is good just to... kind of make her feel good."

I both narrowed my eyebrows and smiled at the same time.

"That... That's sweet," I eventually said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Mel laughed. She then looked back at Ace, turned around, and headed for the door. "So hurry up!"

She quickly left the room after she shouted and, proceeding that, I gazed at Ace to see if we were going to follow her out.

"Too bad I'm not even hungry," he mumbled, staring at the floor for some reason or another. After a second, though, he exchanged eye contact with me. "You should probably, go, though. Get all that nutrition and junk; you'll probably need it later."

"Oh, well... okay, then," I replied, now preparing to take a step back.

"Tell Katie how great her pancakes are," Ace commanded while turning back to the counter close by. "I'll come get some later."

"Okay," I quietly responded.

When Ace didn't speak again and began to toy with the guns on the countertop, I slowly turned around and made my way to the closed exit. Once there, I opened the door, slipped noiselessly past it, and stepped into the almost empty hallway. It wasn't completely empty, really, because I both heard and saw Mel go through the shut doorway at the very end of the left side of the corridor.

Which was honestly a good thing because, without seeing where she was going, I would have been completely lost.

I began to make my way over to the door of which had closed behind her much more hastily than I had moved before. After I had gotten to the point of approaching it, I swiftly reached out to grab its handle and creaked the door open. I poked my head inside before entering and saw a very familiar kitchen and dining-like area.

Katie, who I could see taking a seat at the large dining table, snapped her head up at the sound of the creaky door.

"Good morning," she greeted as I stepped inside.

I gave her a smile but didn't say anything else in return. I looked over to where Mel, the only other person in the room, stood, in front of the counter next to the fridge and stove as she placed a heaping amount of pancake slices on a plate. I then took my time walking over to her side and, after approaching her, she spoke up to me.

"Plates are up above and silverware's down below," she directed. "And these..." she paused to clear her throat before continuing. "Just *delicious* pancakes are right here."

I had looked up at the overhead cabinets, drawers under the countertop, and platter of about twenty pancakes as she spoke. After that, I looked back up to her face as she gave me a small wink.

I showed her a weak smile as a reply before she turned to make her way over to the table. Once she had fled my side, I turned all of my attention to the food set before me, which kind of smelled like burnt peanut butter, somehow with a hint of grape juice or something similar at the same time, but scents can sometimes be very deceiving. And, with that in mind, I stretched my arm up to the overhead cabinet, grabbed an assumingly clean plate, reached my other hand down to the drawer above my waist, pulled out an also hopefully washed fork, and twisted to take the

top two pancakes from the tall stack for myself. After all of that was completed, I turned around and stepped over to the dinner table.

"I didn't use so much vinegar this time," Katie said as she stuffed a rather large chunk of syrup-soaked pancake into her mouth.

I studied the table setup, noting that her and Mel were sitting side by side on the opposite side of the table as well as both the well sized tub of butter and tall, but thin, jug of maple syrup set in the center. I then decided to take a seat directly across from Mel and grabbed the syrup container.

"Oh... yeah..." Mel kind of mumbled after taking her first bite.

I only looked at her for a quick second as she talked, and then returned my attention to dribbling probably much needed maple syrup onto my own plate.

"So, *Mae*..." Katie began. "Do you happen to remember anything more this morning?"

I finished pouring my syrup and set the container back onto the tabletop before replying.

"Um... Well, I haven't really tried to, but..."

My voice then trailed off and, before I could pick it up again, Katie continued.

"Well," she paused to chew up another bite. "I mean, you don't have to tell us everything, anyways, but..." She abruptly stopped and gazed over at Mel. "Do you wanna tell her?"

I had by now placed a small piece of pancake on my fork, but before I attempted to eat it, I froze and glanced up at the two women across the table.

"T-Tell me what?" I asked, a concerned look probably on my face.

Both Katie and Mel snapped their looks back to me.

Mel then cleared her throat.

"Mae, we did a lot of discussion yesterday over... what we believe would be best for you... And we did a little bit of... I guess, research on your family, or who we think is your family, and we found out that your parents are, well..."

"Missing," Katie quietly chimed in.

"Yes, missing..." Mel went on. "And—"

I, almost accidentally, cut her sentence short.

"*Missing*?" I repeated. "What... What does that even mean, exactly? And... h-how do you even know who my parents are?"

"Derek and Miranda?" Katie tested.

My eyes widened a little as I stared back at her and suddenly remembered the ring of those words.

"How... How do you know their names?" I questioned.

Katie pushed a tiny smile.

"I told you before..." she started. "Research is my job."

I blankly stared at her a moment, and then Mel made the decision to recapture my attention.

"So, they're missing, and we don't think it'll be a good time for you go home, at least not for a while. So... we've arranged to let you stay here, with all of us, until... well, just for a while."

"Of course, we can't force you to stay here," Katie added. "But we also all know that it's the safest option for you."

I looked from one girl to the other as they finished up.

"And, if you really don't want to stay, then we'll take you to wherever you want to go and just... well, let you go; it's completely up to you," Mel concluded.

Once it seemed that they were fully done with their explanations, I prepared myself for a well-worded response.

Even though I'm never good with words.

"But... my-my parents... they're *missing*; I need to find them... I-I need to go home."

Only now did I set my prepped-to-use fork back onto the plate in front of me. Also, conveniently at the same moment, the dining area door suddenly opened. I glanced over to it from behind my shoulder and saw Ace swiftly appear.

"Hey, how is it?" he asked, more cheerfully than he needed to.

I fell quiet and looked back at my plate.

"Fine," Mel blandly answered.

Without really even looking up, I finally took a bite from my loaded eating utensil.

And tasted a mouthful of what just had to be a relative of either garlic bread, fried mushrooms, or clam chowder.

"Just fine?" Ace shot back.

While trying to hide my scrunched-up expression, I reached out to grab more maple syrup.

Then, when Ace received no more replies, I heard him begin to fill his own plate at the counter somewhere behind me.

"Mae..." Katie eventually started, again, filling the short silence. "Are you *sure* that's the best place for you to go, right now?"

I set the syrup container down, took another bite, and then gazed back up at her. While thinking of some kind of response, Ace came around my right side and set his plate down next to me.

"Why, where you goin'?" he abruptly questioned of me.

I slowly craned my neck into his direction, my expression most likely in a state of distress.

"Ace, not now," Mel scolded.

He looked over to her a second.

"What?" he nearly snapped.

They exchanged hard gazes a moment, and then Ace returned to his breakfast.

"Sorry, then," he quickly apologized.

Afterward, I returned my own glance back to Katie.

"Are you sure?" she reiterated.

I studied her a moment, and then guided my eyes back to my barely touched pancake platter.

"No, actually, I'm not..." I mumbled out.

I picked at my food for a long, silent moment before Ace abruptly piped up once more.

"Have you told her about the job, yet?"

Immediately after his input, both Katie and Mel yelled his name, simultaneously.

"No, there's no 'job', anyway..." Katie added soon afterward.

"What job?" I asked, confused, as I turned toward Ace.

"They were thinking about letting you become an agent, like me," he responded, turning to face me in the process as well.

"No, we were not," Mel corrected.

I looked around to each face, and then Katie went on.

"You wouldn't want to, anyway, Mae... It's *really* not a safe job, and you're too young for all of that..."

"She did pretty damn good with all of 'that', yesterday..." Ace, I think, kind of complemented.

"It's not a good idea, Ace," Mel chimed in.

"But you still need someone to fill the shoes, anyway," Ace argued back.

I moved my eyes back around the table and stopped them temporarily on Ace.

"Wait," I finally spoke up.

Once I had caught his glance, I went on.

"I... I *could* do it... If-if it's not too dangerous, or anything..." I looked back across the table at the other two females. "It's the least I can do, you know, if I stay here..."

"Mae, you don't have to..." Katie almost pleaded.

"No, I... I *want* to," I declared.

I looked between Mel and Katie, who both looked more concerned than any parent or teacher ever would be.

"At least let her try it out," Ace suggested.

I shot my look over to him and studied his calm demeanor.

"Well, I..." Mel began.

However, before she could continue, Katie cut her short.

"Mae, are you really sure?"

I gazed from her to Mel, and then back to her.

"I'm... yeah, yes, I am. I'm sure."

Katie then turned to lock eyes with Mel and, after that, Mel decided to speak up.

"Well... just... she can, but just to try it, and then we'll see from there."

I took a deep breath, and then looked over at Ace.

"Great," he started. "Then that means she can come with me on my mission, tonight."

"Wait..." I then began, raising my eyebrows a little. "*What?*"

He gazed over at me and flashed a smile.

Chapter Five

"Stop smiling like that," I commanded as I stepped around the parked sports car to Ace's side.

"Why? Aren't you excited?" Ace questioned of me while he slid his surprisingly small pistol discretely into the waist band of his baggy, dark grey jeans.

"Well..." I began, now fixing the position of my new, black crew neck tee over my fresh black leggings. Both pieces of the outfit were supplied from the back of Katie's wardrobe and were a bit on the baggy side for my use, but I could still make it work.

At least, kind of.

"Yeah, I am, actually..." I continued speaking. "I just... forgot a little, I guess."

Ace finished playing with his gun and looked me over.

"Of course you did," he said. After his statement, he turned back to the driver's door of his car and reopened it.

"Here," he directed, now grabbing something from inside, specifically, another hand gun.

He then held the weapon out to me and shut the door once again.

My eyes got a little wider at the sight of it.

"Um..." I started, without intention of finishing.

"I know Katie told you that you wouldn't need it, but..." Ace explained. "Where's the fun without it, right?"

I studied him a second.

"Sure..." I spoke, very much unassured.

I then reached out and took the weapon. Afterward, I looked down at myself and attempted to conceal it in the waist of my own pants as well. Although, the fact that the hand gun was a bit small and my leggings were a tad large made the task more difficult than I had imagined it would be.

"Okay..." Ace's attention wandered off as I began to struggle with the tiny shooter. "Now..."

He then stepped past my side and made his way over to the run-down, wood picket fence a few feet in front of the car. I turned around, also, as I was in the process of losing my... pistol-pant game. After not even another two seconds of difficulty, I peeked up to see Ace facing away from me, and then immediately shoved the gun into the side of my more tightly fitted pair of underwear.

Problem solved.

"Through here," Ace continued, pacing over to a large hole made in part of the dirty, old fence. Soon after his statement, he ducked down and started to poke his upper body through the opening.

I took two bouncy steps in his direction, felt the movement of the gun pressed against my leg along with my steps, and then stopped to check that it was still in place. Of course, it was, but then another thought entered my mind.

"Hey, um... this won't, like... go off in... in there," I questioned and, once Ace paused to look back at me, I pointed to the side of my thigh, where the pistol was currently resting. "W...Will it?"

Ace looked as if he really wanted to laugh, but he didn't.

"No, 'Nesia, that's what safety sensors are for," he comforted, speaking in a low, soft tone.

I studied him a moment, and then resumed walking toward him.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled.

"But accidents do happen," Ace, pretty much, inaudibly whispered as he twisted back toward the fence.

I stopped for a moment after his statement, studied his backside, stopped myself from saying anything more, and then decided to continue following him once I had watched him begin to step through the messy fence hole.

After Ace had passed through the makeshift gate, I stepped up to it and hunched over to push my head through it. I didn't have to duck much, though, of course, because of... well, my height. Once I had my body from the waist up through the hole, I started to step completely through to the other side. I then gazed up to see Ace making his way through a tiny yard-like area with a number of metal scraps and probable car parts thrown all over, making it almost cluttered, since the area was so small. The grassy area was also surrounded by a few older looking, brown brick buildings, which were all lined up straight ahead and were each about five stories tall. To the left and the right laid just more grassy patches, but without the appearance of cluttered mechanical parts. Eventually, though, beyond the grass on each side, there were the walls of newer, nicer buildings, which happened to be extremely taller, standing at thirty stories or more.

Ace was already quickly pacing toward the far left, through the slim path of grass in between the brick buildings and old fence. I then gave a good attempt at trying to catch up with him.

"So, do you remember how we're getting in?" Ace tested of me, once I was at least close enough to his side to hear.

"Uh, yeah, we're..." I started, but swiftly lost my train of thought. "We're... The window?"

"No, 'Nesia, the back door... But, in your defense, I did warn that that could be how we're getting out, if you screw it up for us..." I looked over at Ace as he gave a slight laugh, and then went on. "Did you retain any information about the building, though?"

"Yes, I did, actually," I responded, with just a slight amount of sass. Which, really, is kind of rare for me. "It's... it's... for office people and... built, like, a year ago..."

Ace quickly picked up my words for me.

"No. Low security, owned by a team of CEOs that don't really know what goes on inside most of the time, used by part time business boys to take care of their own 'business', and happens to be the hosting place of a certain secret meeting today."

"Which is why we're going there," I added to the end of his statement.

"Right; good job," Ace praised, but with an unenthusiastic, low tone of voice.

We were both now close by the wall of one of the tall clean buildings I had described earlier.

"Now..." Ace began, again, whilst studying the area behind the building in front of us. "Back door..."

He started to slowly creep over to the back wall of the skyscraper, which was only about ten feet away from the fence on our left. I carefully followed after him, passing by nothing but a dumpster and some open space while we moved. Not after much time, Ace abruptly stopped, and I peered over his shoulder to see a typical door with chipping blue paint all over it.

"Wait for my signal," Ace directed, now reaching out to the door's handle.

I took his order, stepping over to and leaning back against the silver, cement wall. He then quietly pushed the worn door inward and began to step through it. I could see him place a hand overtop the pistol in his pants as he disappeared into the building and let the door silently shut behind himself.

And, by pistol in his pants, I really did just mean the firearm he had shoved into the waistband of his jeans.

Once he was gone and out of sight, I turned to look around a little more. I didn't really observe anything else important, though, since there was literally nothing but a few more dumpsters and yards of fence behind the building. I did, however, begin to pick up on the sounds of moving vehicles from far away, probably somewhere on the opposite side of the skyscraper.

I gradually returned my eyes to the closed door in front of me, and then just decided to wait. And, after that, wait a little more.

Once I had realized that my waiting could end up being more laborious than I had originally planned, I took a step forward and leaned myself slightly against the door. I'm not actually sure why; maybe I thought I could hear what was going on inside better that way or something.

After probably another entirely whole minute of patiently waiting, I took a sort of loud, deep breath.

And then, suddenly, the door swung open and inward, forcing me to stumble into the building along with it.

"Whoa, 'Nesia..." Ace started as I attempted to catch myself from falling onto the hard, dark grey floor. "I didn't realize you were so anxious to fall for me."

After hearing him fire his remark, I pulled myself up to stand and straightened myself out.

"I... That..." I wandered my gaze around a moment, and then more permanently placed it onto Ace's face. "That was clever."

I forced a smile.

"I know," he shot back, whipping himself around immediately after.

Once he was turned away from me, I began to search the area that I now resided in.

The room was a pretty good size, had either concrete or cement walls (I think; I'm not a construction worker or anything), and was filled with a number of big, metal tanks. The tanks themselves appeared moderately clean and in good condition, but the pipes that ran out of each of them and against the walls and ceiling were a bit rusted and old-looking. Other than that, the area smelled like a sort of mix between a musty basement and lavender scented laundry detergent.

And, oddly enough, I liked that.

Ace had already paced halfway across the room while I was making my observations, so, after I completed them, I began to follow his steps. He quickly approached a tall, but oddly narrow, door at the opposite wall. The door was also supplied with a long, thin window that had that wire mesh stuff in it; the kind that I feel like you would see in a horror movie about insane asylums. That connection may be a bit far out, but it also could have been a red flag, or something like that.

Ace was now peering through the tiny area of window to whatever was on the other side as I stepped over toward him. Before I could really even stop walking, though, he suddenly reached out, grabbed my right wrist, and jerked my body over to the wall behind him.

"Gosh," I spat out, after the act.

Ace leaned back and away from the window for a moment.

"Sh!" he partly whispered and, somehow, partly yelled.

I froze up alongside him for an extensive minute or so, listening and seeing nothing but rumbling pipes around us.

"There was someone coming," Ace eventually explained, his voice still quiet, at least, for the most part.

"I... I thought you said we were okay to be seen," I tested.

"In the boiler room?" his voice got drastically louder, once again. "Yeah, sure, good idea, 'Nesia."

"Well..." I prepared to sass him back, but then he glared back at me from over his shoulder.

"Well... sorry; it's only my first time doing this kind of thing, so, you know..." I paused a second as I searched his face. "Well, second, really... Actually, you could argue third, but..."

He smiled, just a little.

"And third time's a charm, right?" he commented.

At that point, I meant to smile back, but I forgot to, or something.

"Sure," I responded, simply enough.

Ace then whipped his head back around and peeked out of the door window, again. After a few, short moments of observation, he stepped more to the left and grabbed at the door handle. He pulled it inward and carefully shuffled his way around it.

"Okay, we should be good," he declared as he threw the door completely open.

I made my way quickly around as well, and then followed him through the doorframe and into a small hallway. The door shut itself a bit more loudly than I probably should have allowed it to behind me while I looked around a little.

There wasn't much to describe, just two windowless, wooden doors placed at each end of the corridor, which were both the same short distant apart on both sides of me.

"This way," Ace guided, already basically to the door on the far right.

I wanted to say something in return to him, but I quickly figured that I didn't have time to, so I instead began to chase after him. Once I had caught up to him, at the side of the door, he carefully commenced the opening of the passageway. As he poked his head slowly through, I could hear distant footsteps from the other side.

Ace paused a moment, and then I heard the loud closure of another door, somewhere, followed by the ceasing of the steps.

"Okay," Ace then said, now pushing through the doorway. I trailed close behind and forced the door quickly, but softly, shut after us.

At the same time, I took a quick look around and saw an extremely similar hallway to the last. Only, this time, there were a lot more doors, and the hall itself was quite a bit longer.

"Now," Ace resumed while he made his way across to the other side of the hallway. "Once we're through here, we're in." He approached the last door on the left and stepped to the side of it. "Or, at least, we *should* be."

I looked him and the door over a second, and then made my way over to both's side. Ace turned to face me and went on.

"I'm gonna let you go first, so, when I tell you to, move as quickly and quietly as you can over to the..." he trailed off momentarily. "Elevator or stairs?" he asked.

I stared at him a short second.

"Elevator?" I questionably answered.

"Wrong," he shot back. "Always take the stairs; they're faster."

"Yeah, for you..." I softly responded. "And, I... I thought you were asking for my prefer—"

"No. We're taking the stairs," he proclaimed, now turning back toward the door.

"Well, I... I probably won't even be able to find them..." I subtly complained.

Ace gazed back over at me.

"Fine," he replied. "Then we'll just go out at the same time; just don't be loud or anything."

He shot his head back toward the door in front of us, and then proceeded to crack it open a bit. I stood still as he peered through the tiny opening.

"Ready?" he inquired as his eyes wildly searched the area beyond the doorway.

"Not... Not really..." I sluggishly replied.

"Let's go," Ace then shot out, completely ignoring me. He hurriedly pulled the door open a tad more, and then slipped quietly through the doorway.

"Oh," I immediately commented, reaching out and grabbing the door so that I could follow him through before it slammed shut.

I stepped out and into the new area, making sure to quietly re-close the door behind myself as I did so. I gazed around swiftly and took note of the extremely high ceiling, the countless number of large marble pillars, and the big, grand display of potted trees and plants that surrounded me on my left side. Other than those items, I could also see quite a few wooden doors, elevator doors, and even elaborately decorated doors, all scattered over the long wall on my right.

I looked back over to Ace; he was standing not far in front of me and peeking through the dense shrubbery beside us. I then decided to join in on his fun and looked through the tree branches, myself.

Surprisingly, there wasn't much to see, just a big... actually, *huge* desk in the middle of an extremely large lobby area, where there were seats and seemingly expensive pieces of decor evenly spread about. Around three small groups of people dressed in business-like attire were lounging in some of the sitting areas and two young women in similar, but more causal, outfits were standing inside of the large, circular desk area. The whole lobby area itself was also about only 10 yards away and in the center of the humongous room that Ace and I were also now standing in.

"They're not looking this way, so, if we're quiet enough, they won't even notice us," Ace started to whisper to me with his eyes still buried in the plants.

"But... can't we be seen, now?" I objected.

Ace gradually moved his glance back at me.

"By anyone but those secretaries," he explained. "Because they'll probably stop us and make a big deal about how we didn't check in with them for our nonexistent appointment and call for security to escort us out."

I looked his expression over a second, and then gave him a simple nod of understanding, only because I honestly didn't know how to respond to that statement.

"Okay? So, now..." he twisted his body around and took a step forward. After that, he extended his right arm back, grabbed my left wrist, and then pulled me both forward and up to his right side.

"Just... be... quiet," he mumbled under his breath.

He released his grip on me once I began to step beside him on my own and, soon after that, we both made our way to the end of the line of potted plants, making us now completely exposed as we cautiously stepped toward to the far-off stairs. I focused on keeping my footsteps' external noises to a minimum, although the sound of all the people's minor conversations across the room would probably have been sufficient in covering their potential squeaks.

Ace and I moved at a slow but swift pace into what seemed like, to me, a random direction, even though to Ace it was probably the correct path to take to get to the door that lead to the building's stairwell.

Suddenly, though, a strong female voice shouted at us.

Or, at least, I'm going to assume it was being directed at us.

"Hey! Hey, you two!"

"Shit," Ace cursed in a mumble.

I instantly froze, as did he.

I looked over at Ace from the corner of my eye, and then saw him slowly spin himself around. I quickly followed suit.

"Did you check in?" I saw one of the two women at the desk-like counter, halfway across the room, continue to yell out.

I kind of widened my eyes a little and shot them over to Ace.

"Oh, no need," he began, taking a mere one step into the desk's direction. "We're just going to see our dad."

"Oh, really?" the lady sounded intrigued, but a little suspicious, still. "Who's your guys' dad?" Ace didn't even pause before answering her.

"Mr. Johnson."

I looked from him to the woman he was conversing with, to the other intently listening woman at the desk, to each of the also eavesdropping businessmen and women around the lobby.

"Oh, okay," the young woman decided to continue. "Well, then I can call him and tell him you two are here for him."

She turned around swiftly and began to reach for the telephone on a small area of the vast desktop.

"That's okay, actually," Ace yelled back, and then glanced over at me for a moment before going on. "*Sara*, here, was wanting to surprise him today. We don't get to see him at work much, so she thought it would be nice of us to just come and pop into his office really fast, just without notice."

The girl at the desk hovered her hand over the office-like phone set, and then turned back to look at us once more.

"Oh..." she slowly started. "Well... he may be busy or in a meeting right now. Are you sure you wouldn't like me to call his office and make sure he's available for you? It'll only take a minute..."

I glanced back at Ace as he shook his head at her.

"Nah," he answered promptly. "If he's not there, then we'll just leave a note. I think he'd like that better than a voicemail, anyway."

The woman behind the desk counter looked Ace over a moment, and then turned her attention to me.

"So, Sara, is this your brother, then?" she questioned.

My heart felt like it stopped for a few seconds, although I know it truly couldn't have, because then I would have actually passed out, or fallen over dead, or something. Which, actually, I'm kind of surprised that I didn't.

"A-Aaron," I tried to manage out. I then directed my eyes over to Ace's calm expression and continued. "Yeah, he's my brother."

And my words finally came out with a seventy percent rate of confidence.

I gazed back at the girl and relaxed my muscles a bit.

She leaned onto her arms, against the counter, stared between the two of us an extremely long amount of time, and then looked down and grabbed a pen from nearby herself.

"Well, okay," she spoke. "Sara and Aaron, I'll make a note that you two checked in today."

I took a silent, deep breath.

"Thank you, miss," Ace responded and, immediately after his statement, he turned himself back around and resumed to walk toward the stairs' doorway.

I instantly continued to follow him and, soon, we reached our destination without any more interruptions. Ace then opened the unmarked door in front of us and stepped inside. Well, it might have actually been marked as the stairs, but seeing if it was or wasn't was not the first thing on mind. I don't remember really being good with stair doors, anyway.

And, yes, I do remember that.

I had, by now, stepped through the doorway, behind Ace. The door then swiftly swung shut behind us, and once I was sure it was going to lock all sounds into the stairwell where we were, I turned to where Ace stood and prepared to speak.

"You're *really* good at that," I commented.

Ace locked his eyes onto me and stopped himself from moving any farther toward the bottom of the steps, which were just a foot or two behind him.

"Yeah," he began. "I know."

He gave a short-lived smile, and then spun himself around to continue his determined journey toward the tiled stairway.

I then looked the long, winding staircase over, gave a slight sigh, and began to trace Ace's trail up the first few steps.

"So, um, how far up, exactly, do we have walk on these?" I asked I climbed behind Ace.

"Twelve flights," Ace quickly answered.

I halted myself and widened my eyes.

"*Twelve?*" I tried to repeat without yelling.

Ace stopped a few steps ahead of me and looked back into my direction.

"Well, the twelfth floor is the first stop, then we have to go to the twenty-seventh," he went on.

I felt even more lightheaded than I had... well, at all, within the past two days.

"I-I... I can't... I can't do that," I stammered, shaking my head as I muttered.

"Not with that attitude, you can't," Ace advised before whipping himself back around and continuing to trot upward.

As he left, I gazed downward and searched the steps under my immobile feet.

"Oh, God..." I mumbled, now making the decision to continue climbing the stairs.

Or, at least, the decision to attempt to.

"I mean, I'll carry you if you pass out, so you've really got nothing to lose!" Ace shouted from pretty far ahead of me.

"H... How does that work?" I interrogated in return, not too far out of breath. Well, not yet, at least.

"What do you mean?" Ace shot back, now giving his trek a rest and waiting for me to catch up to him a little. "I said I'd carry you, if you knock out."

"Y... Yeah, b... but..." I began to approach his side and halted to take a deep breath. "I mean... how do I not have anything... to lose?"

I looked up at him as he looked back at me.

"Well..." Ace started to answer as he looked around at the white railings and endless paved steps. "You'll get there either way."

He returned his eyes onto me, smiled, turned back around, and then continued to push on.

I kind of rolled my eyes, in a way, and then resumed to step behind him. I gazed over at every door that we passed and noted that they all looked identical; metal horizontal push handles and clear, non-chipping blue paint were applied to each. And, for some odd reason, none had the number of the floor they led to printed anywhere on or around them.

And I was sure about that.

"Almost there, 'Nesia!" Ace eventually yelled as he passed over another landing above me.

"B... Better be..." I remarked through heavy breaths.

After another, long set of steps, I could hear Ace's footsteps turn to silence. I then stopped at the next landing between two sets of stairs and glanced up to see him standing by one of the doors at the end of my next group to tackle.

I took a huff-like, deep breath.

"I'm... not gonna make that," I breathed out.

Ace crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall beside the door.

"Come on, don't give up now," he encouraged. "I told you before; I hate people who give up."

I gave him a sideways look, and then reached out to grab the white rail on my left. I took my time making slow, steady steps up the last thirteen stairs or so. And, once I was nearly to the end, Ace leaned forward and extended his hand out to me. I reached mine out in exchange and he rapidly grabbed it to tug my body up the last step.

"Good job, cadet," he praised, now pulling me over to his side and turning to open the door in front of us.

He let go of my hand as we both pushed through the doorway and, after that, I took a second to glance around.

We were in the corner of a long hallway area, which extended both straight in front of us and to the left. The hall itself was wide and clean; there were only doors against the inside walls and only windows against the opposites. There were also a few men in suits pacing the corridor, an elevator door right next to the door we had come from, a water machine on the other side of that, and a strong view of trees, smaller buildings and roads in the windows all around us.

"Come on, *Sara*," Ace commanded with my... code name, I guess, as he began to take off down the left hallway.

I immediately refocused my attention to him and followed his order to follow. Once caught up to his right side, one of the wandering businessmen passed us by.

"Good afternoon," the man greeted as he walked.

"Afternoon," Ace returned.

I smiled at the man, but didn't say anything, myself. I took the time to study his ninja turtle neck tie before he completely passed us, though.

Once I had looked back to the long hall before us, I spotted another businessman entering a room not too far ahead. Once we had made our way to that point, I peered over and saw that he was in a large, roomy office with the door propped open. I could only watch him reach over a small computer desk to grab something, though, before we had passed by the room.

"This one, I think," Ace abruptly mumbled as he veered off to a closed door across from one of the big side windows.

I stopped myself by his side as he gazed up to look at the room number above the doorframe. I looked, as well, mostly because I had nothing else to do at the same time, and saw that the number read twelve-hundred eleven.

"Let's hope," he whispered, now bringing his head back to eye level and reaching for the door's unlocked handle.

I mean, I'm assuming it was unlocked, because the door opened for him without any resistance.

Ace next stepped inside and held the door open for me to follow, releasing it once I was also in. I then took the time to look around, as I always do, and saw just a normal, unoccupied office area that looked almost identical to the room the other guy from the hallway was in. A wooden desk with a black laptop sat in the center, in front of me, and cabinets and other storage-like furniture sat against every wall. The only chair within the proximity of the walls sat behind the computer desk.

"Damn," Ace commented, staring directly at one particular, completely cluttered storage cabinet.

The cabinet, in a better description, was tall, wide, and had a number of shelves that overflowed with unorganized papers, folders, and other, just random items which were just shoved into big messy piles.

I made my way over to the cabinet, as did Ace, and then reached out to touch an object whose name or origin I could not identify. Once I pulled it cleanly out from its place in the pile upon the middle shelf, though, I quickly figured out what it was.

It was one half of an entire bicycle tire's tread.

I exchanged a look with Ace, and then dropped the piece of rubber onto the floor.

"This'll be fun," he said, now turning to sort through the pile, himself.

I gave way to a small laugh, just because I couldn't help myself.

"Wait," I afterward started to speak. "What are you even looking for?"

"The old set of janitor's keys," he promptly replied.

He started sorting through a few handfuls of crumpled papers, letting them fall to the ground as he searched.

"Oh," I simply said.

I stood still and observed him a moment, and then decided to crouch down a bit and sort through the contents of the shelf underneath his.

I pulled out six wrinkled papers, a thick black Sharpie, a glass candle lid from Yankee Candle, a bottle of unlabeled cologne or, possibly, perfume, a three inch piece of white rope, a black guitar pick with the words 'pick strings, not wedgies' inscribed on it, a small unopened package containing a fake black mustache, two blank, unlabeled CD cases without any discs inside of them, a black beanie with the Chicago Cubs logo printed on it, and an opened, empty box of 'double pleasure' condoms.

Because what kind of pile of office clutter wouldn't be complete without a package of used contraceptives?

After dropping each item into an accumulating mound on the floor, I studied the now empty shelf, straightened my posture, and then looked at Ace.

"Any luck down there?" he asked, himself continuing to search.

"I don't think so," I replied. "Unless you're looking for the... the key to failure, or something."

Ace laughed a little as he threw an old television remote, one with the back duct-taped into place, onto the top of the mess by our feet.

"Nice one, 'Nesia, but not exactly the answer I was looking for."

I showed him a tiny smile back, even though he wasn't even paying any attention to me, as he continued to dig through the mess in front of himself.

"Oh, wait," he, after a few more moments, piped up again, still looking only at the heap of junk on the shelf he had been searching. He then shook his hand a bit and pulled out a large wad of jingling keys to show to me.

I looked at the keys, and then back at him as he flashed a pretty good smile.

"Good j—"

"Let's go," he abruptly shot out, cutting my sentence short. He then hurriedly pushed past my side, still ringing the keys against each other in his hand.

I moved my gaze down at the pile on the floor really fast, and then spoke about it.

"Are we just gonna leave this... here?"

I twisted my head over my shoulder and saw Ace stop to do the same.

"Yeah," he declared, his eyes moving from me to the mess and back again. "It looks better that way, anyway."

He whipped his head back around, threw the jingling keys into his front jean pocket and continued toward the closed point of exit.

"Well... okay," I whispered, now turning and making my way behind him.

I paused only when I had to wait for him to open the door, and then pushed my way out of the room, directly behind him. Once in the hallway, then, I stepped up by his side and walked the short distance back to the end of the corridor, not passing any other people in the process. After all of that, we both approached the door to the stairwell once more.

And, once we were through that doorway, I stopped.

And then stared at the long line of stairs that led upward.

"I... I can't... I mean, I don't... don't wanna do any more of... of these," I proclaimed.

Ace stopped himself from moving any farther, now right at the edge of the first step up, and turned back around to face me.

"These," I repeated, motioning to the stairs, since I now had his attention.

Ace looked me up and down a second.

"Are you sure we can't just... take the elevator or something, now?" I questioned.

He took another moment of quiet before finally speaking.

"Why, do you think you'll pass out?"

"Well... yeah, probably, actually," I answered.

Ace suddenly took a step back into my direction and reached his arms out.

"Wha—" I started to stutter something out, although I'm not sure what, but it had a quick ending.

Ace leaned forward, grasped my waist on both sides, and then lifted me up and actually swung me over one of his shoulders.

"Well, 'Nesia," he began, turning back around while holding me in place over his upper arm. "I know you may not remember much, but I'll remind you that I vowed to carry you up these steps in the case that you became caught in a state of unconsciousness." He paused momentarily when he took a step onto the first stair ahead of himself. "So..." He took time off from talking as he jumped up the entire first set of steps with me in his arms, and then finished his statement once he reached the first landing. "This way, I'm just staying one step ahead of the game."

It should also be noted that the whole time he had been speaking and trotting up steps, I was letting out one continuous, subtle laugh.

"Well, okay..." I said, decreasing my amount of soft laughter for a moment. I was now forcing my head into an upright position, just so I didn't have to hang it upside-down. "But... I think this is, like... you know, how firemen carry dead bodies."

"And there's a problem with that?" Ace shot back as he prepared to climb the next set of stairs.

"I..." I began but paused when Ace started to hop up more steps. "I guess not, but... you know... I'm not dead."

Ace reached the next landing and took a quick, deep breath.

"Might as well be," Ace muttered. "Because then I could just drag you."

I giggled, just a little.

And Ace laughed, too.

"Of course, that way you wouldn't probably make it all in one piece," Ace began, again. "You're arms and limbs and stuff would probably catch on something and just pop right off and I'd just leave them behind."

Oh, God.

"Well, that..." I paused my chuckles as Ace jumped up some more steps. "That would... just not really... be good."

"Yeah," Ace responded. "I figure that's one of the reasons that I've never been asked to be a pallbearer."

"Oh?" I interjected, now relaxing my head and just letting it bob upside-down for a few moments. I studied the back of Ace's heather grey tee shirt a moment, and then decided to continue speaking. "Well, what's the other reasons?"

My voice kind of wavered with the bouncing of my head and, after I spoke, I tilted my head upward once more, propped one hand under it, and rested my elbow on Ace's back in order to get in a comfortable enough position, which is kind of hard when your body is hanging over someone's shoulder.

"Other reasons?" Ace repeated, prepared to jump a few more stairs. "Well, there's that one, and the fact that I've never had to go to a funeral. That makes it kind of hard, you know."

"Really?" I started to question, still in my odd but slightly comfortable position. "You've never been to one of... of those things?"

"Nope. I mean, I see people die all the time, if that counts for anything. But I've never been to a formal funeral service or anything. I'm cool with that, though, because they don't exactly sound like the 'funnest' of times, anyway."

I gave another soft giggle.

"You know what's always a good time, though?" Ace went on when I didn't.

"Uh..." I began to ponder a second as I looked around at the walls of the stairwell around us. "This?"

Ace stopped for a moment at the next landing of stairs, and then laughed a little.

"Well," he started to reply. "Although this is turning out to be a smashing, great time... I know of one that's even better."

After giving another subtle laugh, I spoke up, again.

"Um, well, then... I don't really know."

"Well, I'll give you a hint," Ace assured. "It starts with an 'f' and ends with an 'r'."

"Uh..." I sounded out for what felt like... just, a really long time. "Is it... fiber?"

Ace suddenly stopped, pulled me down from over his shoulder, and pretty much threw me onto the floor in front of him.

I stumbled to a stand, and then looked up at his confused face right before he burst out into a fit of laughter.

"What?" he chuckled out, after a few seconds.

I couldn't help but laugh, too.

"I... I don't... I don't know," I sputtered out.

Eventually, we both quieted ourselves, at least, a little bit.

"It's the *fair*," Ace announced. "The county fair, 'Nesia."

I tried to keep myself from giggling any more.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled. "That's... okay, then."

"You don't even know real fun unless you've been to the Grigson County Fair," Ace stated, in a surprisingly serious manner.

I just smiled at him and nodded.

"Although..." Ace prepared a remark as he twisted slightly to the left. "I'm sure the fiber fair would be a great time, too. Maybe it would even help you cure that good ol' pickle disease you've got..."

He then turned completely away from me and approached the nearby closed door.

I opened my mouth into the tiniest 'o' shape.

"Oh... my God," I mumbled, now letting out a decent amount of laughter.

I stepped over to the door, behind Ace, and heard him start to chuckle out, himself, as he began to open it. After stepping through the doorframe, though, his laughs magically fell silent.

However, mine did not.

I stepped into a new kind of hallway, behind Ace, trying to control my laughs. There wasn't anybody around, but the hallway extended only to the left of us and seemed quite a bit smaller than the one we were in earlier.

Ace quickly turned around to face me.

"Sh," he whispered, himself visibly forcing his own laughter into a quiet state.

I looked him over a moment, and then tightly shut my mouth, pursing my lips afterward to show him I was keeping my giggling contained, for the most part.

He flashed a slight smile at me, and then turned himself toward the left. He started to pace slowly down the hall, and I swiftly began to follow.

We passed by a few doors on our right, but no windows on the left. There were a number of small potted plants all around and the sight of a similar model of water machine to the one on the previous floor at the end of the hallway.

Before we could really make a decent amount of progress in walking toward the far side of the corridor, though, Ace veered off to a nearby door on the right. I stepped over to his side, in front of it, and waited for him to pull out the keys we had earlier retrieved.

Almost shockingly, he remained completely silent as he flipped through the load of metal keys, picked one out, and inserted it into the keyhole in the center of the door handle. He then

cautiously turned both the key and knob, pushed the door inward, and took a careful step through.

I slowly stepped behind him.

Once inside, though, I looked around and noted that we were just in another vacant office room. The area was a lot bigger, though, and not nearly as messy as the last one we had been in. There was a handful of cabinets along each wall, a few decorative paintings strung in between them, and a decently sized computer desk in the very center of the entire area.

"Okay," Ace muttered, now turning back around to face me.

He reached out, grabbed my upper arms, and then guided me to step over to the side of the doorway. Afterward, I twisted my neck to watch him close the door behind us and flip its lock.

"Now," he continued, pacing over to the desk.

He next gazed upward and searched the ceiling for a moment, and then stretched one foot up to place on the desk. He pushed off of it and swiftly stepped up and onto it with the other as well. After that, he re-searched the ceiling above himself, and then reached up to grab the edges of a vent cover. He tugged at it a little, then a little harder, and, eventually, he was able to pull it completely off.

After its removal, he turned and tossed it onto the carpeted floor below.

He then glanced over at me and made a small back and forth waving motion with one hand.

I paused for a second and just stared at him, and then suddenly realized that his gesture meant 'get over here'. After that, I hurriedly made my way over to the side of the desk, raised my hands up by my sides for balance, and tried to throw my right foot up to the height of the desktop.

However, I quickly found that the task was a bit challenging for my own height.

Ace then threw an arm out to me and snatched me by my right wrist. Without even using much effort, he tugged, somehow forcing me to actually get my one foot up on the desk, and then pulled me up to a fast stand next to him.

I stumbled a little when he let go of me, but I gained my balance soon enough and looked up at him.

"Okay, now, do you think you can handle getting up in there?" he questioned, pointing a finger up at the open vent above him.

I looked from him, to the hole in the ceiling a few feet above his head, and then back to him with my eyebrows narrowed a little.

"Yeah, uh, no..." I answered, shaking my head a little.

He smiled a bit.

"Good," he stated, now reaching out to me with both of his hands and quickly grasping the sides of my waist.

"Wait—" I shot out, my widened eyes staring straight at him.

Before I could even begin to think of forming another sound or word, Ace both pulled me forward and lifted me up at the same time. He then immediately threw me upward and I saw

nothing but a blur of lightness to a quick darkness, which could really have meant one of two things: either I was dead, or I was just inside of the vent shaft.

But the explanation really was the second option. Or, at least, I think so.

After a second of catching my breath, I noticed that Ace's grip on me had transitioned from my waist to my ankles and that I was staring at a dark, metal ventilation wall.

I threw my hands out to the sides of my face and realized that there were also cold, metal walls pretty close on both my left and right as well.

"Can you climb up in there?" Ace's voice echoed some from below.

"Um..." I began to respond, craning my neck to look above me, where another small wall was placed, barely an inch or two away, as well as over my shoulder, behind me, where there was a relatively small, poorly lighted opening. "I... I guess I can try."

I started to twist my upper body toward the opening, and Ace must have received the message that I was turning, because he resituated my feet underneath me. Afterward, I reached my arms out and through the opening.

"Here, I'll give you a boost," Ace declared.

And, immediately after his statement, he threw my entire body upward, forcing me both to slam my head into the upper metal wall and splatter myself into the tunnel of the opening I was trying to climb into.

"Ah!" I yelled out in pain as I collapsed into the tiny, long hallway of the vent.

"Sorry about that," Ace collectively voiced back.

I slowly reached up and rubbed around on the back of my head.

Just what I needed: another concussion.

"I'm coming up; make room!" Ace abruptly shouted up at me.

"I don't think I really want to, now," I whispered, contradicting my comment by pulling myself up to my knees and inching forward a little.

And, yes, there actually was enough space for me to crawl on my knees without hitting my head again. Although, with my luck, I'm surprised I didn't hit it a second time, even with the space around me.

After a few short moments, Ace jumped up and into the vent. I could hear him slap his hands onto the bottom edge of the shaft, and then I glanced over my shoulder to see him both pull his weight up and swing his body forward and into the tunnel close behind me.

He made it look way too easy.

"Keep going," he quietly commanded, now situating himself onto his own knees.

I looked him over a second, faced forward once again, and then began to journey into the darkness of the shaft ahead. There weren't any turns or bends in the path, or at least, not until I reached the point where Ace told me to stop.

"Wait," he whispered.

I complied with his request and looked over to see him studying the shaft in front of me, where the tunnel split into two and went both to the left and the right.

I watched his expression until he spoke up once more.

"Go right," he eventually directed.

Without reply, I twisted back around and crawled into the *right* path, which conveniently happened to be on the right.

The tunnel slowly seemed to become more and more full of light as I inched through it. I continued to move until I reached the actual source of the light, when Ace suddenly reached out to me and gently tugged on the side of my shirt.

I gazed back at him and saw him give me a 'stop' gesture with his full right hand, then a 'sh' one with his index finger, a wave of light spilling across his face the entire time. He afterward cautiously pushed his way up to my side, the best he could, and reached into one of his jean pockets to pull out a small, rectangular black box with nothing on it but one button with a tiny red light next to it and a few, pin-sized holes etched into the plastic covering underneath.

I looked him over, and then looked back to study the light source right in front of us, on the floor of the tunnel area. It appeared to be another vent cover, one extremely similar to and, if not, identical to the one in the last office we were in. It was big, square, and had a number of square-shaped slits cut in it, all of them wrapping around the center. Each was also slightly bigger than the last as they gradually worked their way from the center out to the outer edges.

Ace slowly reached his hand holding the black box out to the edge of the vent cover and pressed the single button on it, forcing the little red dot to light itself up.

I looked from him, down to the vent cover, and then focused my attention onto the slits within it, realizing that I could actually see some blurs of color through them. I leaned forward a little and began to search what I could see of the room below us.

It was a much bigger room than any other in the building, well, other than the lobby room and probably the stairwell, if you could stretch out all the stairs on one level, that is. It was a sort of conference room, with a long meeting kind of table directly below where we sat with a number of vacant seats pushed up to it on all edges. The only wall I could really see was the one on the right of us and I could spy a large flat screen television with a blank, bright blue picture currently displayed on it.

Suddenly, I heard a rustle of papers from somewhere in the room that I couldn't see, and then saw a tall man in a suit walk into view on the left side of the conference table. He was holding a thick stack of documents and trying to flip through them in search of a certain one. Or, really, that's just my assumption of... you know, what he was doing.

Soon after I caught the glimpse of him, I heard a door creak loudly open.

"Did you get them?" a low, but feminine, voice questioned from out of my range of sight.

The man with the papers then turned around and slowly looked up.

"Yeah," he softly replied.

I saw a woman with dark hair, dressed in a cream pantsuit and tan heels, suddenly walk into view and past the man.

"Good," she snappily spoke, her voice being the one I had previously heard.

She made her way over to the far corner, where I could barely see, and kneeled down. After a quick moment, she stood back up, paced back over to the table beside the man, and set a plain manila folder on the tabletop.

"You'd think they'd be here already," she sharply commented.

"I know," the man quickly agreed, turning to set his papers down next to her folder as he pulled out a thin stack of pages from the bigger whole.

As soon as the man had finished his sentence, the sound of the opening door echoed throughout the room, once again, and two other professionally-dressed men appeared.

"Good afternoon," one of them greeted as they both made their way to two chairs across from the man and woman already there.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," the woman returned. As she spoke, I caught a short glimpse of her face and noted her fair skin, white smile, and bright red lipstick.

"Let's make this fast, yeah?" the other man of the new two abruptly added.

"Yes, yes, of course," the woman assured, clasping her hands together at her waist as she spoke.

"So, we have, in fact found the whereabouts of *section twenty-two*..."

Her voice trailed off as she looked downward and began to rummage through her folder. She then grabbed one paper of significance, slapped it onto the tabletop, pushed it across the desk, and set it in front of the two men.

"As you requested," she added, and then awaited a response.

"*Alaska*?" the man that had originally greeted everyone inquired as he observed the contents of the page.

"Yes, and—" the woman started to reply, but was quickly cut short by the other man across the table.

"No," he harshly stated. "Mr. Williams already sent a team to investigate Alaska, Yukon, and all of Far Eastern Russia. It's not there."

"Yes, but..." the woman began to object, but had to pause to think a moment. "But this information is much more recent."

"How recent?" the man that seemed to be a tough cookie shot back at her.

"Earlier this week," she continued. "Monday afternoon, to be precise."

The man seemed to fall silent and didn't form another comeback.

"This paper says fifty miles north of Fairbanks," the man's partner started. "Is that..."

His voice lost its way a bit and the woman finished his sentence for him.

"In the wilderness? Yes, of course..." she stopped to nod. "Completely surrounded by wooded area, just as Mr. Williams had predicted."

"Well, we'll have to just see about that..." the other man commented.

What a downer.

"We're very sure about our information, this time," the woman reassured.

After her short statement, she turned toward the man standing by her side, who had remained unspeaking the entire time.

"And, we, of course, retrieved the files on *Mr. Barker*, as well..." she continued, taking the few documents in her companion's hands and extending them out to the men across the table.

"Good, thank you," the nicer man accepted the papers gratefully.

He then appeared to look them each over carefully for a long while, his business partner beside him searching them as well, but a little less closely.

"I knew he couldn't hide forever," the more harsh man said, eventually.

"None of them can," his companion added, softly.

"We'll get more information to you about the rest of them as soon as we are able to retrieve it," the woman confidently spoke, now clasping both of her hands together in front of herself, just as she had before.

"You know," the ruder man abruptly started, almost entirely ignoring the woman's previous proclamation. "I don't think they really know what they're getting themselves involved in, none of them do. Especially if this guy's only... what, *nineteen*? He's not gonna see it coming..."

He quickly stood up and, afterward, his partner followed his actions.

"That is all for today, isn't it?" he finished up.

"Oh, yes," the woman said as the two businessmen gathered their papers and started for the door.

"Please notify us for the next meeting," the opposite partner said to the woman.

"Of course," she agreed, the two men already leaving the room.

Once they were out of my sight, I heard the sound of the door both open and shut quickly.

A quick silence fell, and then the woman spoke up to her quiet coworker still beside her.

"Always *love* talking to those guys," she said with a small sigh.

She turned to pick up her folder, and then made her way over to a place in the front of the room where I couldn't see.

"*Yeah*," the man replied, obvious sarcasm laced in his voice.

He reached down to retrieve the stack of papers he had set down on the tabletop earlier.

"Honestly, though," the woman continued, making some rustling sounds along with her words. "I doubt they'll ever catch that kid; they didn't even know about him sneaking around until now."

She quickly reappeared into sight, a large Vera Bradley tote bag slugged over her right shoulder.

"Well, I kind of think they had to have monkeys running their research department before now," the man remarked as he made his way over to the door.

The woman laughed a surprisingly great amount at him, and then followed in his steps. Which was... funny in its own way, actually, because his comment was not even the least bit humorous.

Soon, though, the door creaked open and shut, once again.

The room fell completely quiet as I gazed back up and over to Ace in the vent beside me.

I watched him shove the black box he had held the entire time back into his jean pocket, and then noticed the sort of confused expression on his face.

"You... okay?" I whispered, although there probably wasn't much need to be as quiet, now.

He glanced over to me and pushed the look off.

"Yeah," he stated, his voice not nearly as soft as mine was.

He then began to crawl backward and turned himself around.

"Let's bust out of this joint," he added, now starting to hurriedly crawl away.

I looked him over a second, and then decided to follow after him. We both remained quiet as we inched through the tunnel and returned to where we had entered. And, once to that point, Ace became the first one to exit, throwing his legs out from underneath himself and jumping swiftly through the large square hole.

I hesitated to do the same, carefully sliding myself to the edge of the opening and pushing myself slowly off of it until I slipped through the shaft and landed onto the desk far below. Well, it wasn't exactly *far*, but it was far enough to make me stumble on my landing. It was surprising, however, that I didn't land on anything other than my feet.

Once completely out of the vent, I looked around the slightly familiar office room and saw Ace retrieving the vent cover he had earlier removed from the ground.

I cautiously knelt down, sat myself on the edge of the desk, and then slipped softly to the floor beside him. He did the opposite once I was done, jumping back onto the desk and replacing the vent cover in its original place. After that was accomplished, he turned back toward me, leaped from the desk, and started for the door.

I began to follow him as he opened up the doorway and slipped through. Once I was back into the hallway, right behind him, I paused to softly close the door behind the two of us. I then turned back to see Ace already practically to the end of the hallway and immediately chased quietly after him.

He soon approached the door to the stairwell, and I groaned internally while I stepped up to his side.

He opened the door, slipped through, and then made commentary on my thoughts once I had slid in behind him.

"You know, going down is a *lot* easier than going up."

He started to trot quickly downstairs, and I sluggishly followed behind.

"Well, you know... to... to you," I tried to formulate a response, one I knew I had already used once before.

Ace let out a very soft, almost inaudible laugh.

"Well, you'll get a break," he started, his voice almost shaking a little with his fast steps.

"Because we have to return the keys."

"Wh..." I paused to take a breath, just for a quick moment. "What keys?"

Ace stopped at the bottom of the set of stairs in front of me, turned around, smiled, and shook his head.

"Oh, Amnesia..." he mumbled, now continuing his trek without answering my question.

I watched him disappear down and around the corner to the steps below me, and then decided to just keep going without asking again.

Next, I silently followed him down... just a lot of stairs. I can't really calculate how many flights or anything exactly, but it was too many. Far too many.

Once we had reached the end, though, Ace pushed open a familiar door to lead us both out of the stairwell and entered an also very much recognizable hallway. He quickly paced down the left side of the hall, past the same unused water machine my eyes had picked up on earlier and around the same number of doors on the right-hand side of the corridor as well as windows on the left. No one else was in the hallway this time, though, which was probably a good thing.

Or, at least, I hoped so.

Ace soon enough veered to the right and opened one of the office doors. I stepped up behind him, and then followed him swiftly inside.

I looked around and saw the same office we had retrieved the keys from earlier, the pile of junk from the cabinet of which we had dug through still thrown onto the floor. And, as Ace stepped forward to put the keys back into some drawer in the office desk, I studied the mess on the floor in front of me.

All of the items in the pile I remembered seeing before, like the condom box and the unused fake mustache, but, for some reason, they looked... different, or something. Well, really, I only say that because the black Cubs hat was thrown away from the pile and sat on the floor against the opposite wall. And, I don't remember putting it all the way over there.

Then again, what *do* I actually remember?

"Okay," Ace piped up, now making his way back over to me and the re-closed door behind me. "We should get going, now."

He then quickly pushed past me and left the room. I looked the area over a short moment, again, and then made the decision to follow.

Once back in the hallway, I gave the door time to shut behind myself before I turned into Ace's direction.

And then, suddenly, I froze.

"There you are!" the woman from earlier, the secretary, shouted at Ace and I from the end of the hall in front of us.

Ace halted, as well, and didn't speak.

The secretary speedily walked toward us, and then continued to talk.

"You know, Mr. Johnson has been searching for you."

She reached out to point to Ace, and then to me.

I flickered my widened eyes over to Ace's backside, blinked a few times, and then slowly took two steps toward his side.

"Why don't..." the woman paused as she approached us, stopping herself to stand a few feet away. "You two come with me."

I took another step, now up to Ace's side, and then peeked over at his expression, which was a lot less surprised than my own.

"We don't want you getting lost, or anything..." the girl went on, turning her body back around a little in the process of speaking.

"Oh, yeah," Ace finally piped up. "Thank you, but—"

"No, no... Come with me, please," she started, again, cutting him short. "I wanna make sure you know where you're going."

She swiftly turned around and waved her hand as a gesture to follow her.

I gazed over at Ace and he exchanged a look back, although his face was completely emotionless, so I didn't really get anything from it. He then began to follow after the secretary, so I did as well.

She led us both to the elevator door, pressed the downward-pointing arrow button beside it, and then waited a few short seconds for the door to open up in front of us. We each stepped inside and, afterward, the woman pressed the button marked with the number '2'. The doors then shut from the edges inward and a slightly awkward silence began to fall.

At least this way I didn't have to take the stairs again.

"And you said your names *were*?" the woman broke the silence after a few moments, the end of her question elongated a bit to emphasize her need for a response.

"Aaron and Sara," Ace immediately shot back.

"And are your last names also Johnson?" she posed another inquiry.

"Yes, but it hasn't always been," Ace replied, now actually turning to make eye contact with the girl, who was on his right. "You see, we're both adopted, actually. From foster care, too, originally. And, we only recently *both* changed our names. Sara, here, was a 'Miller' for a pretty long time."

I looked between the two, who were both on my right side.

The secretary forced an odd-looking smile.

"Interesting," she commented.

Suddenly, the elevator stopped, and the door in front of all of us started to open.

And a dark-skinned man dressed in a security uniform appeared on the other side, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I'm gonna have to ask you some questions," his extremely deep voice began, his eyes staring straight at Ace.

My eyes slightly widened, once again, and I gazed over at Ace as he flashed both a smile and a small laugh.

"Not today," he said.

Immediately after his statement, his cheeks relaxed, and his right hand whipped the pistol he had been storing out of his pants' waistband. I shot my head back to the security guard, saw his hand instantly reach for the gun on his belt in the same manner, and then watched as Ace threw his gun upward and spat out a quick bullet directly at the man's chest.

I flinched at the sound of the gunshot and the secretary, still in the elevator, let out a scream.

The security guard stumbled backward, both of his hands flying up to grasp at the area of the shot he had taken.

"Come on, 'Nesia!" Ace shouted, jumping out of the elevator.

I took nearly no time flying out after him.

He turned to the right and sprinted down to end of the hallway, which wasn't too far away. He then turned and flew through the door that led to the stairs as I followed close on his heels.

Once we had returned to the stairwell, we both hurriedly descended down one flight of stairs before reaching the door to the first-floor lobby we had come through before. After that, we pushed through the doorway and continued to run through the back of the lobby in an attempt to get to the door behind the potted plants. I didn't really know if anyone saw us run by, but I don't think it would really even matter at this point. After we reached that specific door, I followed Ace through the same hallways and doors that we had gone through when we had first entered the building.

Eventually, we exited through one of the boiler rooms, the exact same place we came in from.

Of course, though, the run couldn't slow down there.

Once outside, I continued to rush behind Ace as we both made our way to the far left of the building's backyard and through the hole in the old, worn fence that our journey had once started at.

Soon enough, we had reached a familiar-looking sports car, and Ace jumped into the driver's seat of it in physically no time. I, on the other hand, did take at least a little bit of time, but I managed to get in the other side before he started the car up and whipped it around.

He pretty much flew down the half-dirt, half-grass path that led through a patch of wooded area. Once he got to us to a nice, safely long distance from the building, he slowed the car a slight amount and I actually received the chance to put my seatbelt on.

"You know," Ace started, pulling the car onto another pathway that was paved completely with dirt. "I usually don't actually have to speed away like this."

I took a breath and looked over at him.

"I've probably only had to run away once... ever," he continued, his eyes remaining on the kind-of road ahead of us. "At least, until you came around."

He kind of smiled but didn't gaze over at me.

"Well... I... Sorry about that, I guess," I sluggishly replied, giving the smallest laugh along with it.

"Yeah, well," Ace began again, turning onto an actual gravel road at the same time. "I kind of like it, actually. It's... different."

He paused for a few moments as he drove us fully out of the wooded area, and then looked over at me for once.

"You're pretty different, too," he commented, afterward giving a short chuckle.

I smiled back.

"Well, sorry about that, too," I stated.

His laugh strengthened as he turned back to face the windshield.

I gazed over to the window on my right-hand side soon after and a silence quickly fell. After watching a few trees, cornfields, and small houses pass by, though, Ace piped up once more.

"So, we're going to make a quick stop before we head back."

I looked back over at him.

"To where?" I questioned.

Ace turned his head over to me, smiled, turned back around, and then answered.

"You'll see."

The car came to a gradual stop and I began to grab at the door release handle by my side. I then looked out of the window above it, opened the car door, and started to step out and onto the sidewalk set in front of me.

"Oh my God..." I mumbled.

Straight ahead sat a long, dark red brick building, two stories high, with a number of white doors with chipping paint and stains, lined up in sets of two, placed all along the front of the building itself. The sidewalk I currently stood on led a path to each set of doors and a few dying or already dead bushes were lined against each pathway. The two doors straight ahead of me had the numbers '175' and '176' inscribed onto a small silver plate in the top center of them.

I instantly realized where I was.

An 'upstairs-downstairs' type of apartment.

I slowly took a few steps toward the two doors directly ahead as I heard Ace get out of the car and step onto the path behind me. I looked around a little more as I walked and noted that most of the grass around was turning brown, just like the bushes by the sidewalks.

Yeah, I could remember where I was.

Once I reached the two doors at the end of the pathway, Ace pushed up by my side.

"Here, let me get that..." he mumbled as he pulled out some kind of device that looked like a crossbreed between a pen and a screwdriver. He then proceeded to put the end of the... *thing* into the lock on the left door's handle, jiggled it around a bit, and twisted the handle inward.

Afterward, he creaked the door open in front of me and stepped back.

I reached out to push the door back a bit more, and then started to take a step through the doorframe. I peered inside and saw an area well-lit by nothing but sunlight as well as a tall, carpeted staircase a few steps ahead, surrounded by only light blue walls.

A little bit more fast paced, I made my way completely inside, grabbed the long, plain wooden railing on the left of the stairs and began to step upward. I gazed over to the right at the same time and saw a few small, framed pictures hanging on the wall connected to the stairs. One was a simple painting of a beach scene, another of a random barn's side, and the last of some kind of cottage in a forest.

Eventually, I reached the end of the staircase and was able to step into a similarly carpeted, small living room area. In front of me sat a brown love-seat, an identically colored recliner, a black coffee table made messy with copies of *Time Magazine* and *Better Homes and Gardens* issues, and a mid-sized, flat screen television set, all arranged into a square-like set up. I turned to the right and took in the setting of a kitchen area as well, with a bar counter directly on my right side and an actual kitchen on the other side of that, complete with a refrigerator, sink, stove, microwave, white cabinets, and other cooking essentials.

After taking in all of that, I made my way past the living room and saw a rustic, white dining table equipped with four matching chairs on each side. Behind that, against the wall, was a short, but long, bookshelf with framed photographs set atop it. I then walked over to see what was pictured in each and realized that I was actually in every single one.

The first showed me at only four or five years old, outside, sitting on the back of a large black horse with nothing but a completely frightened expression on my face.

I remember that, too; that was the first time I had ever broken a bone.

The next picture displayed was of me, taken only a few years ago, holding a tiny newborn baby in a bright pink blanket, surrounded by windows so bright that you really couldn't clearly see my face.

And, I know that baby was my younger cousin, Ella, and the picture was taken in my aunt's indoor porch because the lighting there was so bright that I'm pretty sure you could actually get a sunburn there, even if you just sat in the one shaded corner. Also, Ella was the first baby I had ever performed a diaper change on.

The third photo portrayed me as a moderately young child sitting on my dad's shoulders. The two of us were both laughing and a few tall, multicolored castle-like structures could be seen in the background.

Disneyworld.

The last picture was of me and my mom. In it, I was attempting a smile while licking a wooden spoon covered in chocolate and she was smiling wide while showing her outstretched hands in front of her chest, also covered purely in light brown chocolate. There were also a number of brown splatters on both of our faces, shirts, and arms as well as in our hair and mouths, at least from what could be seen. There was also a mess of melted chocolate in the kitchen behind us, too, but it could only be seen if you looked close enough in the photograph, which I made sure to do. I remember the scene as our first stab at baking cupcakes together and it couldn't have happened any earlier than at least a year ago.

I studied my mother's short, dark brown hair more closely for another moment or so, and then turned to look toward the small hallway ahead.

I began to walk quietly into it and started to loosely observe its cream-colored walls.

Only three doors surrounded me: two on one side and a mere one on the other. They were all residing opened and I could see that the first one led to the bathroom as I passed by it. The next one, on the opposite side of the hall, served as a passageway to the master bedroom, AKA my parents' room. I peered into it momentarily, and then decisively entered it.

I stepped over to the perfectly made queen bed against the far wall, and then gazed at the two large dressers on the right. Next to it, a wooden art easel sat, folded up, against the wall.

Ace's footsteps began to enter the room behind me and, soon after, I saw him make his way over to the easel's side. He then spotted the edge of a canvas board peeking out from behind the nearest dresser and reached down to pick it up.

"Someone's a real painter," he commented, the first time he had spoken since we had arrived here.

I looked him over a second as he searched the front of the canvas, and then stepped over to his side to take a peek at the board as well. I immediately recognized the arrangement of various cream colors and few light blues as a familiar winter landscape.

"My mom," I partially whispered. "She..." I stepped back a little as my voice momentarily lost its track. "She..." I paused, again, and then let out a slight giggle as I finally continued. "She hates snow... And she only likes to paint when she's mad, so when she does actually paint, she paints things that she hates... And then, whenever she's done, she calls the picture ugly, or cusses it out, or something, takes it outside, and burns it. She says it's the best therapy she's ever given herself for under ten bucks."

Ace gave way to a small laugh.

"So, what does she hate, other than snow?" he questioned, placing the picture back in its spot.

I took literally no time in responding.

"Corn husks."

Ace laughed, again, as did I, just for a moment.

After a few short moments, I turned back around and looked around the room some more. After seeing nothing more of interest, other than a box of my dad's 1970s and 80s baseball cards in one corner and a family portrait of me and my parents from 2002 hanging on the left wall, I started to leave the room and reenter the hallway outside.

Ace followed me while I made my way to the last door yet to visit, I mean, other than the bathroom, which I actually kind of needed to use at the time.

Bladder retention aside, though, I slowly walked into the most familiar room of them all: my bedroom.

Sunlight poured into the small living quarters from one corner and my favorite scent, vanilla coconut, dispensed itself from an air freshener plugged into an outlet below it. A white desk adorned with blue and purple paint splatters sat in another corner, its desktop completely covered with notebooks, perfume bottles, a few pairs of sunglasses, a couple water bottles, and a number

of CD cases. Near that sat my tiny twin-size bed, the purple covers practically thrown into a ball on top of it. A few old stuffed animals were also thrown onto the floor below that and, across the room, sat a blue and white dresser with a mess of hair clips and headbands sitting atop it. Next to that was a closed closet door with a bunch of random, multicolored Post-it notes slapped all over it. Other than all of that, a long string of white Christmas lights was strung over each wall with a countless number of photographs taped onto areas that the lights didn't cover.

"Sister's room, right?" Ace asked, now walking past me and into the middle of the room on top of a large, bright purple rug.

"Mine, actually," I corrected, stepping further in after him.

"No way," he remarked, turning to face me. "There's no way you're this messy."

He smiled softly and I decided to do the same, giving no other response.

After a second, he turned back around and looked around a little more. I followed suit, now stepping over to my messy desk in the far corner.

"So, you wanna pack a bag of your stuff?" Ace began, again.

I reached one hand out to grab the edge of the desk in front of me, and then peered over my shoulder at where he stood, by the closet door.

"Well... clothes, yeah, sure, I guess," I hesitated a bit to answer.

Ace stepped around a little, and then made eye contact with me. After he didn't say anything more, though, I walked over to the closet by his side, opened it, and looked its contents over.

The closet itself was pretty small, definitely not a walk-in, but all of my jackets and a few of my tops were hung in it, making it look kind of cramped, and all of my shoes, bags, and throw blankets were thrown onto the floor and the one shelf underneath the hanging garments.

I grabbed the largest bag I spotted, a dark blue duffel, swung it over my right shoulder, and then squatted down to grab a pair of light pink Converse sneakers. After that, I stood straight once more, made my way over to my bed, threw the empty bag over the waded sheets on top of it, and placed the footwear inside.

"You can take more than just clothes, you know," Ace commented from across the room.

I turned around and paced over to the dresser beside him.

"Well," I started as I opened the top dresser drawer and reached in to grab a good handful of multicolored socks. "W... Why would I wanna do that?"

I stepped back over to the bag and dropped the socks in.

"Because..." Ace paused a moment while I went back to the dresser. "You could be gone longer than you think."

I looked over a pile of bras and underwear, also in the top drawer, and then looked over at Ace.

I slowly closed the drawer and reached down to open the next one.

"But... I..." I gazed back downward and began to flip through a few tops in the freshly opened drawer. "I'll be back... e-ventually, anyway."

Ace remained silent for a few moments as I pulled out a stack of a variety of shirts and turned back toward the bed.

"I-It's only temporary, I-I mean, staying... away..." I shoved the stack into the bag, and then continued. "We're going to find my... my parents, and then we'll come back home, again."

I walked back over to the dresser to grab a couple more tops and, at the same time, I noticed Ace had made his way over to my cluttered desk.

A quick silence then fell as I continued to pack my shirts and only after a minute or two did Ace speak up once more.

"Why do you have so many Walmart cards, 'Nesia?"

I resituated the clothing in my duffel bag, looked over to him, and then stepped unhurriedly over to his side. I afterward watched as he carefully moved two notebooks out the way to reveal about four tall stacks of Walmart gift cards.

I gave a tiny laugh, and then began to explain as he picked up one of the stacks to search through.

"My... My dad, he would get those gift cards every time he got the reward points that... that you get when you get gas, and then he used the money off of every single one of them except for just one... and then he just kind of shuffled them up and gave them all to me for my birthday a few years ago," I stopped to laugh again. "He said there's a hundred dollars on one, but I don't know which... or even know if he's telling the truth, actually."

Ace chuckled a bit, and then added his own commentary.

"So what, you just try a different one each time you go to get groceries?"

I giggled again as I replied.

"Yeah, actually... well, sometimes... There were about seventy cards to begin with, and now there's... um..."

I looked the stacks over a second and tried to come up with a quick calculation, but my brain didn't really work fast enough.

"About seventy," Ace shot out, letting a slight laugh go with it.

I laughed along with him, and then looked directly up to him as he reached down to set the stack he was holding back onto the desktop.

His eyes flickered from me, to the cards, and then back to me.

"Actually, here," he began, picking the one stack back up and holding it out toward me. "You can take these; you'll never know when you'll feel like taking a spontaneous trip to gamble at Walmart."

I smiled and gave a tiny giggle as I took the handful of cards.

"Thanks," I mumbled while I turned around and made my way back to my bag.

Ace remained silent, kind of surprisingly, as I dropped about twenty gift cards into my partially packed bag.

After that, I took a sort of deep breath and walked back to the dresser across the room to search for a few pairs of pants from the next drawer down. Once I found a good number of jeans and a few shorts, I gathered them up and marched back to the edge of the bed.

Ace suddenly piped up as I threw the pants into the bag, almost scaring me after the strong silence he had created.

"Nesia?" he began to address me, not continuing though, until I turned to look at him.

"Y-Yeah?" I stuttered out.

He then slid his hands down by his sides and took a subtly deep breath.

"I... I gotta tell you something..." he stopped and pursed his lips, and then looked down to floor.

I could suddenly actually feel my heartbeat.

I may also have let a few drips of still-held urine release, but I'm not so sure if that's actually accurate.

"It's... about your parents," he added.

And then I could actually feel my heart stop.

"W... What?" I muttered.

He stepped forward, still studying the floor.

"Well, they're not *really* missing..." he went on.

I looked him over, my eyes widening a bit.

"They're not?" I shot back, my voice sounding high and optimistic.

Ace abruptly looked back up to me, made eye contact, and shook his head.

"No..." he stopped and took a fast breath. "They're... They're... *dead*..."

A cold feeling immediately rushed over me.

"W... W... W-hat?" I completely stumbled on my one-word sentence.

"Nesia, I'm sorry..." Ace continued, taking another step toward me.

My vision suddenly turned blurry, both from shock and a quick onset of tears.

"N... N-No, n-no..." I mumbled, shaking my head.

"I'm so sorry," Ace kept going, and I could see him take another step toward me from behind my nearly tunneled vision.

"I-It can't... b-be true," I said, reaching up to wipe away a few tears that had already streamed from underneath my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Nesia, but... but it is," Ace stated. "I wouldn't lie about that."

Suddenly, another rush of coldness swept over my body and, in the process, I threw one hand up by my mouth in an attempt to somehow calm myself.

"Hey, it's okay," Ace went on some more, now reaching to gently touch my upper arms. "It's okay."

I instantly let out a strong sob.

"Sh," Ace attempted to soothe as he guided me to sit on the edge of the bed next to me.

I continued to keep my hand over my face and wrapped the other around my frontside as I let out another quiet cry.

"No, no, no..." I repeatedly mumbled.

Ace carefully sat on the area of the bed directly in front of me, gliding his hands up to my shoulders at the same time.

"I'm s-so sorry..." Ace suddenly started to stutter, himself. "I-I had to tell you... I'm so sorry, Nesia..."

I softly cried once more, then sniffled, placed both hands into my lap, and gazed up, directly at him.

"I... I...." my voice completely trembled as I tried to speak. "I... I... n... n..."

Eventually, I gave up with my mutters and released another soft sob.

I looked quickly down, but I could see Ace scoot more closely to me from the corners of my eyes.

"It's okay," Ace decided to go on, one of his hands traveling from my shoulder blade to my upper back. "It's okay."

I continued to cry, not making any sounds but letting my silent tears drip down my face.

"I-It's gonna be okay," Ace said, his stutters disappearing just as fast as they had appeared.

"You'll be okay, alright?"

I sniffled a bit more as the water in my eyes continued to accumulate.

"I... I promise that, okay?"

Immediately after his final words, Ace slid the one hand still on my shoulder to my back, leaned forward, and pulled me into his chest, tightly.

I took a deep breath and allowed another few tears to be released.

"I heard something I didn't really want to today, too..." he very faintly whispered. So faintly, actually, I'm not even sure that's what he actually said, or if he even said *anything* in that moment.

The room quickly fell silent and I focused nearly all of my energy on breathing. I could also feel most of the water on one of my cheeks soak into Ace's thin tee shirt while the rest slowly froze in place.

After another few long moments, I began to cautiously lean backward and felt Ace's hands gently fall off of my backside.

I then reached up with the back of one of my wrists and wiped the tears that were still left underneath my eyes and looked up at him

He placed his hands back onto my upper arms and began to speak once more as I struggled to fight off another rush of cries.

"Let's try to finish packing now, okay?"

Chapter Six

I turned the small, rectangular-shaped plastic card between my fingertips.

I glanced shortly at the blue and purple tie-dye design on the front of it, the words 'Gift Card' in one corner, the printed Walmart logo in the other, and then set the card down into a pile by my right leg, right on top of another, which had a cupcake adorned with sprinkles imprinted on it. I afterward twisted a little to the left from where I sat, atop the bed that I had only slept in once, which was only last night, and picked up another card from a separate stack.

I brought the next card upward and held it over my lap as I flipped it over to view its frontside.

I bit my lip as I studied a partially rubbed away scene of snowy hills and dark clouds.

Then, suddenly, a knock came from the door across the room.

I shot my head upward and took a deep breath.

"C-Come in," I said, probably not as loudly as I should have.

Slowly, the door creaked its way open, and Ace revealed himself from the hallway.

"Hey," he casually greeted, now letting himself in.

I forced one corner of my mouth upward a bit but didn't speak.

He pushed the door to a closed crack, and then began to pace along the opposite wall of the room from where I sat. He looked over the empty, flat top of the dresser nearby and, afterward, spoke once again.

"Now, 'Nesia," he began, now turning to look at me. "I told you that you've gotta put those pictures out, or else I was gonna put up a bunch of my headshots instead."

I smiled a little but, again, remained silent.

Ace then turned away, promptly made his way over to one of the two duffel bags I ended up bringing, picked it up, reached inside, and pulled out four black picture frames. After that, he dropped the bag back onto the floor, stepped back over to the dresser, and began to place each one on top of it.

"So, you hungry yet?" he questioned as he set down the picture of me holding my younger baby cousin.

I looked his backside over a second before answering.

"Not really."

"You *gonna* be hungry?"

I paused a moment, and then replied.

"Probably not."

Ace put the last picture frame he held into place and turned around to face me.

"Well, alright," he stated, now stepping over to the bedside on my right. He then looked over the two piles of cards by my legs and went on. "What you doing, there?"

I glanced back down at the card still in my hands, studied the snowy photograph printed on it, and then decided to speak.

"I... I don't actually... know."

Ace let out a quiet laugh, let the air fall to silence, and then spoke up once again.

"Well, I think *I* know what you're doing."

I looked over and up at him as he stepped forward and took a seat on the edge of the bed beside and slightly in front of me.

"W... What am I doing?" I managed out.

He looked down at the card as I lowered it down to my lap.

"Nesia, there's snow on it."

"There is?" I questioned, somehow completely forgetting that *that* was what I had been looking at for the past four minutes. I gazed back down at the card, and then continued. "Well... that's just a coincidence."

I quickly placed the card into the pile on my right and looked up to the wall behind Ace's head.

I could see Ace glance at both piles of cards from the corner of my eye and could hear only his breaths in the sixty second silence that he took on.

"You know, I know how it feels," he eventually piped up.

I gradually glanced back at his face.

"How... *what*?" I interrogated.

"Well, kind of," he began, pretty much ignoring my question and just continuing on with what he had already started saying. "I never had parents."

I studied his blank expression.

"Really?" I asked.

He slowly shook his head, and then went on.

"Nope; I grew up in foster care. And, I had a different home every... well, sometimes I was in a new place each month but, more often, it changed about once a year. So, I never had one real family or anything."

I paused once he was done explaining, and then tried to think of something to say back in a quick manner.

"Well... I... Sorry about that, I mean, your luck, w... with that."

Yikes.

Contrary to how I had expected him to respond to my statement, though, Ace flashed his usual, bright smile.

"Right back at 'ya," he replied.

I smiled only a little bit back, then looked back down to my lap and began to roll my hands over each other, just giving myself something to do for a short moment.

"So..." Ace started to pick up, again. "You're probably not going to feel like doing anything for about a week or two, are you?"

I kept my eyes on my hands as I slowly responded.

"Probably not..."

"Well," Ace abruptly stopped, suddenly reached out, grabbed my chin, and pulled my eyes up to look at him.

My heart practically jumped out of my chest before he decided to go on talking.

"That's too bad."

He quickly let go of me and let out a short-lived laugh, probably at my surprised eyes.

"W-Why?" I stuttered out as he chuckled.

"Because," he said, as soon as his laughter ceased. "Remember how I told you about the Grigson County Fair?"

"Um..." I tried to think but honestly had no clue what he was talking about. "No..."

"Of course you don't, 'Nesia, but I'll remind you that it's just about the 'funnest' place in America, and it's open tomorrow night."

"That's... nice."

"It sure is. And you and me are gonna go to it."

I looked him over a second.

"Well.. oh... okay, I guess," I carefully responded.

He smiled slightly.

"Good," he simply said.

I tried to give a smile back, but it wouldn't come out, so I began to let my eyes wander over to the right wall of the room. I searched the framed photographs that Ace had just set out, stopping after a moment to stare at one picture in particular: the scene of me and my mother licking chocolate covered spoons.

"H..." I abruptly started, paused to catch my words, and then went on. "How did..." I had to stop again to take a breath. "How did they die?"

I felt a stinging sensation in one eye, so I flickered my eyes downward. However, after a long moment of silence followed my question, I had to gaze up at Ace.

He looked me over quietly.

"I..." I slowly began, again. "I wanna know."

He pursed his lips and lowered his gaze away from me.

"Please..." I added softly.

He gazed back up at me.

"They were shot," he suddenly stated. "The day that I... *we* found you."

The stinging in my eyes increased its pressure and I bit my lip for a short second.

"W-Why?" I asked, my voice beginning to shake.

Ace shook his head.

"I don't know. I only know the location and time it happened."

"W... Where?" I followed up.

"The same building we found you in, on the fifth floor," he stopped for a short second. "At around eleven thirty-five a.m.... They were together."

The last part of his description drove a hard, cold sensation in my chest, making my eyes almost instantaneously swell up with tears at the same time.

"W..." I started, took a gulping deep breath, and then went on with a slightly shaky voice. "Were they... y-you know, looking for... for me?"

Ace's gaze fell down to the bedspread between us.

"I really don't know, 'Nesia," he said, returning his eyes to mine after a moment. "But I guess that's possible."

I felt a droplet slide from one corner of my right eye and, after reaching up to remove it with my index finger, I looked down to the bedspread, myself.

Ace let the room remain in a state of silence a few more short seconds, and then spoke up once again.

"But, hey... Let's focus on the positives!"

I reached up to rub a bit more residue of salty water from my cheekbones before I gazed back up to him.

He gave me another cheesy grin.

"Like... what?" I questioned, the subtlest laugh underneath my voice.

"Like... well..." Ace paused to think for a moment. "Now you're practically halfway to becoming a major mainstream superhero."

I squinted my eyes and smiled at him.

"Like... take my favorite comic hero, Spiderman, for example," he went on to explain. "Peter Parker," he stopped to purse his lips for a second. "Never had *his* parents, at least, not after his toddler years. And, I think he turned out pretty awesome."

I smiled a little brighter.

"Yeah, but... he's also... a fictional kind of thing, too, so—"

Ace quickly cut my objections short.

"Yeah, *but* that makes it even better. He's a cartoon."

"Oh, yeah," I giggled a little. "Of course; another one for your... list of... of inspiration, right?"

Ace smiled.

"Yep; another one I like to sometimes pull from the hat."

I smiled back, again, and then looked a little more toward the empty wall behind Ace's head because... well, I'm not sure why, but I did.

"And another positive is the fact that you get the opportunity to go to the county fair with me tomorrow," Ace picked back up after about a minute or two. "So, do whatever you want around here the rest of tonight and tomorrow but, after that... you're *mine*. Okay?"

I returned my eyes onto him and studied his expression.

"I-I guess," I quietly answered.

"Alright; I'll take that, then," he cheerfully commented on my response and began to stand. He took a few steps toward the cracked doorway, and then continued. "Just don't forget about it, okay?"

I faintly smiled at him and, after a quick moment of eye contact, he turned around and stepped out of the room. I then gazed downward and looked over the piles of gift cards on both my right and left.

I slowly picked up the right stack, placed it atop the left, and then picked up the two together with both my hands. I afterward turned and leaned over the edge of the bed I sat on to place the tall pile onto the floor below but paused a second to look over the card on top, which was the cloudy, snowy scene.

After another second or two, I had to blink back another surge of tears, then leaned back in the bed, pushed my legs out a little, allowed myself to lay down on my side, and began to just stare at the framed pictures set on the dresser across the room.

For a long while.

"Nesia!" a faint, but strong, voice called out.

I groaned a little bit, turned my body over and onto my side, keeping my eyes completely closed the entire time, and shoved my face deep into the pillow underneath my head.

"Hey, Nesia!" the masculine tone called out, once again, this time a little closer than before.

I remained completely unresponsive and didn't move.

Suddenly, though, the door to my room shot open, making me jump just a bit and, after that, I began to open my eyes a little and lift my head upward.

"God, have you been in bed all day?" I could hear Ace question from the now opened doorway.

"Um..." I began, groggily turning my head to the side to get a slightly slanted view of his figure. "N-No."

I shifted my range of sight down a bit and studied the floor of the small bedroom I was in which, even though it had only been available for my use for one, two... or maybe around ten days (again, I don't remember ever being a mathematician or possessing the desire to be one in my lifetime), had a mound of clothing thrown in the center of it.

"Yeah, you have," Ace countered my response and started to step into the room.

Keeping my eyes focused on the floor, I began to softly speak once more.

"Wha... What time is it?"

"Six," Ace immediately shot back, now making his way up to the edge of the bed, right in front of my face.

I leaned my head back a little and gazed up at him.

"In the morning?" I questioned.

No wonder I felt awful.

"No," Ace answered. "At night."

Never mind.

"Oh," I said, my eyes probably widening quite a bit. "It... It's that late already?"

"Yeah, and as far as I know, you haven't ate anything since whenever yesterday, so I believe it's my duty to stuff you up with deep-fried fair foods and cotton candy and however many caramel apples your little heart desires," Ace stated, beginning to reach down to grab at my ankles for whatever reason. "So, come on; you promised me you'd go to the fair."

He started to pull my ankles forward and over the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, but... I-I don't wanna go, now..." I mumbled back.

"Well," Ace paused his tugging on my legs for a moment. "You know, that's just too bad."

Promptly after he had finished speaking, he gave another jerk on the top of my feet and pulled my entire lower body onto the floor. I quickly grabbed at the sheets underneath myself at the same time, but he instantly followed up by grabbing my right wrist and yanking it forward, forcing me to stand.

"No, no.... I don't wanna go," I quietly whined.

"I know," Ace responded, now turning around, my wrist still in his hand.

He then began to pull at my wrist in an attempt to drag me to the door, but I resisted and pulled back.

However, that plan didn't completely work, since I was wearing lime green socks on a slick, tiled floor, and I began to slide forward with his force. I leaned back a little more, though, and, after a few more short moments of dragging, my legs slipped out in front of me and I fell onto my gluteus maximus.

Ace swiftly stopped, let go of my hand, and turned around to face me.

"Well, you gotta put your shoes on, 'Nesia," he commented as he looked up from where I sat and scanned the room behind me.

After about three seconds, he stepped past my side, walked over to... well, I don't really know where, since I didn't look, and then returned with a pair of light pink sneakers which, I assumed, were mine.

"Here, I'll save you the struggle," he added, kneeling down in front of my feet and snatching up my right one. He then took one of the shoes, forced it over my toes and heel, and began to tie a tight bow over its top.

I sat silently as I watched him finish, throw my foot back to the ground, and repeat his motions with the other.

"There. All good to go," he proclaimed as he stood back up.

I looked him over a second and attempted to speak, yet again.

"Ace, I don't—"

"Yeah, I know," he cut my sentence short, and then reached downward to grab both of my forearms. Afterward, he held one in each hand as he pulled my stiff body up to stand once again.

"I'll have to do this again, won't I?" he continued, now wrapping his own arms around my waist and hoisting me up and over his shoulder.

Once I was hanging over his upper arm, I fell silent and allowed him to carry me out of the room and down the hallway outside of it. I then rested my hands under my chin, over his back, and watched the floor move underneath Ace's feet as he walked to and up the stairs that led to the... *great* outdoors.

After we were out, a warm breeze hit me, and Ace abruptly decided to throw me back down to the ground.

I stumbled a little when he dropped me onto my feet, but I managed to gain my balance fast enough to avoid a fall or... an avalanche, or something of that sort. Once that gain was attained, though, I turned to watch Ace start to walk toward a completely empty road at the edge of the slightly familiar woods.

"Did... Did someone steal your car?" I questioned, actually concerned when I realized I couldn't see the blue sports car anywhere in sight.

"Maybe," Ace replied, his tone of voice showing his non-concern-ness very clearly.

I narrowed my eyebrows at his backside, and then began to follow quietly after him.

"Or maybe not," he continued, now crossing the half-dirt, half-paved street.

I, of course, looked both ways before I decided to cross behind him. After that, however, I walked directly in his footsteps and into the forest of trees on the other side from where we came.

Eventually, though, Ace halted and turned around to face me.

"Do you see it?" he questioned of me, placing his hands firmly on his hips, as he usually does.

I squinted at him, then at a few angles of the trees surrounding us, and then back at his expression.

"*Really?*" I responded.

He flashed a smile, turned back around, stepped a bit forward, twisted to the right, and went on speaking.

"How about now?"

I stepped up to his side and followed his gaze to the right.

There, behind a row of tall, closely grown trees, sat a very familiar blue car. A large, tarp-like and camouflage-patterned sheet was also hung across the near side of the trees to disguise any small cracks there were between them. Behind the car laid a faint dirt path of tire tracks that weaved through the rest of the trees in the woods and led to somewhere that I couldn't actually see from the place I stood at, but I could definitely see that it went completely in the opposite direction of the road on our right.

"That's... um," I began, searching my mind for the right adjective to use. "Nifty."

I then turned back toward Ace and nodded my head a little.

"And necessary," Ace added, looking over at me. "You know, so that no one finds out that I'm *here*."

I raised my eyebrows a bit and nodded once more.

"But, anyway, let's get going to that shindig," he quickly continued and began to step around the backside of the car to get to the driver's door.

I followed up by making my own way to the front passenger door, opening it without any lock related problems, and sitting myself down in the seat to the right of Ace's, who wasn't far behind in seating himself. Once we were both situated in the car with the doors securely closed, Ace started the car engine and dropped the shift stick into reverse.

Also, don't worry, I had my seatbelt clicked into place shortly before he stomped on the gas pedal.

I held onto the middle of the belt strapped across my chest, though, when Ace accelerated the car backward. I gazed forward to see the trees in front of the car quickly distance themselves from us, and then turned my head toward Ace to see him twisting his entire upper body into the direction of the car's back window. He also had one hand on the steering wheel and one tightly grasping the back of my seat's headrest.

After about a second or two, I realized that he wasn't reversing to turn the car around and that he was actually just driving backward, so I decided to question his methods.

"Why don't you just turn around and go forwards?"

"Oh, 'Nesia," he shot back, a tad bit condescendingly. "Do you always try to take the easy way out?"

He didn't look over at me once and kept his two eyes completely glued to the back windshield.

I looked him over, kind of confused at his answer, as I struggled to form a response to his... accusation.

"W... Well, yeah, actually, when it's like... this."

Ace took a little while to reply to me, probably because he was so intently focused on navigating the path behind us.

"Well, I guess the easy way still works, but," he stopped, kind of abruptly, as he swerved the car sharply to the left. "There's a lot more adventure in taking risks."

Suddenly, he whipped the entire car even more to the left, and then hit the brakes.

He twisted back toward the front windshield, and I followed his gaze to see that we were now on another poorly paved gravel road, just outside of the woods.

"Just remember that," he added as he hit the gas pedal and sped forward on the new path.

I looked over at him and gave a tiny smile.

"I'll try," I said.

He laughed a little, continuously keeping his eyes on the road ahead. After a second, though, he spoke up and gave a quick glance over at me.

"It's only about ten minutes away, you know, this whole affair of the fair."

I gave him a nod of understanding, and then let my eyes wander over the windshield and window by my side. At the same time, Ace reached down and started playing a little bit with the radio tuner. He scanned through a variety of stations, including a Latin one, a heavy metal channel, and a number of country music playlists, until the voice of a man on some type of talk show could be heard.

Immediately, he pulled his hand back from the radio and began to listen intently.

I looked down at the radio panel, and then over at Ace.

"Why are we listening to—"

"Nesia, sh!" he quickly scolded, before I could even finish what I wanted to say; not that it was hard to figure out what I was trying to get out, or anything.

After his strict statement, he reached back down to the radio tuner and turned the volume knob slightly to the right, which just happened to be the direction that made the man's voice in the speakers even louder.

I kind of squinted at Ace, and then slowly guided my eyes back to the windshield as I listened to what on the radio was actually being spoken.

"So, I think this year is the fair's largest turn out, or so I've been told, so have fun out there, folks, and be prepared to wait in a line or two for your corn dogs! I also believe that it wouldn't be too bad of an idea to get out there a bit early tonight, since the weather doesn't look too promising; I believe our forecast here says the rain and possible thunderstorms are going to start around... eight or nine o'clock. So, if you really wanna stay until closing, bring an umbrella! Or a poncho; that's more of the kind of guy I am."

As I listened to the man's voice, I studied the very slow darkening of the clouds that kept passing in front of the sun, which I hadn't really thought about as being malicious bodies of water vapor until he had mentioned it.

"Anyway, we're ready to hear some calls about what food or rides you'd recommend to folks for trying out tonight! So, give us a call at six-one-o', twenty-two hundred! That's six-one-o', twenty-two hundred!"

After he had finished speaking, a static-like sound played and a different man's voice could be heard saying 'thrills with Phil, on tight one-o'-seven-nine', and then a soft jingle began to play as a woman's voice started to speak.

"Do you have aching back pain? Do you miss out on activities that you used to love because—"

Quickly, though, Ace reached out to flip the volume knob in the opposite direction that he had last time, making the girl's voice so quiet that it was really kind of inaudible to me.

"You hear that?" he questioned.

"What?" I shot back, my eyes practically shooting over to him simultaneously.

"It's the largest turn out this year!" he answered.

"Oh, yeah; that's... nice," I replied, now turning my head forward once more.

"You're damn right it is," Ace commented as he turned the car onto a new street.

As we moved into a different direction, though, I soon saw that there was an extremely long line of motionless vehicles not too far ahead.

"Ah, shit," Ace faintly muttered.

He then suddenly whipped the car completely around, forcing my body to be thrown up against the passenger door in the process.

"Mm..." I grumbled before peeling my face off of the side window.

"Sorry, but," Ace soon began as he turned back onto the road we had previously been on. "I'm not one for waiting; I'll find a shortcut."

"Oh, really?" I whispered, actually trying to not be heard, but it obviously didn't go exactly as planned.

"Yeah, *really*," Ace continued. "I know it may come as a shocker, but I don't care much for just standing or sitting still."

Quickly, he made a sharp left turn into just a field of grass, pushing me up against the door once more.

I kept quiet this time, though.

Ace next drove over a number of bumps and dips, probably a little bit faster than he should have, until he reached a cleared area near the edge of a forest that was also, apparently, far enough away from any road around.

"This'll do," he stated, now placing the car into park and abruptly cutting off the engine.

I gazed up and around at the nothingness around us.

"And..." I began to speak but didn't finish quickly enough.

"Let's go!" Ace yelled out, by now halfway through the motions of exiting the vehicle.

"Okay," I mumbled.

I then hastily unbuckled my seatbelt, opened the door by my side, and stepped out, myself.

"I think it should be..." Ace started. I looked up at him from over the car and witnessed him point into four different directions a few different times, and then watched him stop distinctly on just one straight ahead of the way I was facing. "That way."

I shut the car door in front of myself, and then stepped around the front of the vehicle as he commenced his journey onto the, hopefully, correct route.

I silently followed him as we walked quickly along the long edge of the wooded area beside us. Well, I guess it wasn't too awful long, because we came across the street that was loaded with the long lines of cars more quickly than I had expected, but... I was still out of breath by the time we had gotten to that point.

"This way," Ace halfway shouted out, without turning around to face me, as he began to pace to the right, alongside the stream of vehicles.

I sighed, quietly enough that he probably couldn't hear it, and then continued to follow after him.

We tromped a trek that just had to be at least twenty or thirty miles... or, at least, something like that, before we reached the open gate that the line was leading to. The gate itself looked pretty old and a bit rusty; the sign above it looked almost as unpleasant, with spotting silver paint on metal letters that read 'FAIR GROUNDS'. A few feet in front of the gated area stood a slightly overweight man with a gray beard, who was currently directing the incoming traffic of SUVs.

So far, I wasn't too impressed.

Quickly, I caught partially up to Ace's side as he stepped by the cars entering the partially grassy, partially gravel fairground parking lot.

"Howdy, folks," the bearded man greeted, nodding at both Ace and myself as we each passed by.

"Afternoon," Ace responded nicely back.

I gave the man a slight smile when I passed him, but nothing more.

After that, I followed Ace as he made a turn in front of a moving truck, which, actually, probably wasn't a great idea, but I took the risk anyway, mostly because I didn't want to lag too far behind him. Then, we both trotted across a gravel pathway and made our way both up to and behind a crowd of fellow fairgoers.

"So, which ride do you wanna try out first?" Ace asked, turning around to look at me for the first time in a while.

"Um..." I paused to think a bit as we slowly shuffled behind the large group of people in front of us. "None... of... them?"

I ended my answer more questioningly than I meant to.

Ace opened his mouth, made a gasping kind of sound, and then smiled.

"Awe, 'Nesia, you're too funny," he said.

Soon after taking his turn to speak, he twisted back around and realized the crowd was beginning to disband before us. He then veered slightly to the right and walked up to the end of a medium length line of people.

"Personally, I enjoy trying my hand at the shooting range a few times each year," Ace began again, his body facing the left as his head faced me. "But, of course, that's just because I *always* win."

"Oh, yeah," I started to slowly reply. "It's... It's almost like shooting things is your job, or something."

Ace gave way to a bit of a laugh.

"Almost, yeah," he added with a smile.

The line in front of us suddenly moved forward a few steps, so Ace turned back around, stepped with everyone else, and then twisted slightly back to talk to me once again as I moved forward as well.

"You know, I'll give you five bucks if you do the bungee shooter."

"The... The what?" I questioned, my eyes widening at just the ring of the name of this... 'ride'.

Ace flashed a smile.

"You'll love it," he blatantly stated, and then turned back around to step in sync with the crowd once more.

"Or, even better," he continued, forcing his body toward me yet again. "I'll let you have whatever prize I win at the shooting range. Deal?"

I studied his expression a moment before responding.

"Yeah, but... will the prize be worth more than five dollars?"

Ace smirked and gave a slight eye roll.

"Well, *duh*, yeah."

I cocked my head to the side a bit and gave a small grin.

"Well... maybe, then," I said.

Ace flashed a familiar bright smile, and then turned back around as the few people standing in front of us cleared away.

"Hi," a young woman, who looked around the same age as myself, with deep brown hair and a bright tan greeted without looking up from the stack of money and pile of what looked like old, used Chuck-E-Cheese arcade tickets placed onto the counter in front of herself.

Both Ace and I stepped up to the near side of the counter as she gazed up.

"Oh my gosh!" she, kind of abruptly, exclaimed. "*Mae!*"

She excitedly stared at me and awaited a response.

"Oh, hi!" I pleasantly replied.

Honestly, though, I had no clue who this girl was, or if I should have even had one at all.

"I haven't seen you since before school even got out!" she went on happily, and then, oddly and suddenly, her face grew serious. "Did you hear about what happened to *Brendan Warren* a few days ago?"

I stared at her for a second.

I knew that name.

Or, at least, I felt like I knew.

"N-No," I stuttered out.

The girl's voice fell to a whisper as she began to explain.

"He got *shot*... out on Carmel Street," she paused for a moment. "I don't think he made it."

"Oh... my God," I carefully commented.

"Yeah, it's all over Facebook and stuff..." she trailed off and looked back downward. "But, um, anyway... How many tickets did you want?"

"Fifteen, for now," Ace suddenly piped in.

"Oh, okay," the girl said as she tore approximately fifteen tickets from one of the slightly cleaner looking strands of tokens. "There you go."

She handed the long strip to Ace as he handed her three five dollar bills.

"Thank you," Ace nodded, and then turned around to step away from the booth area.

I began to turn, too, but the girl reached out and tapped my arm to stop me.

"Mae," she whispered, once again.

I twisted back to look at her as she continued.

"Is he your brother?" she asked, tipping her head toward Ace's direction.

I blankly looked her face over.

"I... I don't have a brother," I replied.

"Oh, yeah," she said as she pulled her arm back over the counter. "Well, have fun!"

"Thanks," I said with a bit of a forced smile.

Obviously, the girl really didn't know me, either.

I then looked her over once more, turned completely around, and gave an effort in catching up to Ace.

"That sure was something," he commented, once I was close enough to his side to hear.

He then turned to the left and began to stride past numerous groups of people on a crowded dirt path.

"I..." I slowly started to respond. "I don't... I don't really know her..."

"Good," Ace shot back, continuing on whatever route he was currently taking. "I wouldn't wanna know her, anyways."

He paused for a moment as we both swerved around a large group of stationary individuals, and then while he approached the back of another slightly lengthy line.

"But, you know," he began, again, now turning around to gaze at me. "If she was really right about that kid being shot, we were *there*."

Suddenly, a kind of cold feeling swept over me.

"W-What?" I questioned.

Ace nodded and went on.

"Yeah, Carmel Street. That was when we *tried* to get ice cream. Did you know who she was talking about, though?"

I bit my lip as I thought of a way to reply.

"I recognized his name... but... I don't really... exactly... remember him."

Ace shrugged.

"Oh, well," he said, now spinning back around to step forward, along with the moving line ahead.

Quickly after I stepped up after him, though, I heard a woman's loud scream straight ahead of us.

I jumped a little, and then snapped my eyes directly into its direction.

I quickly noticed that, in between two tall poles, a hammock shaped-thing was swinging high into the air, attached to the two poles with only a few rubber band-like strings. And, although I could barely see inside the hammock, I could make out a long blonde ponytail hanging over the edge of it.

Again, the woman screamed out, this time a little more excitedly, directly from the swinging basket.

"You ready to do that?" Ace shouted out as he whipped back around, toward me.

I widened my eyes and guided them over to him.

"N-No," I muttered out.

Ace smiled.

"Yeah, you are."

I gazed back over at the swinging woman, behind his head, and watched as the strings holding her up slowly lengthened and began to guide her toward the ground.

"Yeah, I... I don't think so," I remarked.

"Come on, 'Nesia."

I looked back at Ace, once again, and shook my head silently.

I then witnessed a group of about four or five people step out of the line, right in front of us, and begin to walk away. After that, Ace, still facing me, stepped backward a bit, and then turned around to step forward a bit more and completely take their place.

Part of me felt like maybe that was a sign, or something.

I hesitated before stepping up behind Ace, and then leaned to the right a little to realize that there was only more group in line, which only had one man stepping up to become a participant in this... activity. The other men in the group swiftly stepped aside, placing more empty space between me and the ride.

Ace took another step forward, but I didn't, instead standing still as I watched the woman with the blonde ponytail step away from the matted area below the hammock. Once she was past the half-open, half-gated area, she threw her arms up and gave an enthusiastic 'woo' to the group of people waiting for her near the fence area. After that, the next man in line passed through the same opening she had left from and walked up to the hammock, which I could now see was more like a cloth chair. He then sat in it and allowed the older-looking woman who was in charge of the ride to secure a few straps around his legs and abdomen as well as attach one from the

bottom of the seat to something on the ground. Once that was all complete, she stepped back to a control panel and pressed a button that made a slightly loud humming noise come from the two poles that the stretchy strings were attached to.

And, after that noise ceased, a short moment of silence fell. Well, not really complete silence, since a ton of talking voices could be heard from all over the rest of the fairgrounds, but it was pretty considerably quiet for a few seconds.

Then, suddenly, the older woman hit another button on her control panel, and the seated man shot up and into the air, letting out an electrified shout as he flew.

I watched as he bounced a time or two after that, and then as the woman controlled his path back to the ground.

Soon enough, he was out, and Ace turned around to face me, again.

"You ready?" he enthusiastically asked me.

I raised my eyebrows and shook my head at him.

"Oh, come on!" he shot back, now reaching out to grab my right wrist.

He pulled it upward and gave it a strong tug, which ended up forcing me to step forward.

"I... I don't-I don't think this is a... you know, really good idea," I protested as he began to drag me up to the gate opening.

Once there, though, Ace practically threw me in front of himself and grabbed both my shoulders, making me look directly at him.

"Go get 'em," he simply stated with a smile.

After that, he spun me back around and gave me a push forward.

The woman in charge was already standing in front of me, smiling. And, after reaching around me to take three tickets from Ace's hand, she looked at me and spoke.

"Come on, now, hun'," she warmly commanded.

She then turned around and made her way over to the hammock that hovered over the ground.

Oh, God.

I carefully followed after her and stepped over to the side of the seat. Once there, though, I looked it over and didn't proceed to sit down.

"Well, come on," the woman nudged me with her words.

I guided my eyes over to where she stood, about a foot in front of the actual front of the hanging chair.

I forced a very weak smile at her, and then stepped around the seat and sat down.

The woman immediately took action in buckling a few straps around different parts of my body, much like she had with, hopefully, everyone else that she had assisted today.

"Alright," she said as she stood back up straight. She didn't even give another glance at me, though, before she turned and began to walk back over to her control panel thing.

I could already feel my blood pressure rising. Or, at least, something of that sort.

Suddenly, the sound of mechanical humming began to emit from the two tall poles on both side of me, making me jump under my skin just a bit.

I then gazed over to the control panel stand that the old woman stood at, on my left. Quickly, though, I caught a glimpse of Ace from the other side of the fence, behind her.

He was leaning over a bit, resting his forearms on the top of the waist-high metal fence. As soon as he caught my gaze, though, he smiled and flashed two thumbs up at me.

I tried to smile back as the humming sound stopped.

A moment passed.

Another moment passed.

I took a deep breath.

And another moment went by.

Then, suddenly, my entire body flew upward.

I let out a scream, but not a super loud one, and closed my eyes for a second. Once my upward acceleration slowed, though, I opened them.

I don't know how far up in the air I was, but I'm pretty sure it was far enough. I could see nearly every other ride on the fairgrounds, and a few of them were flashing tiny colored lights underneath the dark clouds that were even higher up than I was. I could also see a lot of parked cars all around the edges of the grounds, as well as some wooded areas, roads, and even a few houses.

After that, gravity began to pull me back down. Or, at least, until the ropes attached to the chair I sat in stretched to their maximum, and then I bounced back up again. However, I didn't go nearly as far up and fell downward once more.

I bounced another two times, and then, slowly, I could feel the strings holding me up start to lower. My seat continued to jump up and down a little as I dangled back down to the ground but, once I was close enough, the woman who had put me in the ride grabbed the edge of the seat and guided me all the way to the earth below.

She remained silent as she then secured the hammock back to the ground and unbuckled me from my containment. After that, she just walked away and yelled 'next' for the next victim in line to step up to the plate.

Cautiously, I stood back on the ground, and turned to walk back to the open gate.

Ace was already making his way toward me, clapping his hands.

"Nice," he applauded, once we were able to meet back up by the fenced area. "How was that, huh?"

He held out a hand to me, an offer of a high five.

"It was..." I started as I slapped my palm against his. "It was alright."

Ace slipped his hand back and turned around to walk away from the fence and into the crowded path ahead.

"Just alright? Come on," he replied.

I stepped over to his side and followed him onto the dirt walkway.

"I mean... it was kind of fun, I guess," I stated.

He looked over at me as we walked and, although I'm not sure why, I gave a bright smile.

Of course, he flashed one right back.

"Well, I guess you're gonna want my prize now, right?" he questioned.

"Well," I began looking away from him for a second but finished with my head turned entirely in his direction. "*Duh.*"

Ace laughed, and then veered off to the left. I followed him as we both pushed through a few groups of moving people but, eventually, we ended up at a large booth that was, surprisingly, mostly unoccupied.

I looked it over as Ace stepped up to the counter at its front and saw that it was, in fact, the grand shooting range he had described previously. I noticed that there were a number of red and white ringed targets about only ten feet back from the counter and three plastic guns were set up, attached to the counter, in between every few one of the targets. Only one other person was currently using one of the guns, which was a young boy around the age of eight.

He wasn't doing too well at the game, though.

"Damn it!" the boy abruptly yelled out, jumping back from the counter and slapping the plastic shooter in the side at the same time.

I stared at him while Ace approached the gun *farthest* from him... which, honestly, I'm glad is the one he picked.

"How many bull's eyes for what?" Ace asked the middle-aged man that stood across the counter, who was wearing a black and white striped vest over a long sleeved, white turtle neck with an old-fashioned straw hat.

"All o' those," the man started to answer with a really rough, southern accent, as he pointed to the few, medium sized stuffed animals that I didn't even notice were hanging high above the targets until now. "Are worth a hund'erd points, which 'ed be ten bull's eyes total, or twenty o' the second rings, o'—"

"I can get it with all bull's eyes," Ace shot out, cutting the man short. "How many tickets, then?"

"Three shots per one ticket," the man answered. "But if ye' ain't got enough, I got smaller prizes in a tub."

I couldn't help but smile at... just, this guy.

"Like what?" Ace asked.

"Well, I got some... pencils, erasers..." the man paused to think of more responses. "A notebook, some candies, some rubber bands... a box o' crayons, 'bail-oons'... Little things, ye' know?"

Ace nodded at him, and then turned to me.

"Your pick, 'Nesia," he said.

I smiled.

"Anything worth five dollars," I replied.

Ace nodded and turned back to the booth.

"Go big or go home," he commented, now shelling four tickets from his pocket.

He afterward handed them to the man, and then grabbed the handle of the plastic gun in front of himself.

"Alrighty, then," the man said, now stepping off to the side. "Ye' got ten bullets in there, but I'll get ye'—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, though, Ace turned the gun, still attached to the low countertop, toward the target on the left of him and spat out three rubberized bullets. Each stuck to the very center of the target and, after that, he turned to do the exact same to the target directly across from where he stood. Next, he repeated his motions with the target on the right, and then took his hand off of the trigger.

"Ye've got one left in there," the man piped back up, once Ace was done. "And here's... two more."

The man carefully reached out and placed two more rubber bullets into the hole on the top of the gun.

"Oh, okay," Ace said, now grabbing the trigger once more.

He went to shoot at one of the three closest targets ahead but, when he realized there was no room left in the center of any of them, he turned the gun sharply to the right and shot his remaining bullets at a farther target down the line, which happened to be one that was in front of the little boy that, for some reason, still stood at the other end of the booth.

Each shot, again, was perfect.

After he was completely done, Ace took his hand off the gun, again, and stepped back a bit.

"Whoa!" the young boy nearby exclaimed. "How did you *do* that?"

Ace looked over at him and, although I could only see the back of his head from my angle, I could tell he was smiling.

"Practice, kid," he answered.

"Well, ye' got a hund'erd and twenty points," the slightly offbeat man declared.

"Okay," Ace replied, now turning back to the counter, and then to me. "Which one?"

I looked over at the selection of hanging prizes and saw that there was a cute panda, an adorable penguin, a sweet puppy, and an... oddly realistic cow.

I gave a small laugh and pointed at the spotted farm animal.

"That one," I stated.

Ace looked in the direction I was pointing, laughed a bit, and then relayed the information to the man across the counter.

"We'll have the cow."

"Oh, alrighty," the man responded, now stepping over to the targets. He then grabbed a long, metal stick from the ground and used it to poke at the animal until it fell off of the peg it was hanging from.

I kind of winced when it fell onto the bare, dirty ground and made a small cloud of dust fill the air around itself. After that, though, the man picked it up from the earth, brushed it off a little, and then stepped back up to the counter to hand it over to me.

"Ye' know, ye' got twenty more points left," he added as he stepped to the side a little, once again.

"Oh, well..." Ace looked the whole booth over for a moment. "Give the kid a pencil," he concluded, nodding his head to the boy that was still standing at the far gun.

"Ah, sweet!" the boy shouted out.

Ace stepped back and turned around to leave. I then looked down at the furry cow in my arms for a moment and, afterward, began to follow after him.

"Thanks for the... um, you know, this," I said with a small smile, as soon as I caught up to Ace's side, which we all know isn't ever an easy task.

"Well, you sure are welcome, 'Nesia," he returned, now turning to merge in with the traffic of moving people in the middle of the dirt path that connected everything within the fairgrounds. "So, you hungry, yet?"

I picked up my walking speed a bit as I paced beside him.

"I'm... not, no, really, no," I answered.

"Well," Ace went on. "You're not leaving this party without eating anything." He paused for a moment. "Let's do one more ride before we go eat, though."

"Which... Which one?" I asked.

"Well," Ace began again, suddenly stopping in the middle of the crowd.

Confused, I stopped by his side, looking around.

"How about the next one we see that's got less than ten people in line?" he finished, turning to look at me.

A number of people pushed past us as I turned to gaze back at him.

"Sure, why not," I agreed, mostly because I wanted to keep moving instead of stand in more people's way than we already had in the last few seconds.

Ace smiled, didn't give a response, and then continued to speedily walk down the busy pathway. I hurriedly chased after him, not even attempting to look at the length of lines on either side of us. The reason I didn't try, though, was partly because... well, I didn't want to, but also because I was a tad too short to see over majority of the people blocking my views around me.

After about a minute or two of walking, though, Ace veered right and stepped away from the crowds surrounding us.

It was a little hard for me to get by the passing people to follow after him, but I still managed.

Quickly, I made my way after him and into the back of an extremely short line, one of about seven people total, to who knew what.

"So... what's this line for?" I asked, once I was by Ace once more.

"Not sure," Ace replied, afterward searching the large, fenced area at the front of the line. "Oh, it's that."

He stood still and just stared straight ahead, making me turn and try to guess what he was actually referring to as 'that'.

Soon enough, though, I realized that he was looking at a tall Ferris wheel which had its rounded peak at... somewhere between fifty and eighty feet, but that's just my estimate.

Either way, it was a lot taller than me.

"Oh, well..." I now began. "We... We don't have to do, you know, *that*..."

"And why not?" Ace interrogated, turning around to look me over.

"Be... Because it's... got a really long line," I carefully replied.

Ace squinted at me, turned to look the line of seven... well, now five people in front of us, and then twisted back toward me.

"Awe, 'Nesia, did you forget how to count, too?" he remarked.

I opened my mouth to reply, but nothing ended up coming out.

"So, why don't you wanna go on it?" Ace continued, after my temporary speechlessness.

"Well, I..." I started, rubbing the rough fur of the stuffed animal still in my hands. "I already did one terrifying act today, so... I don't really need to do another."

Ace had to stop himself from laughing.

"There's nothing even scary about this one, though, 'Nesia," he objected.

I pursed my lips and kept myself silent for a short second.

"Unless," Ace went on. "You're actually just afraid of heights."

"No," I sharply spoke. "I just... don't think it's natural for, you know... someone of *my* height to be up... *that* high."

Ace smiled.

"Yeah, you're afraid," he said.

Soon after his assumption, he whipped back around and stepped forward with the line, which now only consisted of us and two others in front of us.

"I'm not afraid," I began, again, forcing him to turn back around. "I just think maybe... a different ride would be, you know, just... better."

"Oh, 'Nesia..." Ace replied. "It's okay; if you get too scared, you can hold my hand."

Before either one of us could say anymore, though, a manly voice yelled out.

"Next!"

Ace turned around as I looked around him to see that, of course, we were next. He then stepped up to the man and took four tickets from his pocket.

And, even though I still really didn't want to, I stepped up to the ride entrance, beside him.

"Thank you, sir," the man said to Ace as he took his tickets. After that, he opened the gate in front of us and let us step through.

I followed Ace as he made his way over the gondola of the large wheel that was currently empty and resting on the safe, stable ground. The small cabin, itself, was surprisingly large; it had two short benches inside of it that faced each other and had a nice, solid floor. However, it was not completely enclosed and had no real walls or anything of that sort to protect its passengers from falling out or dying or anything, so I wasn't too much impressed.

Ace quickly stepped into it and took a seat on the left bench, allowing himself to face where I was currently standing, just a foot or two away. He then leaned forward and placed his elbows loosely on his knees.

"Come on, 'Nesia," he commanded with a small smile.

I took a deep breath, and then stepped into the compartment along with him, myself taking a seat on the bench opposite him with my stuffed cow in my lap.

Once seated, I felt the whole cab move up and toward my backside a bit, then stop.

"See, it ain't so bad," Ace assured, now leaning back and throwing his arms comfortably behind his head.

"Not yet," I swiftly replied, my eyes searching the setup of rusty, metal railings that connected the benches and bottom of the freely moving gondola with the rest of the wheel.

"You're right," Ace continued. "I haven't started swinging us, yet."

I rested my eyes on him and raised my eyebrows quite a bit while he let out a soft chuckle.

"Just kidding, you can calm down," he, eventually, soothed.

Suddenly, we moved upward and back, again, just a little more. The cabin swung a bit more after we stopped this time, too.

"So, what're you gonna name it?" Ace asked as he threw his arms back down and rested his palms on top of his thighs.

I looked him over, a bit confused, for a moment.

I mean, I wasn't pregnant, or anything like that.

"The cow," he soon clarified.

"Oh," I started, immediately after. "Um, well..." I gazed down at the... interesting, furry animal in my hands. "Well... what do you think?"

"You could name it..." Ace paused to think of an answer while I looked back up at him.

"Angus... or... 'Moo-riah Carey'."

I let out a pretty good giggle at that one.

"Yeah, that one's it," I declared. "Moo-riah."

Ace laughed back a little as the cab swung upward a bit once more.

A short silence then fell around us and I took the chance to glance over the edge of the weak metal railing to my right. I noticed that we were about one-third of the way to the top of the wheel and not too far off of the ground. I also looked up at the sky and searched the clouds, which were seemingly becoming even darker than they were before.

"I'm glad you came out here with me, today," Ace abruptly piped up. I gazed back over at him and gave a slight smile as he continued. "Or, actually, glad that I dragged you here, I should say."

I laughed, just a little.

"Yeah, me too."

Immediately after my short sentence, though, I heard a loud, squeaky shot-like noise come from somewhere in the distant left.

I snapped my head into its direction and looked the sky over, expecting to actually see fireworks, or something like that, because that's a lot like what it sounded like it should have been.

However, soon after that, another one of the sounds echoed through the air, followed by a female's ear-piercing scream.

I whipped my head back at Ace, my eyes wide.

Not again.

Ace glanced right back at me, his demeanor much calmer than mine. After about a second of exchanging looks, he sprung up to his feet.

"Well, back to work," he commented, now reaching into the waistband of his pants to whip out a small concealed hand gun.

"You... You actually brought that?" I partially yelled out as I watched him load a handful of bullets into the tiny pistol. "That... Isn't that.. kind of illegal?"

Almost instantaneously after my questioning, a variety of more screams echoed out, each sourced from around the same distant area as before.

I, already on the edge of my seat, snapped my head back into the direction I had before, although I couldn't actually see anything from where I currently was, other than the back of a few food stands and a small sliver of the crowded pathway in front of all of them.

"Well, it may be, but," Ace began, now shoving the prepped firearm into his back pocket. "Who ever found success in following the rules?"

I looked him over as he gave me one last look and turned toward the left side of the swinging cabin.

"W-What are you doing?" I sputtered out.

Abruptly, another gunshot rang out from far away.

"What I do best," Ace answered, now turning and stepping backward, toward the entirely open entrance of the gondola. "So, stay here, and I'll be back in a bit."

He then grabbed the metal railings on either side of himself and jumped off of the edge of the cab flooring. He quickly slid his hands down the posts that held the rails up as he fell gracefully

downward and, after that, grabbed the edge of the floor he had just stood upon. He then did something to make the gondola swing a bit, I'm not sure what, since I couldn't see him at this point, but, after a few more moments, his hands slipped away and he was... well, just gone.

I placed the stuffed cow I held onto the seat beside me and slid over to the side he had just jumped from. I leaned cautiously over the railing he had used to deploy from and gazed downward to see him on the ground below, already running back to the gate that led to the Ferris wheel itself.

I gave a small sigh and leaned back on the hard bench.

Great.

Suddenly, more shouts emitted into the air, some seeming to be even closer than last time. Only, this time, they didn't stop.

I sat up straight once more and looked toward the slit of the main path that I could see from my angle, now noticing that a number of people had halted and were looking the same direction I was currently facing.

Abruptly, the Ferris wheel moved upward, again, making me grab at the edge of the seat I sat on. Only, this time, it didn't stop until I was one cabin away from the very top.

I looked back over to my left, now that I could actually gain a much better view of the fairgrounds, and realized that all the screams that I could still very well hear were coming from the huge crowds of people that were running away from one particular building down the wide, dirt path. I could also see that as the crowd came more this way, the people standing in the way joined in and made the hysteric crowd gradually grow at a steady rate.

The Ferris wheel jolted and moved one tick up, once more. I then leaned over the railing by my side again, looked down at the base of the wheel, and saw that a man and a woman were jumping out of the lowest cab to run out of the entrance gate.

I bent my body back upward and looked over at the cow on my other side as the wheel moved yet another time.

"Well, Moo-riah," I began, waiting until we moved again before continuing. "Maybe the ground isn't always as safe as I thought it was."

I reached out to grab the stuffed creature, and then turned back toward the left as we jerked downward some more. I looked back over the side one last time, taking in the image of a mother and young daughter sprinting out of their gondola, much like the last couple I had seen do.

I leaned back and bit my bottom lip as I listened to the continuous sound of screams all around me and felt the wheel turn a few more times.

Eventually, though, I saw the ground fall underneath the edge of the metal floor beneath my feet and, when that did actually happen, I took no time in hopping up and jumping out of the cabin I was in, the cow still clutched tightly in my arms. I then lightly ran through the open gate that separated the Ferris wheel with the rest of the world and passed by only the man intently pushing buttons on a control stand to the wheel right outside of the fenced area. After that, I slowed my pace and approached the edge of the fast-paced swarm of individuals moving to my left.

And, if the sound of quick stomping and frightening screams weren't enough, a roar of thunder tore itself from the dark sky above.

I looked both up as well as to the right and left of myself quickly after that.

I felt like passing out, or screaming, or crying, or fainting, or... something like that.

Instead of doing anything of the sort, though, I stepped carefully forward and prepared to enter the moving mob in front of me. Before I committed to doing it, though, a somewhat young man and woman rushed by my left side, making a slightly strong wind push up against my back. And, because of that change in air flow, I turned toward my backside and looked around.

After gazing around to the Ferris wheel entrance and food stands on either side, though, I realized something. Or, really, just an idea that I hoped to be true.

Hurriedly, I began to run back toward the fence in front of the tall wheel ride, and then turned toward the direction that everyone was running to.

There, behind all of the food stands lined against the main pathway, sat a thin, grassy walkway that nearly no one else was currently utilizing.

Maybe I am actually a little smart.

Soon enough, I began to run on top of the alternate walkway. I made sure to gaze to the right every time I passed in between each of the little stands and shops, though, just to... make sure I was keeping up with the crowd on the other side, I guess.

After about only three or four times of doing this, though, I jogged past something that caught my attention.

Within the near one or two seconds of my passing, I collected a clear image of a tall, tan man holding a door to one of the booths that was partially a real building, but still partially not, open. His one free arm was extended in front of the door, which was pointing the opposite way of the both the moving crowd and myself, and a well sized pistol was in his hand. The door was blocking the sight of the gun from the crowd on the other side of him, though, so I'm sure I was the only one who even noticed it.

By now, I was already behind the next building along my journey, so I immediately stopped myself from going on any farther, turned back around, and stepped closely up to the wall of the building that was now by my side.

Another clash of thunder emitted from above me, and then I heard the man from around the corner yell out in an extremely familiar, *non*-Russian accent.

"*Está listo!*" he shouted out, also in a familiar, but not *familiar*, language.

I shuffled more closely to the edge of the wall I was kind of hiding behind and pushed my stuffed animal down by the side of my legs as I listened for more insight.

"Ready, as in... *ticking?*" another man's voice suddenly appeared and faintly whispered under all of the other sounds clouding the air at the moment. This voice didn't have any slight trace of a foreign accent, though.

"Yes," the other, recognizable voice replied.

Immediately after his response, I could hear two or three sets of footsteps begin to stomp into my direction.

"Good; let's do this, then," the opposite man added as I started to step backward quite a bit.

Once I felt that their steps were approaching the corner in front of me, I turned hurriedly around and ran toward the other corner of the building currently concealing me. I then reached out to touch the corner and whipped myself swiftly around it.

After that, I heard the footsteps continuing to follow me, so I kept jogging ahead, and then jumped into a cracked doorway on my right, one that led to a completely dark, quiet, and, hopefully, empty room. I only stepped inside enough to be out of sight of whoever the men passing by were and remained there, still and silent as I listened for them to walk by, which didn't take long.

I heard their steps go straight ahead, so I was able to assume that they continued on the thin, grassy path I was planning on taking. However, as I listened to their outside noises, I noticed one odd sound come from somewhere behind me inside the dark building.

It sounded like a pattern of almost robotic beeps.

I turned around in my place and searched the area with squinted eyes that were still adjusting to the quick change in lighting. I stepped forward a little bit, and then turned toward the direction of the beeping sounds.

I focused my vision a little more and saw a suspicious-looking gallon milk jug sitting on top of a wooden chair, filled with... some kind of fluid. Underneath the chair sat what looked like a big walkie-talkie, which had duct tape stretched out all over it. I think that was also what was making the sort of soft, beeping noise, too. All around the chair also sat a number more of gallon jugs, each one of them filled with similar liquids to the first.

After seeing all of this, though, I didn't think to search for more. Instead, I put all the clues I had gotten so far together, spun back around, and sprinted back out of the small building, my stuffed cow still swinging from one hand.

Once back outside, I turned toward the right, saw the rushing, loud crowd still passing by, looked to the left, saw that no one was on the other path, and then began to jog toward it.

A flash of both thunder and lightning erupted from the sky over me, making me tense up more as I approached the corner of the building on my right, which was the next one the men would have passed when they walked by a minute or two ago. After I got there, I slowly peeked around it and searched the grassy walkway ahead for any sign of them, but they were no longer even on the path or anywhere in my sight.

I stepped slowly around the corner, and then checked behind myself from over my shoulder.

No one was there, either.

Softly, a raindrop touched my left cheekbone. Which made this all even better.

I turned forward once more, and then began to trot along the path ahead as another water droplet hit my left forearm. I managed to pass by at least two more buildings before I felt another, also in the same general area.

Suddenly, though, after that, I had to stop.

Because I heard two gunshots come from somewhere not too far ahead.

I froze and turned my head to the right, where I could see the main path of people between two more small buildings.

I saw part of the crowd quickly come to a stop, majority of people gaze around confusedly, and heard a number scream out once more. Soon enough, though, another shot rang out, and then the crowd, for the most part, began to turn and run back the direction it had come.

I, myself, also turned around and started back toward the Ferris wheel as a few more raindrops fell onto my skin.

After a moment or two, though, I realized what was *actually* happening and stopped, once again.

Everyone was being forced to run back toward the... well, the whole shady setup in the dark building I had witnessed not too long ago.

Which, I believe, was ninety-five percent likely to be some form of a bomb.

I snapped my head into the direction of the crowd, yet again, even though it was behind a building from my current point of view. I stepped forward, though, and soon was able to see it once more. I then quickly ran up to it and frantically looked around at the rush of... very frantic individuals.

The pace of falling rain began to gain speed while I listened to the numerous shouting voices in front of me.

Soon enough, though, I decided to join them.

"Ace!" I yelled out, still standing alongside the edge of the swarm. "Ace!"

I stepped forward even more and pushed myself onto my tip-toes, looking both left and right for anyone who was tall, blond, and, most likely, running the opposite way of everyone else.

"Ace!" I repeated, now making the decision to step into the herd of running people.

I clutched my stuffed animal close to my body and forcefully pushed myself by a ton of unfamiliar faces. After I was about to the middle of the pathway, or close enough to it, I realized that this strategy was not going to work, so I stopped, looked up, and formulated a new plan.

I quickly continued to push my way past a number more of people, until I reached the grassy area on the other side of all of them. Once there and in a cleared area, I turned and looked around for... just something to enhance my range of vision.

Soon, I caught a glimpse of a tall, wooden cart that must have been a working food stand not too long ago on my near right. Speedily, I made my way up to it and looked over its backside, which had opened boxes thrown all over an area of ground within five feet of the stand itself. There were also quite a few bags of cotton candy spilling out of each box and, although it was a bit tempting, I didn't grab one for later. Instead, I rushed over to the sturdy bar chair behind the stand's counter, stepped up onto it, and then jumped up to stand on the cleared wooden countertop.

Now, I could see, at least, a bit better than before.

"Ace!" I shouted out, once again.

I grabbed onto a metal pole that sprung up beside the stand with my free hand and searched the crowd kind of below and around me. My other hand, surprisingly enough, was still occupied with hanging onto Moo-riah Carey.

"Ace!" I reiterated for what seemed like the millionth time, my voice sounding probably very desperate at this point.

I pursed my lips as I looked around hysterically, preparing myself to shout, again.

Suddenly, though, a familiar masculine voice yelled back at me directly on my left.

"Nesia!"

I snapped my head toward it and saw Ace standing right beside the stand I was standing on.

"Oh, thank God," I mumbled, turning toward him, already on the edge of the countertop.

He rushed up to the very edge of the wooden bar, also, and then held his hands up to assist me back down to the ground below.

"There's a bomb somewhere; we've gotta go!" he urged as he reached forward and grabbed the sides of my waist.

I actually purposefully dropped my stuffed cow, leaned toward him, grabbed his upper arms, and then let him guide me as I jumped back down to Earth.

"I know," I began to partially yell back at him. "And I know where it is."

My eyes, kind of unintentionally, guided themselves back toward the stand and saw Moo-riah laying on the deserted countertop. I reached out and snatched her back up before Ace started to reply to me, though. Don't worry; I wasn't about to leave her behind.

"What? Where?" Ace interrogated.

One of the quick falling raindrops landed in my one eye as I gazed back at him, making me blink more than I wanted to for a moment.

"Back-Back there, in one of those buildings," I said, turning to both look and point to the general area that I remembered seeing the sketchy weapon hiding in.

Ace remained quiet for a second.

"I don't know if we have time," he eventually muttered.

I snapped my eyes back toward him, but didn't say anything more, and felt the continuous rainfall begin to actually soak through my clothes.

I studied his face as he searched the crowd still screaming and sprinting behind me.

After a short moment, he took a visibly deep breath, and then spoke.

"Well, come on; we've gotta do something."

He looked back down at me, grabbed my wrist (the one that wasn't holding my stuffed animal), pushed past my side, and then pulled me close behind him as he trudged across the crowded path before us. He did it a lot more efficiently than I had before, though, and managed to get us to the other side within a matter of seconds.

Once there, he paused.

"Which building?" he asked, releasing my wrist.

I looked over the dirty, white painted building that was currently in front of us, and then turned to walk around its side. I quickly picked up my pace once I realized it wasn't the one I was looking for, though, and started to walk around the back of it and toward the next one on the left.

Once around to see the other building in line, I knew it was the one.

"It's in there," I declared, staring directly at the still open doorway I had used earlier.

Ace made his way around my side and sprinted toward it.

I afterward followed him to the entrance, myself a bit slower than him, though. Once we were both inside, I listened for the slightly recognizable beeping noise, which I soon enough picked up as coming from the same place as before.

"Ov-Over there," I directed, even though I noticed Ace was already making his way over to the taped device under the chair near the far wall.

Cautiously, he picked the beeping plastic box up.

"Nice," he whispered, now turning back toward the doorway behind where I stood.

I stepped aside as he passed me and walked back outside, then turned to hurry after him. After we were back in the rain, Ace walked up to the fence that wasn't too far behind the buildings around us and pulled his right hand, which was holding the walkie-talkie like thing, back by his ear. Soon after that, he swung his arm forward and released the device, making it fly high up and far away. Immediately after that, then, he reached into his back pocket, whipped out his pistol, aimed it at the flying black bomb with both of his hands, and swiftly spat a bullet into its direction.

Soon enough, the device made a decently-sized explosion in the sky, right above a vast, mostly empty grass area. I say mostly because, well, some of the area was covered with dirt roads and trees, instead of just grass. Some pieces of the fiery eruption fell to the ground below, but the rain turned any remaining flames into smoky clouds before they reached that point.

"Okay," Ace began, now turning back toward me as he replaced his gun in his pocket. "Now, we should get out of here, in case there's another one that we don't know about."

I looked from the smoky mist to his face, and then nodded.

"Okay; come on," he went on, turning to the right and beginning to sprint away.

I quickly chased after him and looked to the moving crowd across from the buildings and stands beside us as we ran, realizing that we were actually running the opposite way as everyone else.

Whether or not that mattered at this point, though, I don't know.

After some time, the fence that ran along our left came to an end, revealing a large, dirt path that led to a grass covered parking lot. At the same time, the bigger path on our right joined in with ours, which all came together to create a big, open area between fair stands. Only a few people were running around us at this point, also, since most of the crowd was still moving back the other way.

Ace turned sharply left and began to run out and into the parking lot, so I did the same.

Before I could get far, though, I heard a loud snap close by my right side, and I mean *really* close and... *really* loud. Once that occurred, I attempted to peek over my shoulder and see what the cause of the noise was, but, of course, I tripped in the process and face-planted onto the wet, muddy ground in front of me.

I heard a loud roar of what seemed like a kind of evil sounding laugh boom from somewhere behind me, and then pushed my upper body up with my now dirt-caked hands. I turned my head over my shoulder, like I had failed to do previously, and instantly saw a short man that looked creepily similar to the rapper Eminem giving the laugh and pointing what looked like a machine gun directly toward what, I think, was *me*.

"Ace!" I immediately screamed out.

Before I could even move or turn or think about doing any of the sort, another loud shot erupted in the air.

And the man holding the gun at me froze up and collapsed onto the ground.

I took a deep breath, and then whipped my head back to its forward position to see Ace standing a few feet ahead of me, his right hand extended outward, clutching his small pistol, and facing my direction.

He quickly tucked the gun back in his pocket and rushed over to me.

"You're okay, right?" he questioned, kneeling down in front of me.

"Y-Yeah," I stuttered. "I-I think."

I then pushed myself up to my knees, looked back at the ground, grabbed Moo-riah's muddy leg, and carefully stood back up.

Ace stood in front of me and looked me over a moment.

"Okay, let's keep going, then," he said.

He spun back around and started to sprint off toward the fairgrounds' exit, which was somewhere far ahead and slightly to the right.

I brushed away some of the clumps of dirt stuck to my shirt and thighs, my heart still pumping outrageously, before hurriedly following after him. We then passed quite a number of parked cars, a few other running people, and only a handful of actually moving vehicles. Eventually, though, we passed through the same gate we had entered from and started off in whatever direction Ace's car was in.

I tried to steady my uneven breaths between my rushed steps.

Why did we have to park so far away?

After running alongside an extremely long and mostly vacant street for what felt like an hour, Ace turned left and started to follow his own path between the edge of a wooded area and a large grassy field. Soon enough, though, we both came up to a lone, dark blue sports car.

I took another deep breath as I jogged around it, opened the passenger side door, and plopped down into the seat inside.

Ace hopped in on the driver's side but, surprisingly, didn't start up the car's engine right away. Instead, he just sat there, inhaling and exhaling, a lot like me.

He didn't remain still for long, though, and pulled out the car keys from one of his jean pockets. I looked down at the dirty stuffed animal in my lap as he turned the car on and dropped the stick shifter into reverse.

I gazed upward as he backed the car slowly away from the forest in front of us and clicked my seatbelt into place. I studied the water droplets as they hit the windshield for a moment, and then spoke up.

"I could have died today..." I mumbled, kind of out of nowhere.

Ace put the car into drive, and then, actually, *carefully* guided us onto a road by our side.

"I *almost* died today," I added, almost with no emotion.

"People die every day," Ace softly, I guess, consoled.

I paused a moment and kept my eyes on the road ahead.

"People like my parents," I eventually said.

A short silence fell.

More water droplets formed across the front windshield.

"W-Why..." I slowly picked up again. "Why does... it... have to be... like-like that?"

I tried to keep my voice from wavering, but I'm not sure how well it worked out.

Ace took another quiet moment before responding.

"Nesia... You can't... Well, you just can't control the past. You can't change what happened; you just can't. But, you know what?"

He stopped and waited for me to speak back.

I watched the two black windshield wipers swipe the raindrops away from the window in front of me for a second.

"W... What?" I muttered out.

"You *can* change the future," he continued. "You *can* control what's *going* to happen."

I gazed over at him and caught his eye contact, just for a short moment, before he turned back to look at the street in front of us.

"And, you know what else?" he went on, not waiting for me to inquire 'what' before going any further, though. "If you wanna change the future of the people who killed your parents, then you can."

He smiled over at me.

And I gave a tiny smile back, just as he finished speaking.

"And I'm gonna help you do it."

Chapter Seven

"You got all that, Mae?" Mel inquired from across the desk-like table in front of me.

"Yeah, yeah," I shot back as I straightened my back in my seat.

Even though I had actually no recollection of whatever she just explained to me.

"Okay, good. So, now," Katie jumped in, wheeling her own spinning chair up closer to both Mel's side and the table's edge. She next placed a well-sized stack of printed papers on the desk in front of herself. "Here's what's gonna be going down, tonight."

She took the top page from the pile, flipped it around, and pushed it across the table for me to see.

"You two," she continued, gesturing to Ace and I with her index finger at the same. "Are starting out *here*, first thing."

I studied the photographs taken of different angles of a moderately small, two story brick building on the paper in front of me, and then looked up at Katie once she decided to go on.

"It's where Mr. Williams' new research team is headquartered, at least, where it *should* be. And, once you're in there..."

She trailed off as she pulled off the next paper and slid it across the table as well.

"You'll wanna find... just *any* files or folders labeled with these names," she finished, momentarily.

I studied the next page and saw that it was a list of handwritten titles and nothing else. The list only went down about a third of the paper and I skimmed over the first few for a moment, which read seemingly random things, like 'Magazine subscriptions', 'NFL Scores 2006', and 'Gift ideas for Grandma Georgia'.

"I don't know why they picked those names," Katie eventually redrew my attention. "But, I assume it's to keep everyone else out of their business, or to make their research look casual, or something. Still, check what's in those files before you take them, because I could be wrong on which names were which. And, Ace," she paused and turned her gaze more toward Ace, who was sitting on my right side. "Just... don't take more than you're supposed to, okay?"

I looked over to Ace, also, as he agreed to her demands.

"Yes, Ma'am."

I gazed back at Katie, who silently looked him over a moment, and then continued.

"Anyway, just make sure you get rid of those files. You can shred them up yourselves and throw them in the dumpster, or throw them back in the car and tear them up here when you get back. But, don't try walking around with them in your hands all night because... God knows what would happen if you lost them."

Katie looked between both Ace and I as she took a breath.

"And, I don't really care *how* you get in or out of there, as long as you just don't break anything, or hurt anyone, or..." she continued, turning back to Ace for the rest of her statement. "Just anything stupid."

I looked back down at the table, trying to keep an oncoming laugh from actually occurring.

"Okay, so, that's your guys' first... part, or objective, or whatever you wanna call it," Katie went on.

I gazed back up at her, my smile efficiently washed away, as she basically tore the next paper in her stack away to look over.

"After that starts all of the fun!" she, surprisingly and quite a bit unexpectedly, exclaimed. She then flipped the paper she held around, slapped it on the table over the others in front of Ace and I, snatched a few more from the top of the stack beside her, and spread them out around the other one. "So, see this guy?"

I studied the multiple pictures that were printed on each page, noting that each was of a different angle and event, but that every single one had the same recurring face of a man who looked to be in his 30s or early 40s. One shot, for example, was from a New Year's Eve party and showed the man standing next to three other guys around the same age. I know it was New Year's, though, because each had on one of those cheap party hats and two of the men in the group were wearing '2016' glasses, with both the zero and the one forming the eyeholes. It didn't look like a super fun party, though, because... well, all of their faces didn't have the most ecstatic expressions.

Another photo, though, was of him and a younger blonde woman, both standing in front of that one mountain that has the U.S. presidents' faces on it... I couldn't remember what it was named, though, of course. The two seemed pretty happy, though, and you could see his dark hair, tan skin, and distinct facial features well in the lighting they were standing in.

"This is Justin Sarvey; you're going to follow him," Katie stated, now throwing a few more sheets of papers on top of the ones already thrown about. "And this is his partner tonight, David Kreel."

I looked over the new layout of pictures and saw more photos, this time of a much more pale man, around the same age as the last, with light brown hair that was nearly shaved down to his scalp. Each of his photos were even less exciting than the other's, with one of just him standing in front of a refrigerator with both a blank pose and expression and another of him sitting on a sofa, alone, in the same manner.

"Both of them work under Mr. Williams, as well, and, I believe, are going to a type of charity event tonight. Of course, though, they're not *really* going to be there for charity; they're going for whatever information they can get from whoever else is going, too," Katie explained. "And, I'm not even sure what information they're searching for this time, but I know they definitely wouldn't just get sent to a public event if they weren't going to gain something for their company."

Katie placed another sheet of paper in front of me, one that looked to be actually printed from Google maps, having a small street map in the middle of it with an address written over a highlighted point in the center of that.

"You'll be able to get into the event itself just fine, since it's open to the public," she continued. "As long as, *Ace*..." she flickered her gaze over to Ace for a moment. "That you don't have a *gun*."

I looked over at Ace, also, and took notice in his slight smirk.

"Well, okay, if you say so," he said.

I glanced back at Katie and watched her give her own type of smile.

"Great," she replied, turning back to the papers spread out all over the tabletop. "So... once you're there, it may be a bit difficult to actually locate these two, since there will probably be a lot of people there. But, once you find them, keep an eye on them and don't lose track of them. I don't know what all they might be doing, so I trust you..." She paused a moment, and then held out a finger to point to both Ace and I. "Both of you... to figure out what's up. And, after the event is over, try to follow them out, just for a little bit, to see if they're up to anything else tonight. Try not to be too suspicious or obvious about it, though, okay?"

Katie looked back and forth between Ace and I as I gave her a quiet nod of understanding.

"Okay, good," she eventually concluded, now gathering the mess of papers back into one pile.

"Oh, Katherine," Ace suddenly piped up. "I miss your beautiful briefings; why don't you ever do them, anymore?"

"Don't call me that," Katie scolded. "And I don't know, but it might have something to do with how you always complain when I take more than sixty seconds to actually do them."

She tapped the newly organized stack of pages on the desk a few times, and then sat them back down in the middle of the table.

"That's just one negative, though," Ace contradicted. "And it could be *so* easily fixed."

"Yeah, well," Katie responded, now sliding her chair backward and preparing to stand. "I don't really *care* to fix it."

She then completely stood, gave a sarcastic grin to Ace, and turned around to do... well, I'm not sure what, but she found something to occupy herself on the desk behind her.

"Go for it," Mel piped up, still sitting from an observant place across the table.

I looked over at her as she started to stand, also.

"Gladly," Ace replied, now swiping the papers from the center of the desk in front of us and getting up, himself.

"Okay," I felt the need to add as I followed suit to jump out of my chair.

"C'mon, 'Nesia," Ace went on, already almost to the other side of the large meeting room.

I turned to chase after him, passing by a number of other desks, both empty and cluttered alike. Once to the back of the big space, I approached a familiar enough staircase and prepared to trot up it.

"Good luck, Mae!" I heard Katie's voice yell out from behind me.

I paused a moment, gazed over at her from behind my shoulder, and smiled.

"Thanks... I'm... I'm gonna need it," I weakly shouted back.

After that, I whipped myself back around and quickly made my way up the stairs set before me. Once to the top, I stepped out and into the quiet, dark woods. I then looked toward the road straight ahead but couldn't actually see Ace anywhere around it.

Suddenly, a loud *bang* spoke up from behind me, making me jump, just a bit. I then shot my head toward my backside and saw that the sound was just Ace slamming the trap-like door behind me.

He flashed me a smile, and then quickly stepped past my side. I turned and watched him make his way toward the front of the forest for a moment, and then began to follow after him.

Just as we had before, we crossed the road and hurriedly approached Ace's concealed sports car. Also, much like I've done multiple times in the past, I ended up seating myself in the passenger seat and barely clicking my seatbelt securely into place before Ace took his hard hit on the gas pedal.

I sat still as he shot us backward and through a maze of tall, fat trees.

And, yeah, I was kind of biting my tongue and tightly grasping the edge of the seat the whole time.

Eventually, though, he got us turned around and on an actual road, just as he had once before. After that, he started to speed off alongside the woods.

"So, here's what's *really* going down tonight," Ace began. "We're going to illegally surpass a building security system to break into a highly coded research facility, steal and later destroy a collection of hidden documents, then sneak into a charity event so that we can stalk two guys for the rest of the night. How does that sound?"

I gazed over at him.

"I thought we didn't have to sneak in," I simply stated.

"Well," Ace replied, occasionally glancing back at me. "We don't, but it sounds a lot cooler when I say it like that."

I gave way to a little laugh.

"Oh, of course," I commented.

Ace laughed back, and then I turned my head back toward the road.

After a few long moments of silence, though, a random question popped into my head.

"So..." I started, slowly. "Um... How... How did you... you know, get this job?"

I looked back over at Ace as he promptly answered.

Well, kind of answered.

"Do you really wanna know?"

I studied him a moment.

"Well... yeah, I mean, I... I asked, so I—"

He quickly cut my response short.

"Okay, then," he began, and then paused for a quick second. "Well, I was only seventeen when all of my paperwork said I was eighteen," he stopped, gazed over at me, and then continued.

"Remember, I said I was a foster kid?"

I took a hesitant moment to reply.

"Yeah," I, somehow, confidently managed out.

And I did actually faintly remember that.

"Okay, well," he went on to tell, twisting forward once more. "The papers were all wrong because they lost the originals way-back-when and made fake ones to cover it up. So, I ended up being kicked out of the system a year prematurely, without any job, or car, or even enough money to feed myself for more than a month. And I'm talking ramen noodles. So, believe it or not, I tried to chase after the job I had wanted since I was a little kid. And, you know what that was?"

I took a second to think of a response.

"Um... an astronaut?"

Ace chuckled a bit.

"Nah... It was an FBI agent," he said. "But, obviously, I had absolutely none of the requirements that I needed for that. So, after a short, disappointed call with the government on a pay phone... I ran into someone."

He fell quiet for an oddly long time.

"And?" I eventually inquired.

He looked over at me quickly.

"Oh, well, I got the job. *This* job."

I studied him another moment as he looked away.

"The guy I ran into," Ace explained. "He heard me on the phone and offered it to me. He's still my boss today, too." He paused and gazed over at me. "Kind of your boss, too, now, I guess."

"But, I," I began. "I-I don't even know him."

"Don't need to," Ace shot back. "I haven't even talked to him since last October."

I stared at him for a second.

"Oh," I mumbled. "O-kay... then... I guess."

I slowly returned my head to a forward position. Then, I noticed that we were already rolling into a metro-like area, with a number of moderately sized buildings of almost all kinds coming up on both sides of the street, a handful of them flashing neon-lit words at us as we passed them underneath the dark sky. Most of them said either open or closed, but I caught a glimpse of one that read "The Windiest Women are Here!"

Whatever that was supposed to mean, I didn't want to know.

Actually, I kind of knew; I just didn't want to admit that I did.

"Our first stop should be here, somewhere," Ace piped up.

I looked at the buildings both on the left and the right of us as he spoke, searching for one that looked like the one I had seen in the photographs before.

Before I could study any more than three of structures around us, though, Ace jumped ahead of me and took my success away.

"Right there it is," he muttered, drastically slowing the car down as he passed a small brick building on the right-hand side.

"Oh, goodie," I whispered, surprisingly quiet enough that Ace didn't hear.

Or, at least, I don't think he heard.

Carefully, but not... cautiously, Ace turned the car onto a smaller road on the left and pulled up to the entrance of a moderately sized parking garage. He then stopped next to some robotic box thing, rolled down his window, and reached out to take an automatically dispensed ticket stub from the large machine. After that, a red and white striped, horizontal post mechanically swung forward, not too far in front of us, opening up a dirty, concrete path up ahead.

Ace instantly drove the car past the gate, even as it was still moving, which made me kind of confused as to how he didn't actually hit it, or anything. Either way, he got past the entrance and began to guide the car quickly up the big cement ramp in front of us. Once that feat was accomplished, he turned to the right and rolled past a few lines of vacant vehicles.

I should probably mention that ever since we had passed the gate to the whole parking garage, I was grabbing onto the edge of my seat, once again. I'm not exactly sure why, but I have a feeling it had something to do with how these kinds of places are always mentioned as 'hot spots' for kidnappings and... murders and things like that sort.

It could also be how the lights are always either really dim or flickering, too, because... well, that just really freaks me out.

Even more than waking up alone in an empty office building surrounded by a number of a dead bodies.

Ace suddenly whipped the car to the left and pulled into an empty, but tight, parking spot between a black SUV and a... well, another black SUV. Once he placed the vehicle completely into park and shut the engine off, I began to pry my hands off of the seat underneath me.

"Okay," Ace shot out, looking over to me.

I gazed back at him as he continued.

"Let's do this."

Immediately after that, while keeping his eyes on me, he grabbed the handle on his door and actually threw it outward.

I flinched when I heard the crunch-like sound that followed.

Ace gave a cheesy grin.

"Oops," he uttered, now shutting his door and reaching out to turn the car back on.

I then leaned forward and looked at the slight dent and traces of blue paint that had just appeared on the side of the black car beside us. I afterward glanced back at Ace and noticed that he was currently putting the car into reverse.

"You're just gonna leave it like that?" I questioned, my voice actually pretty soft for how concerned I was.

Ace looked back at me, put the stick shifter back into park, and then turned to open and search through the small, enclosed storage compartment in between our two seats. I watched him as he

pulled out a red, cap-less and click-less pen and a thin stack of light-yellow sticky notes. After that, he turned forward, rested the notepad against part of the steering wheel, and used his right hand to inscribe some kind of message onto the top sheet of notepaper.

Then, he ripped the top sticky note from the rest, threw the pen and other papers down to somewhere on the floor below, turned to the left, rolled down his window, leaned out of it, and stuck the piece of paper onto the damaged SUV's passenger window. Once he leaned back in his seat, I glanced over him to read what he had wrote.

'Sorry about that'.

With a simple frowning face and downward-pointing arrow.

"Does it look better, now?" Ace asked, grabbing my attention back.

I tried not to, but I had to smile.

"Even better than a... a... an insurance provider's number," I answered.

"Yeah, sure" he replied, now returning to his task of backing the car out of the space it was in.

I let out a quiet giggle as he pulled the car back onto the path that led farther into the garage. After that, I waited for him to find another available parking spot, which ended up, this time, being one that had a Jeep on one side and a small, compact slug bug on the other. I noted the larger amount of room we had to get in and out of the car as Ace pulled into the place, parked, and shut the engine back off.

"Okay," Ace began, turning to take a swing at opening his side door once more. This time, hopefully, not as strong of a swing, though. "Now, let's do this."

I unfastened my seatbelt as I watched him open his door and step unproblematically out and into the night air, and then turned away from his direction to try to do the same. Luckily, my door came nowhere near the yellow Volkswagen beside me, although I took extra precaution by slowly opening it and avoiding extending it all the way out.

Once out of the car, I shut the door behind me, and walked around to the back of the vehicle, where Ace was already standing.

"Come on, slow poke," he said, now stepping quickly away from the car and down the path in between the rows of cars around us.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled as I began to chase after him, a routine that I was becoming pretty accustomed to by now.

Almost every light we passed on the trail was flickering, which was kind of making me tense up. I guess that was a bit of a good thing, though, because it forced me to pick up my pace and catch up to Ace's side a bit more quickly than I would have... well, even without the creepy lights, I think I still would have pushed myself to step pretty fast, so never mind about that.

Soon enough, though, we both reached a cracked glass door near one of the cement walls of the garage. Ace quickly threw the entrance open and stepped through with me, even though I was hesitant, not far behind. Once inside the new, actually very tiny area, I could see that it was a little room that was in one corner of the whole parking building. Against one wall was a dirty, silver elevator door with a ripped orange paper attached to the center of it, the words 'OUT OF ORDER' scribbled on it with sloppy handwriting. Next to the elevator was another plain metal

door, with nothing surrounding it to determine its purpose, except for context clues, which, believe it or not, actually led me to believe that it was the entrance to a staircase.

I guess, though, if it didn't lead to the stairs... well, then we'd have no sensible way to get out of the building.

"Gotta love Chicago," Ace commented, looking around at the small, dirty and litter-filled area, also.

I wanted to smile, or laugh, or something, but I was still a little too creeped out to manage out either option.

After that, Ace made his way over to the unlabeled door beside the elevator and opened it, surprisingly with caution.

I looked over at him through the dimly-lit area and waited for him to say something; hopefully something that wasn't along the lines of 'oh, wait, there's a dead body down there' or 'sorry to interrupt your cult meeting, guys, but could we squeeze by really fast?'

"We're good," Ace eventually cleared, now stepping through the open doorway across the room.

I looked the passageway over for a second, and then hurriedly stepped over to it before it closed itself up again. After that, I made my way into some kind of dark place that smelled like a cat's old litter box, which is just not good. I looked ahead as I let the door shut behind me and saw a line of concrete steps going downward from the platform I stood on, a cement wall against the right side of them and a rusty, metal railing following them on the opposite side.

"You coming, 'Nesia?" Ace yelled from somewhere below where I currently stood.

"Y-Yeah," I stuttered out, now forcing my feet to move forward a little. And, once I had shuffled my way to the edge of the stairs, I took a deep breath, and then started to trot rapidly down them, turning at the next platform once I reached it to continue downward the other way.

Soon enough, I reached the bottom, which came pretty quickly, although I guess we were only descending two flights of steps. After I stepped down from the bottom stair, though, I gazed upward and saw an open doorway ahead, which actually had no door or gate or anything even attached to it.

Cautiously, I passed through it, and then noticed that Ace was walking through the large, open area in the wall ahead and on the right, which I'm pretty sure is where we drove in at, seeing how there was the same setup of robotic machine things in front of the passage. I looked it all over a second, and then hurriedly strode over to the area, not looking back into the dark eeriness of the garage before I exited the building.

Once outside, where it was actually lighter, thanks to the accompaniment of working street lights, I turned to the right and caught a glimpse of Ace approaching the street corner in front of the parking garage. I rushed my way up to him as he waited for the street traffic in front of him to slow, and then followed him across the street, once the traffic had ceased, of course.

"So, what..." I began as we started down the right-hand side of the sidewalk across the avenue.

"What's the... the plan?"

"Get in, get our shit, and get out," Ace responded snappily. "Simple."

I paused for a moment.

"Okay, but... um, how, exactly, I mean?" I went on.

I gazed up sharply as Ace abruptly slowed his walk down and realized that the first place on our to do list was directly ahead, just a few feet, and on the left.

"Well," Ace started, looking the small, brick building over for a moment. "We'll just have to see."

He then stepped right in front of me, making me nearly run into him, or trip, or... I don't really know what else, and paced toward the front door of the building. I halted my own walking and watched him as he completely passed the whole frontside of the structure and turned to make his way around its far corner.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled, now beginning to sluggishly chase after him. When I passed the front entrance, though, I noted that there was a sort of note posted on the other side of its window. And, thanks to the assistance of a bright sidewalk lamp somewhere on my right, I could read that it said something along the lines of 'Hunt's Dentistry has moved to 141 Eastgate St., call 824-5690 to make an appointment today!'

After that subtle observation, I turned around the same corner of the building Ace had and started to walk down a dark, thin, and plain alleyway that was between the brick building we needed to infiltrate and whatever store or restaurant that was on the other side. I think it was a type of Mexican eatery, though, because, once I was close enough to the backside of it, I could smell the scent of refried beans coming from the air conditioner that was placed in one of the back windows.

And I could remember exactly what refried beans smelled like, because I also remembered that they were my absolute favorite chip dip. Then again, who doesn't like refried beans?

Once I was at the back corner of the brick building, I turned to the left and saw Ace standing with his hand on his hips and staring up at one of the dark windows on the upper/second floor.

I thought about saying something to him, but I backed out, mostly because it was pretty quiet around us at that moment and I didn't want... the cops to hear us, or whoever else that would have been around to stop us, for whatever reason.

Suddenly, Ace turned toward me and jogged both up to and pass my side. I twisted around to see him grab a large, hard plastic trash can from behind the Mexican restaurant and start to drag it back by me. I turned back around as he passed by me once again, and then stared at him as he pulled it up to the back wall of the building in front of us. After another short moment, Ace leaned his hands onto the lid of the can, pushed his weight onto it for a few seconds, stepped back, and then jumped up and onto the top of it in one amazingly swift move. Once he was able to stand stably atop it, he turned to face the brick wall and looked up at the window directly above him, which he realized was still about a foot or two away from his fingertips when he raised his arms.

Slowly, he lowered his hands, turned to look over at where I stood, and flashed a smile.

"This is where you come in," he said.

I studied his expression.

"It... It is?" I questioned.

"Yeah; come here," he commanded, gesturing me toward him.

I took a deep breath, and then walked over to the base of the garbage can, below him.

"I don't think I can..." I started, my voice quickly trailing off. I pulled one hand up and pointed at the trash bin as a whole. "This..."

Suddenly, though, Ace squatted down, and I glanced up at him as he reached down to snatch the wrist of the hand I was holding up by my upper abdomen.

"Foot here," he directed, his eyes flickering down as he tapped one foot on the edge of the trash can lid.

I gazed down at his foot, too, and then back up at him as he gave me a look of anticipation.

"Come on," he encouraged, almost in the same manner that you would with a dog that doesn't want to go outdoors.

I stared back at him for a few seconds, and then made the decision to raise my foot all the way to the top of the garbage bin. It was so far for my height, actually, that I had to place my opposite foot on the tip of its toes to really reach it.

Then, Ace tugged toughly on my wrist and forced the rest of my body up to a stand closely next to his.

"Wow, it almost feels like we've done this before, doesn't it?" Ace commented.

"Kind of," I began. "Not that I would remember it, or anything."

I laughed a bit at my own remark, as did Ace.

After a short second, though, I tried to turn more in a direction to face him, and abruptly allowed my back foot to slip off of the edge of the can's lid, forcing my giggles to stop short.

I let out a gasp as I began to fall backward.

Swiftly, though, Ace grabbed my left forearm and made my body practically freeze in midair.

My wide eyes looked over at his as he carefully pulled me back up to stand, just a few close inches in front of him.

"Let's not do that, tonight," he muttered, with a bit of a laugh mixed in with his words.

"Y-Yeah, okay," I softly replied as I placed my feet firmly back on the... well, I want to say, 'the ground', but I wasn't exactly standing on the ground, so we'll just call it... the platform.

I gazed straight up after a moment of getting myself into a safe position and was kind of caught off guard when I realized that Ace was literally hovering above me, his face a mere few inches away from mine.

"W-Whoa, hey there," I mumbled out, a comment on how close in proximity we currently were.

He smiled.

"Hey," he greeted back. "So, here's the deal: I can't reach the window, at least to open it, but your height plus mine, even though it doesn't add much, will get us there. You know what I'm getting at?"

I stopped to comprehend his words for a second or two.

"No..." I answered.

Although I really did know; I just thought pretending that I didn't might get me into a safer situation, or something.

"That's good," Ace stated.

Wait, what?

"W-Why?" I asked.

"Turn around," Ace directed, ignoring my inquiries. "Without falling."

"Well, that's... that's asking for a lot," I remarked. "From me, at least... so, I probably shouldn't do it."

Ace rolled his eyes at me, and then reached down to grab me by my right elbow. Soon after that, without another word, he pulled my arm forward and to the left, forcing me to spin around and stumble in place on top of the trash can lid.

"Okay, now that that's taken care of," Ace began, letting go of my arm and allowing me to sort of freely stand, facing away from him. "I'm gonna lift you up, okay?"

I could feel him start to grab at the sides of my waist.

"No, it's... *not* okay, actually," I replied, even though I knew well enough by now that he would just tune out my oppositions.

"And then," he went on, just as I had predicted he would. "You're just gonna open the window. Simple enough?"

He tightened his grasp on me, and I slid my hands up to place over his, I guess in hopes that he would loosen up or let go, maybe.

"But... what if it's locked?" I questioned.

"Nah," he replied. "Nobody actually locks their windows."

"Well... *I* do," I challenged.

"I highly doubt you'd remember something like *that*," Ace shot back. "You know, opposed to so many other things."

I quickly fell quiet.

"So, ready?" he asked, his hands tightening even more on my sides.

I paused for a moment, studying the brick wall a few inches in front of my face.

"Yeah," I said.

Immediately after my agreement, I felt my whole body shoot upward, at least, by about a foot or two, maybe three. I could also feel Ace's palms travel from my waist to my upper legs, to my knees, and then to my ankles. At the same time, I fell forward, into the brick wall, scratched both of my hands against it, and bumped my head on the bottom ledge of the window that, by the time Ace had grabbed my lower legs, was well at eye-level with me.

I leaned against the window, my hands pressed flat against it to gain the balance that I, surprisingly, hadn't lost yet. I looked it over a moment, and then guided my hands gently to the

bottom edge of the glass pane. At the same time, I studied the dark room on the other side, seeing nothing but a small green light on a wall straight across from me, not too far away.

I grabbed at the grooves in the wood underneath the window's glass and tugged upward.

And, surprisingly, the window moved along with my pull.

"Hey, I'm getting it!" I yelled out as I pushed the window sill as far up as I could get it.

"I'm glad," Ace, more softly, responded from below.

"I-I got it!" I continued, now placing my hands on the ledge of the window frame. I also started to lean my upper body inward to get a better glimpse of the inside.

"Good," I could hear Ace manage back.

Then, suddenly, I felt a strong push upward on my ankles, making my body shoot forward, directly through the open window.

"Whoa!" I shouted out as I was violently forced through the opening. My upper body then slid sideways as my legs flew into the room and, somehow, I ended up rolling over and tumbling onto the cold, hard floor under the window.

I landed straight on my backside, and then remained still as I took a deep breath.

After a moment or two, though, I pulled my upper body forward, and then slowly stood, my hand assisting me as I did so by grabbing the window ledge once again. After I was back on my feet, I twisted back toward the window opening and saw Ace already climbing through it, his hands grasping the other side of the ledge as he pulled himself gradually upward. He then swung his legs in, around his hands, once he was able to.

I had to step backward to avoid a collision with him as he slid his entire body gracefully into the room.

"Maybe you should... teach me how to do that," I said to him. "You know, instead of... throwing me around all the time."

"Yeah, but that's way more fun," he laughed out, and then turned toward the left. Well, my left, I should say.

I stood still as I watched him begin to make his way across the small dark room. At the same time, my eyes began to adjust to the lighting, and I started to see that there was just one desk across the room with a desktop computer atop it. And, after a bit more observance, I noted that the only other things in the room were the chair in front of it, an air freshener plugged in next to that, which is what had been emitting the little green light I mentioned earlier, and a sink with an empty counter area on the wall to the right.

No loose papers, folders, or cabinets anywhere to be seen. The desk the computer sat on didn't even have any drawers.

"Well, I don't think we'll find what we're looking for in here," Ace remarked, noticing the same details of the room I had.

He then turned and walked over to a closed door on the left side wall, reached down to fiddle with its handle, and opened it, soon after exiting the room. I made my way over to the doorway and followed him through.

We both entered a short and also dark hallway, which had nothing else but a few more doors and a staircase at the opposite end within it. Once I realized we had come from pretty much the end of the corridor, I turned to the right and saw that one door was placed right next to the one we had come from and that there was only one other sitting on the same wall a few feet from that.

Ace quickly approached the next closed doorway in line, and then tried to open it.

However, I think he just as quickly learned that it was locked.

"Well, rats," he muttered.

"Rats?" I questioned, resisting a slight giggle as I stepped up beside him.

"It's okay, though," he went on, gazing over at me as he reached into his back pocket with one hand. "I've got this."

He pulled out a small, dark brown wallet and, without even opening it, was able to slide out what looked to be a blue credit card, or something of that sort. After that, he turned back toward the door that challenged him, reached the card down to the door crack next to the handle, and pushed the card swiftly through the tiny slit. He seemed to jiggle the card in place a bit, and then reached out with his other hand, which still held onto his wallet, and twisted the door handle a tad.

The doorway in front of us somehow became opened.

"That's... That was good," I complemented, I guess, as I peered into the next dark room that had just been revealed.

"Of course it was," Ace stated, already jumping into the new area.

I, less hurriedly, followed after him and flinched when he apparently made the decision to turn some lamp on without informing me.

I threw my right forearm up to shield my eyes while they moved into their... daylight mode. At the same time, I gazed around and saw that we were standing in a room that was probably identical in size to the last, although it felt like it was only half the size, because there was a clutter of filing cabinets and desks thrown pretty much all over the room. I really mean *thrown*, too, because half of the cabinets were actually on the ground and rolled over onto their sides. The rest of the them were pushed somewhat nicely against the walls, but then there were two small desks pushed up against all of those, blocking them off.

The whole room was just a mess.

"How great is your sense of smell?" Ace randomly questioned.

I looked over at where he stood, next to a desk and the lamp atop it that he had used to illuminate the room.

"Why?" I asked back.

"Because," he started. "This could go a lot faster if you could sniff out the dirt that they've got."

"I..." I replied. "I don't think dirt even has a scent."

Ace laughed, but I didn't.

I was being serious.

"Oh, 'Nesia," he said, now turning around.

I stood still and watched him as he reached out to one of the metal cabinet drawers behind the desk next to him. I then took a deep breath, turned the opposite way of where he stood, and saw that there was one of the shorter metal cabinets thrown down by my feet.

I looked it over a moment, and then crouched down beside it. I reached out and opened the top drawer of it, which was on the side that faced me, and soon after began to sift through the file folders that were contained within it.

I looked into the front folder, saw that every paper inside of it was actually a copy of some type of cake recipe, all of them variations of carrot cake, and then moved on to the next. Within the second folder were two different issues of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, one from October 2007, the other from November 2008, and in the last folder sat a thick stack of papers. I only searched through the first two papers in the pack, though, before I desisted, probably because I noticed that each was a typed article, and the headlines that I read were '28 New, Exciting Positions to Impress Him!' and 'The Best Kinky Quickies!'

I closed the drawer back up pretty soon after that.

"I don't know if we're gonna... you know, find whatever we're looking for here, either," I proclaimed.

I stared down at the toppled cabinet before me a second and, when Ace didn't reply to my comment, piped up again.

"Wait... What are we looking for, again, exactly?"

I stood back up, since my legs were starting to hurt from the hovering position I was in, and gazed back over at Ace, who was intently studying a stack of pages in his hands.

"Don't worry; already got it," he declared.

"What?" I questioned, now stepping over into his direction. "What is it?"

"Just what we were looking for," he replied, flipping to the next paper in his pile.

I soon approached his side and leaned in to see what was written on the page. I saw that the name Jeremy Barker, of which I knew about, was printed at the top, as well as the information 'Age: 19', 'Location: Unknown', and 'Company: The Sixth' before he turned to the next typed sheet.

I froze up when I saw 'Mable-Ann 'Mae' Rosemary Brown' written at the top of it. Underneath that, similarly to the last paper, was printed 'Age: 16', 'Location: Chicago Area', and 'Company: Unknown'. Again, before I had time to scan further, Ace flipped another paper on top of it.

Before I could even look at the next one, though, he pushed the packet down by his waist and turned back to the desk by his side.

"W-Wait, what was... that?" I interrogated.

"Don't worry, 'Nesia," Ace, I assume, tried to reassure me. "It's just gonna get thrown out."

I paused a moment while he searched through another drawer behind the desk.

"But..." I began. "Why was my name on there?"

Ace refused to answer me and continued to look through the files in the cabinet in front of him with one hand, keeping the other that contained the papers with *my* name on them out of my reach.

"Ace," I suddenly and, surprisingly, sharply spoke. "Why... Why is my... my stuff in there?"

Ace ignored me, again, and then began to shut the drawer he had been sifting through.

"I think this is it," he muttered, pulling the collection of typed pages back up to his waist.

I gave a quiet sigh of frustration.

"Ace!" I shouted.

Immediately after my attention grabber, he turned toward me and gazed up from the papers.

"Why... or *how* am I in those papers?" I more softly questioned.

Ace studied my expression for a short moment.

"Look," he calmly started. "I honestly don't know; I'm in them, too, okay?"

I bit my tongue because... well, I'm not sure, but there probably was a reason for it.

"Stuff like this happens all the time," he went on. "Or, at least, sometimes. But, it still happens, so don't take it personal."

I looked him over before he decided to finish.

"Look," he said, again, stopping a second to reach down and grab my forearm with his free hand.

"We're gonna go take care of this, though." He held the papers up for me to get a good glance at.

"Okay?"

I questionably searched his face, and then opened my mouth to speak.

Before I could manage anything out, though, he cut me short.

"Good," he spat out with a smile.

He immediately spun around, kind of in a weird way, just so his hand didn't have to release its grip on my wrist. He then somehow clicked the desk lamp beside us off with his full hand, surged toward the open doorway through the pitch-black room, and dragged me along from behind.

And, shockingly, I didn't trip on my way to the hall. At all.

Once in the hallway, Ace pulled me forward... actually, more like threw me forward, and let go of my arm. Then, as I tumbled into the wall across the corridor, I could hear him shut the door behind us.

"Come on, 'Nesia," he muttered as his dark shadow flew past me.

I unhurriedly peeled myself off of the wall and began to sluggishly follow after him as he stepped into the door at the end of the hallway, of which we had entered from. Once to the point of passing through that open doorway, I could see Ace waiting impatiently by the opened window on the right-hand side of the room.

"Make sure you shut the door behind you," he stated.

I nodded in response, although I don't think he could even see my gesture in the darkness of the room. Before I even turned to close the door, though, I witnessed Ace turn toward the window frame, sit on the edge of the sill, swing his legs around to dangle over the outside edge, and slip out of the opened space with the packet of pages still in his hand.

I heard him land on the top of the trash can outside, and then stood still, staring at the window in amazement for just a few seconds. After those moments passed, though, I continued to turn around, shut the door behind me, and twist back to the point of exit.

I slowly stepped up to the window sill, and then cautiously peered over the edge of it.

Ace looked up at me from below, standing on top of the trash can.

"You coming?" he asked, his hands both resting at his sides.

I looked over the long jump underneath me.

"I... I don't know," I started. "I mean, I... I don't think so."

Ace gazed down for a moment, threw the stack of papers onto the trash can lid under him, and placed one of his feet firmly on top of them. He then craned his head back, once again, and held his arms up, into my direction.

Oh, boy.

I leaned back from the window and took a deep breath.

Then I turned around, my backside facing out, slipped my legs one at a time through the dangerous evacuation hole, grabbed the inside edge of the window sill, and carefully slid myself backward, one inch at a time.

I could feel the warm fresh air sweep across my legs as they crawled to a dangle. I then looked up to notice that I was pretty much as far out of the window that I could be without letting go of it.

Yet, I still wasn't close to feeling the safe ground or even the slightly less safe garbage can lid underneath my feet.

"Now what?" I questioned out loud.

"Just let—" Ace started to answer, but stopped quickly because... well, my hands slipped from the window, and my body fell from where it was hanging.

I let out a... *partially* quiet scream as I came crashing down on top of Ace. Or, at least, kind of on top of him.

He rushed into a position to catch me, I assume, because he ended up grabbing me and guiding me to the tiny area of safety in front of himself.

"Go," he abruptly decided to finish his earlier command.

I could feel my heart rate racing as I gradually turned to face him, where he was, like a while before, literally a few centimeters in front of my face.

"Good job," he commented, keeping his hands on the sides of my waist.

I showed a forced smile to hide my terrified eyes. After that, he gave a small nod, let go of my sides, turned to the side, and leaped off of the top of the trash can. I twisted my neck to watch him begin to pick up the papers that had blown down to the ground, and then crouched down to more carefully allow myself to slip down to the earth below.

"Now, look," he commanded, turning to face me once again as he held up the pages he had just collected. He then used both of his hands to rip the thick stack completely down the center.

I observed his actions quietly as he continued to rip the two sections into smaller shreds.

"All taken care of," he declared, once he was finished tearing the papers to the extent that he felt that they should have been. He then stepped past my side, lifted the lid of the garbage can behind me, and threw the shreds in.

After that point, he dragged the trash back past my side and pulled it back to the general area it had been when we arrived.

"Okay," he started, looking back to me as he walked toward the alleyway between the two buildings in front of us. "Now, let's go party."

He quickly disappeared from my sight, so I, a bit hurriedly, began to step after him. I followed him back out to the sidewalk, and then managed to catch up to his side when he started pacing to the right of the building that we were just in.

"I think we may be running a little late," Ace commented. "But, oh well."

"Why?" I asked. "What time... is it?"

"Eleven thirty," he shot back, now leading us to a place to cross an empty street. "It started at eleven, even though the events and everything don't start until midnight."

"It's that late already?" I questioned, realizing that it was... you know, past my bedtime, pretty much.

"Yeah," Ace blankly replied, guiding us across another street turn. "Good thing it's not far, though."

I looked up, after his statement, and saw a large, stadium-like building across the next street ahead. A long banner was strung across its side, at least, the side that I could see, and had 'The Magnificent Midnight' typed onto it, with each letter sporting a different shade of the color blue. I kept walking as I gazed over to the front of the building, noting that there was only a small handful of people entering the doors at the moment.

Soon enough, though, both Ace and I made our own way up to the front doors and, once I was able to see inside, I could tell that there was a lot more people there than just a handful.

Ace led us through the middle of the three open doorways, and then stopped abruptly. I halted behind him and soon realized, though, that he was stopping so a security guard could swipe a stick-like metal detector thing over him. He held both his arms up, his car keys out in one hand and, once instructed to, he turned around to face me so the guard could check his backside.

"You're good," the deep, masculine voice of the... kind of a bit on the heavy side security guard stated.

Immediately after he had given Ace the okay to proceed, Ace gazed up at me, threw his hands back down by his sides, flashed me a wink, and spun back around to step away.

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

"Next," the man in the blue security uniform said.

I looked toward him, stepped forward, and slowly raised my arms out from my sides.

The guard looked me over a second before wiping the metal detector almost a little bit too quickly over my frontside. Then, without even telling me to turn around or anything, he told me to go on.

"You're good," he blandly expressed, just as he had with Ace.

I stood still for a second, processing his words, and then dropped my arms. I kind of cautiously stepped away and walked over to where Ace stood, waiting for me, his hands casually on his hips.

Before he said anything, though, I took a quick look around and noted that there were a lot of groups of people walking around aimlessly, each containing individuals that looked like they were anywhere in their forties, fifties, or sixties. Everyone was also either quietly conversing with each other or just remaining quiet, so the area we were in was actually moderately noiseless.

The room itself was also a lot like a really wide hallway, but without any doors around, with the exception of the entrance area. A few decorations adorned the walls, like blue balloons, navy streamers, and another banner that was an exact copy of the one I had seen hanging outside.

"Okay, so," Ace started to whisper, snatching my attention from my observations. "We need to find our guys."

I searched his face a moment, and then nodded.

Without even looking at my reaction, though, he threw his hands back down against his sides, pushed past me, and took off to follow after one of the tiny crowds. I whipped myself around, too, and hurriedly began to trace his footsteps.

I passed by a few middle-aged members of society, a few less trophy display cases which, at least, I assumed that's what they were; it was hard to tell since they were all completely empty, and a handful of blue and white striped signs that each said something along the lines of 'This way to the fun!' and 'You don't want to miss this!', each with an arrow drawn in below the words, pointing into the direction of which we were walking, covered them .

Honestly, though, I felt like I could even come up with better signs, like... 'This could solve your mid-life crisis!', or 'Come check this out... before you get *too* old!'

Well, maybe I could...

After about a minute or two of striding toward the 'fun' that was set ahead, Ace slowed down drastically, and I took the opportunity to step up by his side. At the same time, I noticed that he was only decreasing his speed because there was a larger crowd of older people blocking the entire width of the corridor. Also, I could hear a quiet roar of voices from somewhere close by, but I wasn't exactly sure where.

Soon enough, though, I figured out the source of the noise.

We followed the crowd through a sizable doorway and found ourselves in a pretty much enormous gymnasium full of softly chattering people. I only scanned the vicinity of it for a short moment, but I saw that there were bleacher-like seats against each tall wall of the basketball floor below. We had also stepped into a balcony area about halfway up in the room and I was beginning to follow Ace to a concrete staircase on the near left.

I gazed up as we reached it and started to climb the gradual steps, seeing a vast number of unfamiliar faces in the seats on either side of us. Most of them seemed to be people in their middle ages, just like everyone else, but a few groups of people looked like families with young kids.

Eventually, Ace and I both reached the very top row of seats in the stadium.

"Okay," Ace said as he turned around to face me. "Plan." He gave a smile as he searched my face a moment. "I'm gonna go look around over—" He paused to look at someplace behind my head. "There."

I twisted my upper body to see what direction he was referencing, which happened to be the entire section of seats against the far wall, and then glance back at him.

"And you can search over here," he completed.

"I..." I started, staring at the white, cement wall right behind Ace's back, and then refocused my eyes onto him. "I don't think I remember what they even look like."

Ace nodded at me.

"I know," he stated. "But, they probably won't blend in well with this crowd, so you'll be okay."

He finished off with a familiar smile, patted my left shoulder, and then pushed past my side and started to descend swiftly down the stairs.

I turned around to watch him jump off the bottom of the steps and disappear through a crowd of people.

Great.

I sluggishly began to make my own way down the staircase, taking my time to look down each row of seats as I passed them on both sides.

I saw the exact same groups of people that I had when I had come up the stairs, though, of course, so, once I was back at the halfway point of the gymnasium walls, I turned to the left and started to carefully walk along a path between a black railing that overlooked the gym floor and the rest of the bleacher seats that sat above. I gazed over at the partially filled seats between each of my steps and scanned them to the best of my ability, but I still didn't see either of the two men that I was supposed to find. Or, at least, I think there were two of them... I couldn't exactly remember.

After about a minute into my search, though, a loud, amplified voice echoed throughout the giant room, making me stop in my tracks and actually jump a little.

"Okay, ladies and gents!" it boomed.

I gradually turned myself to the right and peered over the edge of the rail by my side. I quickly noticed that the source of the vocal sound was coming from a middle-aged woman standing in the center of the basketball floor, who happened to be holding a small microphone close to her lips. She looked over the section of seats that I was standing in for a short second, and then turned to the section on my left, whipping her long, curly brown hair over her skin tight, royal blue dress in the process.

"First off, I'd like to thank you all for coming out here tonight!" she went on, turning herself toward the section opposite me in the same manner she had previously. "Secondly, I hope everyone's ready to raise some money, or some big blue bucks, tonight!"

Immediately after her statement, the whole arena erupted in cheers. Also, I felt a strong shove from something on my upper back, pushing me a little closer toward the railing in front of me.

"Oh, sorry, excuse us," a high-pitched but masculine voice said underneath the fading cheers around me.

I brought my hands down from where they had instinctively grabbed the rail set before me, and then cautiously turned myself around, ready to somewhat politely accept the apology that had been given to me.

However, there wasn't anybody behind me. When I turned to glance toward the right, though, I saw two tall men in jet black suits stepping away from me.

Curiously, of course, I began to follow after them.

"So, for our first activity tonight, I'll need three volunteers to come down to the floor!" I could hear the woman talk into the gym speakers as I walked.

The two men turned around the rounded corner and began to make their way toward the next section of seats. And, I wasn't too far behind them.

"So, how about... *you... you... and you* with the purple shirt back there!" the female announcer went on speaking.

Then, almost out of nowhere, a group of about ten laughing people jumped off of the bleacher stairs on my left and obstructed my path.

Of course.

Once they cleared, though, and I waited until they did, I saw no one else walking the path ahead of me... which included the two men.

I gave a short sigh of frustration, and then continued to walk forward, slowly.

"Yes, come on down, please!" the woman continued.

I gazed over and down at the basketball floor momentarily as I walked, noticing that two women in their thirties and a man who was drastically older than that were all walking onto it from different corners. I watched them trek toward the center of the gym, where the hostess-like woman was now standing.

After I captured all of that information, I turned my head back to a forward position and caught the image of Ace standing in front of one of the many staircases in between the stands of bleachers, just a few yards ahead. He was turned completely toward the stairs and looked as if he were just blankly staring down them.

As I continued to pace toward him, he suddenly looked my way, nodded his head toward the edge of the stair steps, and then took off down them, disappearing from my range of sight.

I don't know why, but I halted my steps at the same moment that I saw him vanish. Maybe it was because it seemed sudden or unexpected or... something of that sort, but after that, I took a quick

look at the seats around me, above my left side, and then proceeded to follow the empty path in front of me.

Before I could even take a full three steps, though, the glare from... well, something shiny, I assume, glimmered in my eyes, forcing me to slow down and glance toward its source. Whatever that source was, though, I'm not sure, because it left as quickly as it had appeared, however, it led my eyes into the direction straight ahead and into the area of seats in the corner of the gym, where I saw two men in business suits taking a seat close to the very top. And, after they became fully situated in their seats, they both seemed to gaze into my direction.

Immediately, I whipped myself around and slowly stepped back along the path of which I had come. After a few feet of progress, I stopped alongside the railing that looked over the ground floor and turned gradually toward it.

Casually, I peered over the rail and saw the announcer lady conversing with the three 'volunteers' that she had chosen earlier, without the use of her microphone. A few moments after that, I reached my left hand up, began to twirl a small section of my hair on my fingertips, started to hum a made-up, low tune, and nonchalantly gazed back toward the suspected businessmen, letting my eyes dart to a few different places every other second.

I was just trying to look as casual as possible.

Within my process, though, I got the quickest casual look at them and noticed that they were just looking down at the gym floor, much like everyone else. Everyone but me, though... which probably made me fit in with the crowd a lot less than I wanted to, actually.

"What are you doing?" a sudden, deep voice asked from directly behind me.

My quiet hums nearly turned into a gasp as I spun myself around and stumbled back, just a little.

I instantly realized, though, that the voice was actually coming from Ace.

"Y-You scared me," I stuttered out, looking him over.

He smiled a tiny bit.

"Yeah, I know," he plainly stated.

I paused a moment, catching my breath, mostly, before I went on speaking to him.

"Well, I... I found them."

"Well, I did, too," Ace shot back, unimpressed. "They're downstairs."

I gave him a confused look.

"You mean they're... not, you know, back..." I paused and gestured behind myself with one hand, while the other hand hid the gesture from... well, anyone behind me. "There?"

Ace followed my pointer finger's direction.

"Yeah, *no*," he said as he returned his eyes to me.

"Are you... sure?" I questioned.

"Pretty sure," he answered, squinting and nodding at me at the same time. A short moment after that, then, he started to step past my side. "Come on, 'Nesia."

I took a second to turn around and begin to chase after him as he walked both toward and down the nearby stairs. As we left the area, I could hear the announcer speak into her microphone, once again. I couldn't really make out what she was saying, though, but I think it had something to do with 'kangaroo deodorant' or 'balloon motorists'. Either one didn't sound very sensible to me, though, so I dismissed them both and continued down the stairs, eventually descending into a large, lobby-like area.

Once at the end of the steps, Ace hopped off and hurriedly started striding through a crowd of people on the right. I attempted to follow, even though I found it a bit hard to see where he was going once I was thrown into the noisy crowd. The mass of people was considerably thin, though, or, at least, it was becoming thinner as everyone moved toward the exit of the area, so it wasn't too difficult to keep up with Ace, I guess.

After a number of steps, though, he abruptly stopped in front of me, making me kind of run into his backside. Actually, *really* run into his backside.

Slowly, he twirled around to face me and threw his hands behind his back as I took a reasonably sized step back from him.

"Sh," he whispered to me with widened eyes, although there wasn't much need for him to lower his voice under the talkative crowd around us, no matter how few people it consisted of. He then looked away, took a few steps forward, and began to whistle a soft song, or something of the sort.

A little dazed, I glanced ahead to the open area he had just created in front of me. It was then that I realized the two men we were supposed to find were actually standing a few feet away, their backs to us. Surprisingly, they were dressed in casual blue jeans and tee shirts, but I could definitely tell that it was... well, *them* when they turned around and gave me a good view of their faces, which I then remembered very clearly from the photographs of them I had seen earlier.

However, at the same moment that I searched their faces, they also happened to search mine. At least, I'm pretty sure it was mine, by about ninety percent.

And, again, I may not be a math wizard or anything, but that estimate was enough to freak me out a bit.

Immediately, I shot my head to the right, casually looked around in that direction a little, and then carefully turned completely around. I cautiously stepped up to Ace's side, since he was still walking leisurely away, and, after that point, softly spoke to him without making it look obvious from behind, if that's even possible.

"So, um... what happens if... if, like, they just... you know, find out that we're watching them?"

"Well," Ace started to respond, turning to step in front of a large group of people nearby, putting some much needed space between us and the two guys. "Let's just say that," he paused both his steps and speaking as he turned to me and finished his statement. "If they try to come up to you and talk to you or something, be prepared to do anything and everything it takes to avoid them, even if it's crazy, like... jumping off a bridge."

He smiled, and then turned back to continue walking.

Very reassuring.

"Oh, o-okay," I muttered as I started to follow him once more.

He weaved through a few groups of people, and then stopped calmly by an empty space of wall on our left. He glanced smoothly to the right so, obviously, I attempted to do the same. I didn't see the two men at first, or second or third, actually, but I eventually caught a glimpse of their backsides as one of the pair sneakily slipped what looked like a small, white piece of paper into a blue cup on a long, white table against the side wall. The table itself looked like it had a lot of random, blue objects on top of it, but I couldn't really make any more of them out from this angle.

After I had made that sly observation, Ace stepped forward and began to step into the direction of the men, who were still walking the opposite way, straight ahead. I trailed behind him, making sure to look over the white table as I passed it by.

I noticed that, along with the little blue cup, a bunch of flyers and brochures were thrown into the setup, all blue with white writing and the title 'Step up. Do what's right.' on them. I didn't take the time to read anything else on them, though, mostly because I didn't have the time and partly because the font was too tiny to read from my distance. There was also a large collection of blue pens on the table as well as a small sign next to the blue cup that read 'Step up. Donate today!' with an arrow actually pointing to the cup.

That's when I realized the cup was overflowing with loose dollar bills and checks.

Oh.

I turned back to face forwardly and continued to follow Ace through a handful more of chattering groups. Eventually, he stopped once again, behind a slowly moving pair of elderly women, and peered out from behind them, into a direction that I could not myself see.

After a short moment, though, he whipped himself back around.

"Shit," he muttered, now reaching down to grab my wrist, a common practice of his by now, and turning to push into a large group of people on my right.

Surprisingly, he was successful, and actually pulled me behind him as he forged through the people, who were actually just standing around and talking amongst smaller groups near each other. Still, some people turned and gave both him and I a few... unpleased looks once we stopped in the middle of the crowd. None of them actually spoke to us or anything, though, so they must not have been too mad, I guess.

Then, after a few moments, he let go of my wrist and turned to completely face me.

"Wh—" I began but, of course, became quickly cut short.

"They saw me," Ace jumped to conclude.

"Oh?" I replied, unsure of what else to say.

"But, I think they," he went on, but then suddenly stopped and stared at someplace far behind my head. "They're leaving; come on."

He pushed past my side and began to make his way back out of the crowd the same way he had entered and had forced me to enter.

I turned around, looked over the super thin exit path that he was still pushing through, sighed inside my head, and then started to chase after him.

"Sorry," I mumbled as I awkwardly stepped through a few tightly enclosed spaces. I made my way quickly, though, so that if anyone gave me some type of look, I was gone before they even had the chance to throw it at me.

Eventually, I was free from the clutches of the crowd, and was able to catch up to Ace's side as he passed through an open doorway across the room. After that, we wound up in a hallway that was extremely similar to the one we had originally come into the gymnasium through. Actually, it might have been the same hallway, but I'm not sure. Once there, though, we followed swiftly behind our two... guys, I guess, through the corridor and out to the front room that led to the whole building's point of exit.

Ace halted abruptly as he watched them pass a few people and walk out the front doors, so I did, too. Afterward, he began to follow after them, once more, but slowed down when he reached the closed doors.

He peeked through their glass interiors a moment, and then proceeded to cautiously step up to one of them. He whipped the door handle back and carefully slipped through, me not far behind him. Once outside, then, I followed him as he sluggishly approached the sidewalk ahead and turned right.

By now, I could see that the two men we were following were pacing extremely slowly, only a few feet in front of us. They also appeared to be leaning in and whispering to each other, and I could hear a few pieces of their current conversation.

"...kids?" one asked, although I'm sure he said an abundance of stuff before that of which I couldn't hear.

The other then leaned more closely inward and muttered something back, although I heard nothing of it, and it was a long statement, because he took a number of moments before leaning back once again.

Okay, so maybe I could really only catch *one* piece of their conversation.

At this point, they were quite a few more steps ahead, so Ace began to cautiously step after them, once again. And, just as cautiously, I copied his actions.

Another pair of middle-aged men quietly passed by us as we walked, but no one else was really around. Not too far ahead, though, a decently-sized crowd was gathered in the middle of the street, which was blocked off to cars via manually set up gates. The crowd seemed to be gathered around a few tables, which were set up alongside the gates. I'm not exactly sure what was going on, but it looked like the tables were selling tee shirts and coffee mugs.

At around the time of midnight, too... It seemed kind of shady.

I then witnessed the two men veer off of the sidewalk and jump into the condensed crowd. And, of course, Ace wasn't too far behind, which also meant that I had to push into the large, slightly talkative group as well.

The crowd wasn't too hard to get through but, once we were in it, I completely lost track of the two that we were supposed to be tracking.

Ace took a few steps forward and I tried to, too, but it wasn't super easy to keep up. After a moment or two, though, I glanced upward, over the heads of the people right in front of me who,

as you can probably guess, weren't very tall at all. Right then, though, I just so happened to lock eyes with one of the two men.

And, before I had the chance to glance away, he held one arm out, pointed directly toward me, and mouthed something to the other guy with him, who was now leaning to one side to get a quick look in my direction.

Then, of course, the one that wasn't pointing at me began to step toward me.

At the same time, Ace suddenly reappeared back by my side.

"Shit," he repeated himself from earlier in the same manner and grabbed my wrist, once again, but with more urgency this time.

He spun me around and then attempted to pull me forward, but actually couldn't, because a tight line of people was filing to our left without an opening for us to get back through.

Silently, he whipped his head to the left, where the same thing was occurring, and then to the right, where there seemed to be a better chance of getting through.

As soon as he stepped into that direction, though, a group of laughing individuals suddenly pushed their way into... well, our way.

Of course.

After that, Ace turned sharply to the only route left, which led toward the two men, who were both, from what I could see, just a foot or two away, with a few people separating all of us.

"Um," Ace faintly mumbled to himself.

I shot a wide-eyed glance over at him, and then he turned to do nearly the same, only his eyes were much calmer, as usual.

Then, suddenly, he tugged at my wrist and pulled me my body inward, right up next to his. I tilted my head back to look up at him, confused, and, at the exact same moment, he leaned his upper body over me and pressed his lips right against mine.

Chapter Eight

Oh my God.

My eyes widened as what felt like both a million thoughts and absolutely none at all, all at once, sped through my mind at, like, ninety-one miles an hour. And, at the same time, a warm rush sort of swept over me for what felt like an eternity.

And, although I couldn't really keep time with my poor math skills and clouded head, Ace kept an embrace on me for... just a long while.

It really had to be an eternity.

Eventually, though, he released me and I fell back down to Earth.

He then whipped his gaze to his right and peered past a few people for a short moment.

"Okay; they're gone," he plainly spoke.

My heart and head both pounded as he turned back to me.

"Let's get going," he commanded, now pushing past me and taking off through the rest of the crowd surrounding us.

I stood still for a second or two as I looked wildly at the people all around me, pushing every thought that had been clouding my mind into a state of non-existence.

After that brief amount of time, I turned around, searched for Ace's already far-off figure, and began to slowly follow after him. And, once I caught up, at least to his backside, I chased him, silently, until... well, actually, the entire way back to his car. And, even after passing by the endless count of street poles and hiking up the vaguely familiar, super shady garage stairwell, I still walked in silence, as did he, although he was so far ahead of me at times that I don't think I would have actually been able to hear him speak a word if he would have.

Once we were both eventually seated in the front of our reliable blue getaway vehicle, though, Ace finally piped up.

"Well," he said, with a slight sigh as he started up the car's engine. He then looked over at me as he finished his thoughts. "That was a close one."

He smiled a tiny bit, and then turned back to face the front windshield. I watched him quietly as he dropped the stick shift into reverse and twisted in his seat to glance out of the back windows. Once a few seconds of feeling the car roll backward had passed, he turned forward, once more, and shifted the gears into a forward driving mode.

After that, he focused on the road ahead and fell quiet.

For the *entire* rest of the drive.

"Mae..." a soft voice whispered from... well, I'm not really sure; my eyes were tightly shut and a blanket was thrown over half of my face. "Mae?"

Gradually, I stirred awake and pulled the sheet off my head.

I gazed around and quickly realized that I was back in my new bed, in my new room, of which I was still getting accustomed to. Near the edge of my mattress, though, stood Katie, who I wasn't exactly expecting to see at that time.

"Hey, Mae," she sweetly soothed, now carefully sitting herself next to my side on top of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

Almost confused by the overly calming tone of her voice, I looked her over a moment before answering.

"Fine..."

I kept myself in the same relaxed position, with my head firmly on my pillow, as I watched her nod her head, and then continue.

"You're doing okay with... everything, you know, with your parents and... being here, and all?"

I proceeded to half-sleepily stare at her.

"Yeah, I... I'm... good... good, yeah," I stated, my voice coming close to cracking a few times in the process.

"Okay; good," Katie responded with another nod. "I was just checking."

I slowly removed my glance from her and started to stare instead at the covers next to her legs.

"And, you know, you did a pretty good job last night," she suddenly went on, snatching my eyes back. "Even if you guys didn't exactly get a lot of information."

I squinted at her a moment while I tried to recover the events of 'last night'.

Then, suddenly, I remembered the... well, *you know*.

"But, I think you're kind of getting the hang of things, now," Katie continued, again. "And, so, I came to wake you, not to be *mean*, but because Ace says he wants you to come see this big surprise he's got for you. Also, it's one in the afternoon, so..."

I began to slide myself up to a sitting position as her voice trailed off.

"What... What kind of... *surprise*?" I questioned.

"You'll have to go see," she replied. "He's outside, so... you can get changed and just go see."

She then smiled, stood, and turned to leave. I watched her as she stepped out of the room, the door left open behind her.

I slowly pulled myself out from underneath the blankets on the bed and looked down at my current ensemble: pink plaid pajama pants and a light blue tank top, which had the words 'suns out guns out' inscribed on it in big black lettering.

I looked back up, and then pushed myself off of the edge of the bed. I sluggishly made my way over to one of my duffel bags on the floor, which had its contents of clothing spilling out and onto the ground. I crouched down in front of it and reached out to grab a new set of clothes but, of course, the first shirt I grabbed was a bright green tee shirt, which I soon recognized when I turned it over and read the statement 'Kiss me! I'm Irish...-ish.' that was printed on it.

I took a moment to take a deep breath, and then threw the shirt back into the bag.

My current outfit would do.

I gradually brought myself back up to stand and started to walk toward the open doorway of the room, my feet slipping on a pair of plain black flip flops along the way. Once I had found my way into the familiar hallway, I turned to the left and walked until I had gotten through the door that led to the large... whatever kind of room it was. After that, I trotted up the empty staircase, eventually getting myself outside to where the hot, humid air was.

I shut the trap-like door behind me as I gazed around, confusedly seeing nothing within my current range of sight. Once I had begun pacing toward the road area ahead, though, I caught gaze of what looked like the backside of Katie, leaned up against a sizable tree.

"Well, you think?" I heard a familiar female voice ask from around the same area, although it wasn't Katie's, as I stepped around the tree in front of me and looked ahead to see both Katie and Mel each leaning against trees, conversing with one another.

The sound of my approaching flip flops caught their attention, quickly, though.

Each turned her head into my direction, and Katie gave way to a slight smile.

"Hey, look who it is," she warmly invited.

Mel, with her arms crossed, looked me over and gave a bit of a giggle.

"Are you awake, yet, Mae?" she commented, probably on the account of my attire.

"Uh," I began to think of a reply as I approached the two women. "N-No, not really."

Suddenly, Ace appeared by jumping out from the other side of Mel's tree.

"Hey, 'Nesia, got a surprise for you!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yay," I quietly responded, not much enthusiasm actually added to my voice.

"Yeah, come on," Ace went on to command, stepping back around Mel's side and out of sight.

Leisurely, I began to follow after him, until he walked around a few more trees and stopped by the edge of the woods. He then turned to the left as I stepped up by his side, and I copied his gaze to see a small, bright red and shiny motorized scooter sitting a few feet ahead, along the side of the road.

"A... moped?" I questioned, staring at the mini bike.

"Not *just* a moped," Ace emphasized, now walking over to the side of it. He stopped once he was actually at that point, though, and turned back toward me. "*Your* moped."

I stared at him a second, a smile forming across my lips.

After that second, though, I had to bust out a good laugh.

"You..." I began, after my fit of small giggles was done "You think that *I* can drive... you know, *that*?" I paused for a moment. "Without, like... dying, or... breaking my... m-my body, or... something?"

Ace blankly glared at me before answering.

"Well, yeah, actually," he said, turning to pick up and display to me a red full-coverage helmet from the bike's seat, which matched the color of the mini motorcycle itself. "I mean, that's what *this* is for."

He smiled as I gave him a blank expression.

"You're... kidding, right?" I poked around for assurance.

"Come here," he shot back, turning back toward the bike as he spoke. He then tucked the helmet under his arm, lifted the scooter up by its handles a bit, and used his foot to push in the two kickstands holding it steady.

"So, you're..." I whispered, intentionally to myself, as I stepped closer to him. "*Not* kidding..."

After getting the scooter completely upright, he turned to me and held out the helmet, his other hand still holding one of the handles.

I carefully looked him over, and then took the protective device.

"Now," he started. "Let me show you how to do it."

He turned back toward the bike and put his free hand on the left handlebar, the other remaining still on the right.

"These are your handles- they make you turn, *obviously*. And, these are your brakes," he paused to grip the silver levers attached to each of the rubberized bars. "Always pull them at the same time, *slowly*. And this, here," he moved his left hand over to the side of the right handle and nodded toward it, both at the same time. "Is your throttle. Twist in to go faster; push out to slow down. And, here's your turn signals," he went on, using his left hand to flip a black lever up and down, underneath the left handlebar. "Your speedometer, manual light switch, emergency kill switch, gear shift, ignition, all that good stuff," he finished, wiping his left hand over, basically, the whole front panel of the moped.

I gazed up at him once he was done, feeling pretty lost.

I forced a look of assurance and nodded, anyway.

"Okay, now, get on," he suddenly commanded, stepping back a bit, his hands sliding down to the back of the seat to still keep it steady in the process.

"Oh, n-now?" I shot back, my look of slight confidence fading instantaneously.

"Yeah, *now*," he spat back, just as quickly. He reached out immediately after, grabbed my left wrist, pulled me forward, and spun me around. "Hop on."

Before I could actually do anything, though, he also decided to snatch the helmet from my opposite hand and throw it over the top of my head for me.

"Okay," I mumbled, reaching up to situate the large clear eye shield over my face.

I guided my eyes over the control panel of the mini motorcycle, took a shallower breath than I really wanted to, and then reached out to place both of my hands on each one of the handles. After that, I looked down, took in the sight of my baggy pajama pants and worn flip flops, and stopped myself from proceeding.

"Actually, I don't know if—" I began, beginning to take my hands off of the bike, my voice a little muffled from under the insulated helmet.

"Oh, 'Nesia," Ace, unsurprisingly, cut me off and nudged my lower back forward with one hand. I instinctively grabbed back onto the handlebars with his push, and then took a few quick breaths. After that, I cautiously guided my left leg over the tall seat beside my side.

Now, I was completely seated on top of the scooter.

"Okay, now, put your foot down, so you can keep it balanced until you go," Ace directed.

"W...What?" I questioned.

Suddenly, he let go of the moped, causing it to almost fall over on the right side. As a result, I threw my right foot out to stop the collapse, my body tensing with the feeling of almost falling and... dying, or something similar to that effect.

"Good," Ace commented, stepping over by my left side. "Now, turn it on."

I peered up at him as he crossed his arms and started to stare back at me.

"And... um, how, exactly, do I do... that?" I asked.

Ace gave me a bit of a smirk, and then reached out to the area below the control panel in front of me, where a tiny gold key was inserted in a little slot surrounded by the bike's red paint.

"Turn this on," he instructed, flipping the key toward a small white sticker that had 'ON' imprinted on it. "Then, hold in this button for a few seconds."

He then pushed down on a round white button an inch or two above the keyhole, causing a low rumbling sound with a slight vibration to erupt from the scooter's engine. After a short moment, he stepped back and removed his hand from the button.

I glanced up and searched the controls on the bicycle, yet again.

"I... I don't..." I started, turning my well protected head back toward Ace. "Know... what... now."

"Here, I'll help you," he offered, pacing around the front wheel to get to my other side.

I glanced over at his stance and noticed that he was currently placing one hand on the back of the seat and the other on top of my right hand, where the throttle apparently was.

"Slowly push this," he said, now forcing my hand to twist slightly forward, under his.

Suddenly, the bike began to jerk forward, catching me off-guard, honestly.

"O-Oh," I stammered out, lifting my right foot off of the pavement below as I moved.

"And a little more," Ace went on, pushing the throttle a little more.

He walked quickly alongside the motorcycle as it rolled along the side of the road.

"And then," Ace continued to push my hand over the handle but, before he could finish his sentence, he abruptly jumped onto the back of the scooter, almost right on top of me, and threw his left hand around my side so he could grab my other hand as well.

I looked around wildly as we whipped past the endless count of trees next to us, and then focused my gaze on the road ahead as Ace guided the bike's handlebars softly to the left, slowly leading us into the center of the road. After a few more moments, I glanced down at the control panel in front of me and saw that the red arrow on the speed meter was pushing its way past the number forty-five.

When I looked back up, I noticed that we were just speeding along down the center of the road, the woods still surrounding us from either side.

After another moment or two of feeling the wind whip across my bare arms, Ace piped up from behind me.

"I'm gonna let go now, okay?"

He nearly had to yell by my ear to be heard.

"W-What?" I shot back, also on the edge of screeching.

I flickered my eyes back down to the speedometer; it now read fifty-five miles per hour.

"You'll be fine," Ace reassured, now slowly removing his hands from atop mine.

"No, stop!" I yelled out, my right hand jerking up and actually grabbing his, my small attempt at keeping him from letting go.

"You're fine," Ace laughed out, pulling his trapped hand back further.

"Mm," I mumbled out, pursing my lips and widening my eyes in, pretty much, pure fear.

Carefully, though, I replaced my right hand on the steering handle and started to focus on keeping the scooter balanced as it drove down the partially paved road.

"See?" Ace commented. "You've got it!"

Right after his remark, I let out a tiny squeal of excitement.

And Ace laughed.

—

"Now, come on," Ace pleaded, stepping up to my right side. "You can do better than that; you've got this."

I lowered the gun to my waistline.

"I... I don't think I do, really," I responded softly.

"And I don't always think I'm the best person for the job I have," Ace started to shoot back. "But I am, so..."

His voice trailed off into a tiny chuckle.

I looked him over and smiled.

"So," he began, again, now stepping around to my other side. "Just try to keep your hands steady and try it again."

I slowly gazed back ahead, toward the arrangement of ringed targets across the room.

I took a deep breath, and then raised both of my hands back up to eye level, well above the countertop area in front of me.

Carefully, I attempted to stabilize my shaky palms over the handle of the pistol.

Then, suddenly, the door on my far right shot open, making a loud, almost startling echo throughout the room.

I froze up and snapped my head toward its direction.

"Hey, you two, we need you in the other room; this is urgent," Mel commanded, snapping her fingers alongside her words. Soon after her order, she whipped herself back around and charged back out of the room, just as hurriedly as she had entered.

I began to lower my gun once more.

"Well, damn," Ace muttered, walking around my backside.

I placed the pistol onto the counter in front of me and watched him pace toward the doorway. In the middle of doing so, though, he turned back to me and spoke while pacing backward, just for a moment.

"Should probably go see what's up. At least, I wanna know."

He then spun around and walked both through the doorway and to the right. I paused for a moment before following, but I also eventually stepped into the hallway, outside of the room, and turned to the right, where I could see Ace making his way through the door at the very end of the corridor.

I began to follow in his footsteps, after I saw the wooden door close behind his back. Once to the point of exit, then, I reached out, grabbed the door handle in front of me, and swung the heavy door back, afterward stepping into the large conference room on the other side.

I allowed the door to gently shut itself behind me, and then began to pace toward the large, messy desk area of which Mel and Katie both currently sat at.

"It's Mr. Williams, again," I could hear Katie state as I watched Ace take a seat on top of an empty desktop near her side. "And this whole section twenty-two deal."

I started to slowly pace over to the small group.

"They've got the information about it; they're hiding it; they're going to find it," she went on, her speech moving itself fairly quickly.

"Where?" Ace shot back.

I began to approach another desk near Mel's side, although it was few feet away from everyone else.

Katie paused before answering Ace's question.

"Well, that's the thing," she eventually picked up. "As far as I know, which isn't much, they're taking the new documents to some... a warehouse, or something, tomorrow morning and tomorrow morning *only*. I assume they'll have a big meeting over it and everything and then they'll be destroying *all of it*..." Katie took a moment before continuing. "It sounds like big stuff, too. I mean, this could be our chance... a real chance, and maybe we can get ahead."

"Well," Ace replied, smacking the edge of the desk he sat on with his hands. "What are we waiting on, then?"

"Slow down there, mister," Mel abruptly piped in. "There's more to it than that."

She glanced over at Katie and waited for her to elaborate.

"It's not going to be easy," Katie proclaimed. "I mean, if they're only going to be there tomorrow morning... It's going to be on crazy high security. And, on top of that, it's pretty far away, the other side of town. You'd have to leave really early to get there in time and I'm not even sure what time they *will* be there, at this point." She stopped for a second and looked Ace over. "I guess I could go on but, then again, what difference would it make to you?"

She gave way to a tiny smile.

I gazed over to Ace, who was now opening his mouth in preparation to release a response.

Quickly, though, Mel jumped in to take his words away.

"Now, wait a minute," she ordered, not continuing until she had both Katie and Ace's full attention. "This one could be *actually* dangerous, Ace; take more than just two minutes to make a decision on it, for God's sake."

The room fell quiet for a moment as she uncrossed her arms and began to spin her chair back toward her desk. In the process of doing so, though, she turned past my side, noticed my presence, and stopped.

"And please don't try to drag *her* into this, either," she added, spinning from my direction back to Ace's.

Ace leisurely gazed from Mel to me.

"She can come if she wants to," he commented. "But, she's a big girl; she can make her own decisions."

He gave me a subtle smile, and then looked back to Katie and Mel.

"Either way, *I'm* going. What time do you need me to leave?" he went on.

Katie took a breath before answering.

"Probably before six."

Oh, God.

"Okay," Ace accepted. "In that case, then, I need to go to bed." He hopped off of the edge of the desk he currently sat on. "I'll be ready for the lay-down at five a.m." He nodded his head toward Katie. "Good night."

He then straightened his back and turned to walk to the hallway door. He looked over at me as he passed by and spoke once more.

"Five a.m. if you wanna come, 'Nesia," he stated. "*Don't forget.*"

He then swiftly made his way completely to the door, opened it, and stepped gracefully through, the door making a soft, squeaky sound as it shut behind him.

"Well, okay, then," Mel mumbled.

I gazed back toward her as she went on.

"You know, you *really* don't need to go this time, Mae," she declared as she directed her glance at me. "No one's going to hold you back, though, I suppose..."

She looked me over for a second, and then stood with an emotionless expression.

"I need some rest," she proclaimed, now beginning to head toward the hallway door.

"Night, Mel," Katie farewelled.

I watched Mel shuffle up to the point of exit, and then added my own salutation.

"Good night."

Mel stopped at the door for a second, turned back to Katie and I, and gave a weak smile. After that, she proceeded to leave the room and allowed the door to close once more behind her.

"Well," Katie started. "What are you thinking?"

I looked over at her as she gave both a questioning look as well as an addition to her words.

"On tomorrow, I mean."

I studied the desk beside her for a short moment.

"Um..." I began to mumble. "I... I don't really... know, yet..."

"Yeah," Katie responded. "Well, you can take until the morning to decide. I think you'd be fine, though, really, for the most part. It's Ace that kind of worries me, this time..."

I paused, a little too long, before replying to her.

"Oh... really?" I inquired.

"Yeah, a bit," she went on. "He can... Well, he tends to go a bit fast, sometimes, and this time around, it would do him some good to slow down a little." She smiled at me. "Maybe you could help him do that."

"*Me?*" I questioned.

Katie nodded.

"He pays a lot of attention to you. I'm sure he'd listen if you tried to talk to him."

I raised my eyebrows a bit and continued to look Katie over.

"Anyway, we've all got a big day ahead of us, tomorrow, and I need to at least lay down," she picked back up after a few seconds of silence.

She slowly stood up from her desk and bowed her head to me.

"Night, Mae," she said, turning to face the door.

She soon paced past my side, and then I listened to her footsteps, without turning my head, as she made her way into the hall. After I could hear the squeaky door voice its closure behind her trail, I gazed up and searched the walls across from me for the sign of some clock. However, there didn't seem to be one there, so I pushed myself off of the desk that I was sort of leaning on and whipped myself around to inspect the other two walls behind me.

Then, I caught a glimpse of a small, traditional-looking white clock, which had its big hand pointing to a four and its small pointer facing the number nine.

I gave a little nod to the clock, although I'm not sure exactly why, and then began to step in the direction of the hallway door. Once there, I grabbed at the door handle and pushed it away from

me, forcing myself to jump through the doorframe at the same moment. After that, I released my grip, let the door creak back behind me, and started stepping down the empty, long corridor.

I took my time in moseying up to the door that I *think* led to the room I had been staying in, and then stopped directly in front of it. I looked over its white, lightly polished finish, took a breath, and then opened it.

I stepped into the pitch-black area and felt around the wall directly beside me for the light switch of which I found surprisingly quickly. I flipped the overhead light on, and then softly shut the door from which I had entered. After that, I turned back to face the center of the room and began to walk over to the bedside against the side wall.

I searched the array of Walmart gift cards that were currently scattered all over the bedspread, the area I had been residing in for most of the day, today. The only few times I wasn't flipping through the cards quietly, by myself, was when I had first been awoken and whisked away to drive a mini danger-mobile, as by Ace's command, when Ace burst into the room to give me a plate of Spanish rice and a cold, *pickle-free* turkey sandwich, and when... well, when Ace came to drag me away to learn the ways of 'shootin' the damn right way'.

Other than all of that, I had been sitting right here, staring at this mess.

I swung my body toward the bed, and then took a seat right on the edge of it. I looked down at all of the cards that were thrown about and reached down to pick up one in particular.

If it weren't already obvious, I was now studying an all too familiar scene of snow and dark clouds.

I turned the card in my hands for a few moments, pursed my lips, and then flung it back onto the bed by my side. I craned my neck to look at the rest of the clutter on top of the bed, and then swiftly stood. I turned my entire body toward the bedside, bent over a bit, snatched the bed sheets by its edges, and, immediately after that, whipped the covers up and into the air.

"Ugh," I mumbled as I slung the card-covered sheets over the floor next to me. I watched a number of the cards fly across the room, and then let go of the covers and allowed them to collapse to the ground.

I stood still for a second, and then decided to look back over to the closed door.

Promptly, I stepped over the linens in front of me and made my way over to it. Once there, I whipped the door back open, pushed past it, and quietly shut it, once again, behind me.

I paused before turning to the left side of the hallway and took even more time before beginning my journey in its direction.

After a little bit of time, I made my way up to a door not too far away, and then started to open it and step carefully through.

The lights inside were still turned on and the small pistol I had used earlier was still resting on the counter close by.

I closed the door slowly behind my back and made my way over to the center of the room. I looked up at the middle target across the way as I reached out to the gun that sat on the counter in front of me. After that, I stepped back a bit, took a deep breath, and cautiously raised the

weapon up by my chest, my arms fully extended. I closed my left eye for a second, and then reopened it, held my breath, and pulled back the trigger.

I lowered the gun and studied the result.

I didn't hit *any* of the targets.

"Mm," I groaned.

I looked across the room for another short moment, and then raised the gun once more.

I followed the same protocol before I took an extra breath and shot.

Once I put the gun back down by my waist, I searched the target directly across from where I stood.

A slight smile swept across my face.

A little hole had appeared in the outmost white ring of the center target.

I gazed back down for a second, gave the smile a little bit longer to remain, and then wiped it away and returned my head back to an upright position.

I began to raise the gun up to eye level, again.

Then, suddenly, a sort of rumble echoed out all around me.

I gave way to a gasp, threw the shooter back down to my side, and twisted sharply into the direction of the door.

There stood Ace, in the open doorway, leaning a bit against the edge of the doorframe.

He smiled.

"Well, 'Nesia," he began as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Kind of had a feeling you'd be in here."

He uncrossed his arms and pushed himself away from the door, forcing it to nearly slam shut behind him.

"Really?" I asked, my tense muscles beginning to relax.

Ace stepped quickly up to my side.

"Not really," he replied. "But I'm still not surprised."

I looked him over as he turned and leaned his backside up against the counter beside me. He then glanced down at the gun in my hands, twisted his head to look at the targets far off behind him, and fixed his eyes back on me.

"You do that?" he interrogated, gesturing his head to my left.

I looked into the directed direction and noticed that my one shot was the only one that currently appeared on any of the brand-new targets.

"Um," I started. "Yeah, actually."

I gazed back at him and smiled a bit.

"Really?" he questioned, afterward pausing for a moment. "Prove it. Do it again."

I narrowed my eyebrows at him, and then opened my mouth to speak, although it took some time to actually get any words out.

"Well... o... okay," I said, without any real hint of confidence.

I looked back down, turned to face the middle target once more, glanced up, raised the gun in front of my face, steadied my hands, held a breath, and then released a bullet across the room.

This time, it landed in the second most inward white ring, which was actually even closer to the center than last time.

"Wow!" Ace interjected.

I flashed a bright smile and looked back at him, now lowering the pistol.

He searched my face a little more slowly than usual.

"I'm impressed," he complimented.

I locked my eyes onto his.

"Well," I started, now looking away to set the gun back down on the countertop. "I am, too."

I gave a tiny laugh as I carefully pulled myself up to sitting position on the edge of the counter, right next to the gun.

I looked back up at Ace, who was just about a foot away, on the other side of the pistol, awaiting a reply.

He stared at me a moment, and then twisted his head to look down at his feet.

"So," he began, again. "Are you thinking about going, tomorrow?"

He didn't look back at me until I started to respond.

"Um..." I stopped for a second. "Yeah, actually."

He smiled.

"Good," he stated. "It'll be good for you; don't let Mel and Katie scare you."

I smiled back.

"I don't know what could be any scarier than what I've already been through," I remarked.

Ace laughed.

"Right," he agreed. "Especially your first day... Thrown right into the fire, just like that." He paused. "Did you ever remember how you got into that place to begin with?"

"The, um... Where I first woke up, you mean?" I asked.

"Yeah; you know, how the hell did you end up there?"

I looked down at my lap as I thought.

"Well..." I picked up after a moment. "I know I was mad, or something, I think... and..." I placed my hands on top of my thighs and observed them as I continued. "It was probably over something stupid, I don't even know what, and so... I got in a fight with mom." I bit my bottom lip. "And I just left home and went on a walk... a really long walk, all the way to... well, where that building was, and then..."

I shot my head up and over to Ace.

"There was a man," I stated, suddenly remembering a bit more information. "And he... he..." I studied Ace's expression. "He grabbed me on the sidewalk and he-he knew my... my name, he said 'Mae', and then..." I bit my lip once more. "And then that was it; I woke up after that..."

I looked down to the gun between Ace and I.

"And I don't remember what he looked like... but he had a... a scar, right under his eye," I finished.

Ace remained quiet, but only for a second.

"Wow," Ace started. "Maybe your memory is improving a bit."

I glanced up at his face.

"A little," I laughed.

Ace smiled.

"Well," he loudly spoke, resituating himself a little against the counter. "No matter how you wound up where you did in there..." He paused to take a deep breath and focus his eyes back on mine. "I'm glad you did."

I smiled back at him.

"Me too," I said.

I stared at him for a long moment.

And he did, too.

"Well, um..." he eventually began. "We've got a big job to do, tomorrow..."

He started to lean back and pushed himself away from the counter's side.

"So, uh," he went on. "Better get some rest."

He turned back toward my side, smiled, and reached out to pat my upper arm.

"Don't stay up *too* late, okay?" he negotiated.

I smiled and nodded.

He started to step back and turn toward the door.

"Night, 'Nesia!" he shouted out as he walked to the exit.

I watched him as he walked up to the closed door, grabbed its handle, whipped it open, spun around, gave a salute-like gesture, and then stepped backward, into the hall, the door swinging shut not too long after.

I guided my eyes from the doorway down to the gun that rested by my side. I then placed both my hands onto the countertop's edges on either side of me, pushed myself down to the tiled floor below, turned around, and swiped the pistol up into my grasp.

I stepped back a little, both extended and raised my arms, focused my eyes onto the target straight ahead of me, and inhaled slowly and steadily.

I pulled back the gun trigger once again, and then smiled.

Chapter Nine

"Nesia..."

I groaned and shut my eyes more tightly.

"Nesia."

I rolled my head the opposite direction of his voice.

"Nesia!"

Then, suddenly, a cold... something or other pressed itself against my left cheek.

I jumped in my seat at the feeling and stirred abruptly awake.

I gasped and snapped my head over to the left, where Ace sat, smiling and holding a tall aluminum can of Mountain Dew in one hand with chips of ice practically dripping off it and into his lap, right next to the black steering wheel in front of him.

"Really?" I nearly yelled as I looked him over.

"Rise and shine," he cheered before taking a swig of his caffeinated drink. After taking a decently loud gulp, then, he brought the can back down by his lap and gave a refreshed sigh.

"Ah. So, we're here, finally."

He nodded his head toward the front windshield and I followed his gaze to see nothing but a mess of shrubs and vines, which I soon gathered pretty much surrounded the car from all sides, once I looked around to peek out of the rest of the windows.

"Where is *here*, exactly?" I asked as I glanced around.

"Oh, Nesia, so many questions," Ace mumbled, beginning to fumble with a small black bag by the side of his seat.

I looked back at him as he pulled out a slightly familiar Bluetooth earpiece.

He looked up at me for a moment, and then offered the tiny device into my direction.

"Here," he said.

I searched his face for a second, and then took the earpiece from his hand. As soon as I did so, he turned to the left, reached down to the area in between his seat and the car door, and retrieved two identical, well-sized pistols. He laid one down on top of his thigh, and then turned to grab a small black cartridge from the same place he had obtained the guns. He pushed the piece into the bottom of the handle on the pistol he still held onto and, afterward, held it out to me, by its side, similarly to how he did with the earpiece a moment before.

I looked down at it and took it by the handle, carefully.

"Okay, so," he began, turning back to pick up another cartridge for the remaining weapon. "Since you probably already forgot, knowing you..." He paused for a second to fiddle with his gun and click the cartridge into place. "We need to get in *there*."

He twisted in his seat to point at the back windshield.

I followed his gaze, and then questioned him.

"In... the bushes?"

"Well," Ace objected, turning forward once more. "Through those, and then to the warehouse back there." He glanced over at me. "And then in *there*, somehow."

I studied his expression.

"Okay," I blandly spoke.

Ace then reached out to grab at the door handle beside him, his eyes not looking once away from mine.

"You ready for this?" he asked, slowly forming a smile.

I flickered my eyes down to the two items in my hands.

"Ye..." I softly started to stutter. "Y-Yeah, sure."

"Not too confident," Ace commented, snatching my gaze back to him. "But I guess you just woke up two minutes ago, so I'll take it."

I smiled as he twisted to the left and threw the door open in front of himself. I began to do the same, but I stopped when I found that both of my hands were currently occupied.

"Wait," I started, bringing the Bluetooth device up by my face. "What do I—"

I cut myself short when Ace decided to slam his door shut, leaving me in a cloud of silence. I looked up through the driver-side window quickly afterward to see him already walking around the backside of the vehicle.

I sighed and turned completely toward the door on my right. I began to toss the earpiece into my left hand, along with the gun, so I could grab the door handle with my right.

Before I could even reach the handle, though, the door swung suddenly open, making me honestly jump in my seat, just a little bit.

"Yes?" Ace asked, bending over in front of me to peer inside the car.

I paused before responding to him.

"What do I..." I looked down to tamper with the edges of the earpiece, and then grasped it entirely and held it up. "*This*."

Ace looked at the device for a moment.

"Mel wanted me to use it for once, but now I don't really wanna, so I'm giving it to you to hang on to. Just put it in your pocket or something," he answered.

I glanced from him to my hand.

"Okay..." I mumbled, now putting it gently back in my left hand.

I paused for a second, then grabbed a part of the rubber doorframe in front of me and swiftly hopped out of the car, landing myself directly in front of Ace, who was already stepping back from the vehicle.

"Alrighty," he said, pacing a little more to the side and grabbing at the door behind me.

I stepped away from the car a bit as he slammed it shut and replaced the Bluetooth piece back into my right hand. I then looked down and slid it into my front right jeans pocket, which it surprisingly fit in, and, afterward, followed suit with the gun in my left palm, slipping it into my back right pocket in the same manner.

Ace hurriedly paced past me as I stored away my items and I afterward watched him as he made his way over to the area around the trunk of the car.

He slid his pistol into the back pocket of his tan cargo pants as he walked, and then approached the edge of what seemed to be an undistinguished trail between the clumps of brush all around the car. I had to half-jog in order to catch up to his side and, as soon as I had, he began to take off on a fast walk down the grassy path.

I chased after him as he passed by the endless fences of tall weeds and bushes on either side of the trail until we both, eventually, reached the point where an open clearing could be seen. Once that sight was achieved, Ace *actually* slowed down, and then carefully approached the end of the trail, keeping his body as close to the left barrier of bushes as possible.

He peeked out, just a bit, from behind the weeds and cautiously placed one hand over the top of the gun in his pocket.

He paused for a long moment, and then removed his hand from the weapon. He craned his neck to look back at where I stood, which was only a few feet behind his back, and gave a small waving gesture to move forward. After that, he turned his head back to center and proceeded to walk around the corner of shrubs in front of himself.

I began to follow his footsteps and, once I was also around the edge of the brush, I saw nothing but... well, a large grassy clearing all around us. A countless number of trees surrounded the area from all angles, excluding the direction straight ahead from the path of which we had come. Instead, distantly away, there was a rocky gravel road set out across from the trail and, I assume, that's really how we had ended up in this place to begin with. Other than that, there was absolutely nothing around.

I continued to follow Ace to the left side of the clearing, where a line of tall, lightly colored trees sat. As he began to push through them, I gazed past his side and noticed that quite a few more rows of similar looking trees were laid out and, beyond those, some sort of brown house, or barn, or storage shed, or... maybe a small, shady magic shop, or... *something* was set out.

No matter what it was, I really didn't care, and didn't really care to find out.

I didn't have to, though, because Ace began to pass the structure around the backside and continued to slip through the next few rows of trees in the route that, I guess, we were going.

Naturally, I followed him some more, until we reached the edge of another large clearing, where Ace abruptly stopped and knelt down behind one of the trees next to the open space.

Confused, I froze up behind him and looked around at the area ahead.

I noticed that there was a sizable, red bricked building in the middle of the clearing, which looked to be probably three stories high, and had a number of its windows shot or completely shattered. There were also quite a few streaks of some type of green substance all over the exterior walls as well as dark brown spots in even more areas than that.

And, suddenly, I felt much more inclined to go back to the sketchy magic shop, instead.

"Get down for a sec," Ace ordered, snatching my attention back to where he crouched, staring me down from behind one shoulder.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," I shot back, immediately attempting to step behind the tree by his right side. In the process of doing so, though, I tripped on a stick that was implanted into the ground much more than I had expected it to be, causing me to stumble over and fall, face-first, onto the patch of dirt below.

Well, honestly, the stick could probably be categorized more as a branch, or a log, or... just anything that someone would yell out 'timber' for before cutting it down.

Either way, I tumbled to the ground, my hands thrown out in front of myself to keep my face from eating a mouthful of soil.

"Nesia!" Ace loud-whispered.

"Sorry, sorry," I mumbled, now pulling myself forward and up to my knees, so I could kneel behind the tree that I was still determined to hide behind, at least, for the time being.

I turned so my back rested against the base of the tree, wiped some of the dirt that had been smothered on my knees away, and then looked over at Ace, who was visibly trying not to laugh.

"You good?" he asked, once he was collected enough.

I forced a slight smile and nodded.

After that, he gave no other response, and returned to peeking around the tree in front of himself. He leisurely pulled his gun from his pocket, stood up, and then took one step to the side of the bark in front of his face. He pulled the pistol up, outstretched from his chest, and began to walk slowly forward, toward the clearing behind my backside.

As he left sight, I carefully stood, and turned around to peer out from behind the tree concealing me.

I watched him make his way into the brightly lit area, away from the woods, remaining still. He then turned his head slightly to one side and spoke softly back to me from where he stood.

"Come on, 'Nesia."

I looked him over a bit more, and then proceeded to walk out from the protection of the woodland area. I shuffled up to his backside and, after that, stayed close to him as he pushed his way to the nearest wall of the building ahead, his gun held out precariously the entire time. Once to that point, then, Ace paused for a moment, and then approached a shot window nearby his side opposite to me.

He peered into it for a second, and then turned back to face me.

"Weird," he commented. "I don't even think there's anyone here."

I studied his expression before replying.

"So... can we go, then?" I questioned.

Ace flashed his infamous smile.

"Oh, 'Nesia," he started. "You wish."

He whipped himself back around and instantly began to pace past the window he had looked into.

I let out a quiet sigh, and then followed after him, gazing through the window as I passed it. And, while I did, I noticed he was right; it was dead silent in there, and nothing could be seen but a few rows of double-stacked boxes.

Soon enough, after my observations, Ace reached the side of a tall, brown rusty entrance to the facility. He grabbed at the dirty, silver handle with his free hand, and then pushed it inward. He stepped through the thin doorway it soon revealed and, once I had the chance to catch up with him, I did so as well.

Inside, there was what seemed to be an infinite number of boxes scattered everywhere. There were many thin rows of them straight ahead, as I had seen before, but there were also clusters of them against all of the walls and a few randomly thrown in the middle of the pathways outlined by them, too. Some were even stacked around the doorway, where we both now were, and I could see that a handful of them were left open.

I turned to shut the door softly behind me as Ace leaned over one of the stacks to search through one of their contents.

"Wow," he started while I turned back to him. He pulled out a large, clear bag by its upper corner, which contained some type of green, shredded leafy substance, and showed it to me before continuing. "I bet all of this is worth more than I could even make in five years."

"Wh..." I mumbled, walking toward him. "Why? What is that?"

He dropped the bag back into its container and gave way to a tiny laugh.

I stepped up to his side and peered over the edge of the box, actually having to get on my tiptoes as I did so. I then squinted as I examined the inside, which happened to be packed full of a bunch of identical baggies, all holding the same unfamiliar matter.

I stared at the bags for a moment, then leaned back, turned to Ace, and opened my mouth to speak.

"*Oh*," I simply stated.

Ace searched my face, let out another small laugh, and then turned around. He continued to walk into the building and stepped toward the far wall on the right.

I followed him past the innumerable lines of boxes, until we reached a distance that was considerably far from the door we had entered from as well as from any bright or broken windows.

"I expected a lot more here," Ace claimed, turning around to speak to me as we walked, forcing himself to step backward for a few moments. "Maybe they're not coming after all."

I looked from the floor under my feet up to him and prepared myself for a response. Before I could manage anything out, though, a loud, creek-like noise yelled out through the enormous room.

I whipped my head over my shoulder to figure out what had made the sound but, as I did, Ace grabbed me by one arm and pulled me sharply to the left. I then stumbled forward and practically fell into his hands as he crouched down behind the nearest stack of boxes.

I knelt onto the tops of my knees while I gazed from his hands, now, for some reason, wrapped around the sides of my waist, to his eyes, which were staring intently at the floor beside his feet.

"Well, he sent *me*, so either deal with *me* and get the god damn information you want, or leave and get killed trying to find it on your own," a deep, strong voice suddenly shouted out through the room.

Immediately after that, an abundant number of loud footsteps began to echo out around us and another loud creak filled the area, followed by a slight bang.

"Yes, I'm sorry," another voice, one much more passive in tone, replied. "But, will he—"

"Upstairs," the other masculine voice interrupted. "And we'll see."

The footsteps continued to trot across the floor, all moving in harmony until they reached a certain point of significance, where they all abruptly halted, though a few staggered behind the rest.

"You," the first, bossier voice barked. "You're gonna stay right here. The rest of you... just follow me."

After another short moment, the footsteps picked back up, once again. They made their way farther across the room, and then a soft click could be heard from where we squatted. After that, the footsteps began to gradually fade away, until another bang erupted out, causing them to cease completely.

I looked from the box beside me to Ace's face as a quick silence fell.

He gazed back at the same time that a lone, hushed pair of footsteps started to pace somewhere else inside the spacious area.

Ace took his hands away from me and began to reach for the gun in his back pocket.

He searched my face, and then clearly mouthed the words 'stay here'.

I kept my eyes on him and gave a silent nod.

He looked down to the floor, listened to the continuously moving steps, and then carefully spun himself around on the balls of his feet, miraculously making nearly no sound in the process. Remaining in a crouching position, after that, he began to... kind of waddle alongside the line of boxes ahead, pulling his gun out in front of himself as he did so.

I could hear the footsteps becoming much closer as I watched him move, making me tense up, just a bit.

Understandably so, though, I think.

After what felt like a century or two, Ace reached the end of the row of boxes straight ahead of me, quite a distance away. Once there, then, he straightened his back just enough so that he could peek over the top edge of the stacked boxes on his left.

He held his gun down by his thigh as he gradually stood.

He glanced around, unmoving, as an odd quietness fell.

Then, suddenly, a loud pop shot throughout the room and a cloud of green flakes sprung forcefully out of the box in front of me, making me jump back and slide my legs out in front of myself both at the same time.

In the same moment, my eyes flung upward, and I caught glimpse of Ace as he swung his gun up, a bit to the left, and spat out a bullet into that direction.

I could hear a sort of... croaking kind of sound, followed by a mini crash of something onto the hard floor.

Ace looked back at where I sat and lowered his arm.

"Well," he began, surveying the green mess on the floor in front of me, as well as the small hole in the middle of the box next to it. "Looks like somebody was already trying to blow up this joint."

I forced a smile past my uneasiness.

He flashed a smile back, and then turned away.

I reached up and grabbed at the edge of one of the boxes beside me to help me up to a stand as Ace made his way around the one in front of him. After I had brought myself onto my feet, I twisted to the left and searched the floor ahead, noticing a clump of dark hair poking out from behind a row of boxes not too far ahead. I began to walk toward it, unhurriedly, as Ace made his way across the opposite side of the room.

Once close enough to the stack that concealed the rest of the clump, I started to step to the side a little more, and then rounded the corner of the boxes in front of me.

I instantly gazed downward and took in the view of a man's burly, limp body, sprawled out on the floor, face-down. His dark green shirt was heavily tainted with a dark burgundy color and a tiny pool of a brighter red was peeking out from underneath his sides.

I couldn't help but wrinkle my nose at the sight.

"Nesia!" Ace partially yelled out, causing my attention to switch over to where he stood, on the other end of a row a few lines away. "You coming?"

I looked him over, and then gave him an answer.

"Y-Yeah," I called back, looking back down and carefully stepping around the fallen man in front of me.

I picked up my pace as I walked toward the end of the aisle set before me, and then continued moving in a similar manner as I turned at the end and strolled alongside the side wall.

Eventually, I made my way up to Ace, who was stationed in front of a short, brown door with white, chipped paint splattered all over it.

As soon as I had reached his side, Ace reached out and pulled the door swiftly back, in front of me, without making any type of sound at all. He then stepped through it, quickly but quietly, holding the edge of it until I followed him through. After that, he pushed the door backward and gradually released his grip on it, causing it to gently swing itself shut.

I turned to look at him as he walked past my side and entered a long, skinny hallway. I paced more sluggishly behind him, taking in my surrounding as I did.

The corridor itself had white walls, although the bottom halves of each were painted with a corroding green, and there were open or cracked doorways that led to pitch black rooms every four to five feet. The whole hall itself was dimly lit by a single window pane at the far end, which also happened to be covered by moderately heavy, office-like shades.

Ace treaded a few feet ahead of me, forging his way speedily without making any observations of his own.

I continued to chase after him, although I took some extra time to gaze into each room as I passed them by, just out of curiosity. Each time, though, I didn't really see much of anything, other than darkness and, sometimes, an old desktop by the side of the doorway.

Before I could even make my way past four doors in total, though, a loud shot shouted out from directly in front of me.

I immediately let out a tiny screech and stumbled both backward and to the left, causing one side of my body to collide with the wall.

My ears began to ring, making it feel like the noise was repeatedly echoing in my head.

I reached out to touch the wall beside me with both of my hands and gazed up at Ace, who I could see rushing into my direction, his gun held up by his shoulder.

Then, suddenly, a tall, dark-haired man jumped out of the room that was right in front of me, merely inches away. He twisted quickly toward Ace and threw up a large pistol of his own.

"*Today!*" I could barely hear him yell out, if that even was what he said, since it was so difficult for me to understand any sounds in that moment.

I threw my arms behind myself and hurriedly stepped backward, away from him.

Then, another shot pieced the air.

I froze.

The man collapsed to the floor, his gun falling and hitting the ground alongside him.

Breathing heavily, I touched the cold wall from behind my back and glanced from his body up to Ace.

"You okay?" he questioned, even though his voice was close to inaudible to me, while he stepped into my direction.

I didn't answer and instead stared at him as he stepped around the man that lay before me and made his way up to my side.

"Nesia," he spoke by my ear. "Are you okay?"

I turned gradually toward him and gazed up to his expression.

"I..." I started, barely even able to hear my own voice. "I-I... I don't... I don't really know..."

"Take a breath for a second," he instructed, now taking a step back from me.

I looked him over and nodded. I then gazed down to my feet and took a deep breath.

I scrunched up my face a bit as the hallway fell to silence, forcing my ringing ears into more pain. I waited a number of long moments, until the throbbing sounds at least *started* to subside, and then I looked back up.

"You good, now?" Ace asked, his voice a tad clearer.

I paused before replying.

"No, but... but I'm... I'm good enough," I muttered.

Ace smiled, just a little.

"Okay, well... let's keep moving, then," he proclaimed, now turned and starting to walk back by the side of the body below us.

I took another deep breath, and then followed after him, not looking down once as I paced past the man. After some time, we both reached the end of the hall, where the covered window was.

Ace spun himself around, and then caught gaze of one closed door with a partial window placed in it. I followed his eyes as he peered past the window and saw that, on the other side, a brightly lit, metal staircase could be perceived.

Ace lunged forward at the door, and then proceeded to open it. He swiftly stepped through and, afterward, held it out, until I had made my way through as well. Then, as before, he carefully shut it behind us.

Not that slamming the door could have even been any louder than the gunshot that had just burst my eardrums.

Once all that was accomplished, Ace turned back to the stairs set ahead of me and began to jump up them, one at a time. I went on to do the same behind him, turning at the one platform at the halfway mark and trudging all the way to the door at the end, which I assumed led to the second floor. Once there, then, Ace stepped to the side of it and looked over at me.

"Stay quiet and stay close," he commanded.

I glanced up at him and nodded.

He accepted my nod with one of his own, and then twisted back to the door ahead. He cautiously reached out to the handle and cranked it steadily.

After a moment or two, he pushed the door gently outward and threw his gun upward once more. He waited another few seconds before beginning to step through the doorway.

I stepped directly behind him, keeping myself a close inch or two away.

We both continued to walk, step by step, down the hallway that I could kind of see from around Ace's sides set ahead. From what I could tell, though, the corridor was very similar, if not identical to, the previous one, with the walls the same color, the doors propped open in the same way, and the light shining through a similarly shaded window at the very end. However, this hallway seemed to be a lot more peaceful overall, somehow, than the other. Maybe it was because I was walking at a distance from Ace that felt a little more safe or it was because I had noticed that we managed to walk a full half-length of the hall without any sudden attack by an armed stranger, but I definitely felt more secure, this time around.

Not to jinx it or anything, though.

We proceeded to softly tread down the long corridor, past a number of darkened rooms without any one problem, successfully.

Until I felt the touch of something brush over part of my upper arm, through the sleeve of my jacket.

I froze up for a second, and then gradually turned myself around, still not able to hear anything soft under my ringing ears.

Surprisingly, I saw nothing behind me but the beginning end of the long hallway.

I stood still to observe the area a moment longer, and then started to turn back around.

Then, suddenly, a heavy but muscular man appeared directly in front of me, a gun that looked just like the one the man in the last hallway had possessed in one hand, his eyes staring right into mine.

I jinxed it.

He immediately grabbed at my arm in the exact same place I had felt a touch before and jumped around my side.

"Ace!" I screamed out, my wide eyes glancing toward him as I screeched his name.

I could see him instantly whip around, his gun already aimed into my direction.

Before he even had time to think to shoot, though, a bullet smacked the floor by his feet.

However, it wasn't a shot made by the man holding onto me.

Ace shot his head to his left, and then I witnessed another man, with dark skin and dark clothing, leap out of one of the rooms beside him.

The man who was keeping his grasp on me pulled me backward, forcing me to stumble on my feet as I watched Ace turn to the other man.

I let out an instinctive scream and looked to the side as I felt my captor move his hand from my shoulder to my elbow. I then saw that he was standing directly beside me, glaring right back at me with some type of smirk.

I fell quiet and glanced down at the weapon in his hand for a split second.

And then I reached around my back to grab my own with my one free hand.

Unfortunately, though, my free hand happened to be my left, which is not my dominant hand, so when I whipped my gun back around my side, I found it extremely difficult to hold onto, especially since my body was already shaking uncontrollably.

I focused on steadying my arm as hurriedly as I could but, before I could fully attain a strong, reliable grip, the man let go of my arm, reached out with his own hand, and actually swiped the gun I held away.

I watched as he chucked my weapon down the hallway, behind me.

Uh oh.

He snatched back his hold on my arm, brought his own pistol up to his chest, pointed the barrel of it entirely into my direction, and let his smirk fade away.

Okay... *shit*.

"Ace!" I yelled out, once again, now throwing my body backward, desperately attempting to break the bond between me and the man.

I peered over the man's shoulder at the same time and saw that Ace was struggling to keep possession of his own gun and currently wrestling the other man into the direction of the right wall.

I glanced back at my captor; he still pointed his gun toward me, but he had yet to fire it.

He looked me over a moment as I ceased my efforts to escape and let a rush of tears overpower my vision.

Before I could release my oncoming cry, though, he whipped himself around and threw his armed arm into an outstretched position that pointed in Ace's direction.

Two consecutive gunshots then rang out in the room.

And then the man's hand loosened from my arm.

I held a deep breath as he fell to the floor in front of me.

I glanced up with blurry eyes immediately after to see Ace standing straight ahead, one hand pointing his gun into my direction, the other holding the shirt collar of the other man, who was now pinned against the wall, bleeding heavily from the side of his neck, and appeared to be completely lifeless.

Ace looked directly at me, and then released the grip he held on the man in front of himself, causing him to collapse to the floor in a similar manner as the other had.

"Today just keeps getting better," he muttered, glancing down to the floor below his feet.

I stood entirely still as he turned back to me and took a mere one step into my direction.

"Come on, 'Nesia," he commanded, dryly. "We've gotta keep moving."

As soon as his words left his mouth, he whipped himself back around and began to stride off, down the hall.

However, I remained unmoving.

My heart was still pounding.

"I..." I started, softly, but loud enough for him to hear. "I-I don't know if... I can, Ace."

He slowly stopped and turned back around, even though he was nearly to the end of the hallway by this point.

I shook my head a little as he looked me over.

"What do you mean?" he questioned.

I flickered my eyes down to the fallen man before me, and then quickly switched them over to the wall slightly ahead of me and to the side.

"I... I mean..." I began, shakily. "I don't know if I... if I want to... to keep going."

Ace started to step toward me, unhurriedly.

"Well," he continued to interrogate. "Why not?"

I blinked back any remaining tears that lingered from before, and then answered.

"Because... well," I stopped to search the hallway around me for the rest of my sentence. "Why do you think?"

Ace gradually stopped his pacing, now standing himself a few feet in front of me. He pursed his lips, shook his head, and then placed his hands on his hips, his gun still in one of them.

"I don't know," he stated.

I looked him over for a long moment while I collected my thoughts.

"I..." I began, once again. "I just... I don't think... This just isn't..." I paused to take a breath. "I don't wanna do this anymore."

I stared back at Ace a little longer, waiting for him to reply but, when his words wouldn't come, I decided to go on, myself.

"I don't think I ever really wanted to, actually..."

I glanced down to the unconscious, bleeding man set by my feet.

"It's... It's too much and I... I just," I picked back up, choking back a glob of emotion. "I don't wanna keep feeling like my... my n-next breath is my... my last..."

I inhaled slowly and brought my eyes back up to level with Ace's.

He glared at me without any hint of emotion.

"Fine," he said. "Go on. Give up, now. You make your own decisions. I don't care."

"Ace—" I started my comeback, although I was unable to finish it before he went on.

"No, it's fine. Back out now," he snapped. He took a moment, and then continued even further.

"You probably weren't ever going to stick around long enough to help your parents' case, anyway."

I froze up at the sound of his accusation.

"I," I started, yet again. "I just... I didn't want to end up *like* my parents."

"And you weren't going to," Ace shot back. "But," he stopped, looked to the floor for a second, and then gazed back up at me. "I guess you just don't trust me enough."

"No, I—"

Ace cut me off, once more.

"Here," he spat out, stepping forward and around the man in front of me. He then held out his gun to me, the handle pointing in my direction. "Take it and go back by yourself."

I looked the weapon over, and then he unexpectedly went on.

"This is *my* damn job, anyway. I don't need any help..."

I shot my squinted eyes up to his face as he finished.

"I can do it myself."

I immediately reached out and snatched his gun away.

"And you know what else?" I asked, my own voice now containing minimal expression. "You always say how you... you wanna live like you're in a-a... a cartoon, or something, but... you... you know what?"

"What?" he snapped.

I glared into his eyes as I answered.

"Not all cartoon characters live forever."

I glanced quickly away from his face and spun myself around.

I took one step away but, before I could take another, an unfamiliarly deep voice echoed throughout the long hallway.

"And stop right there."

I froze, instantly.

Confused, I turned gradually back around.

There, at the opposite end of the hall, stood a tall, fair-skinned man with a shiny, bald head and a jet-black suit. Four men who looked very similar to others I had encountered in the building were scattered equally on either side of him, each holding his own gun directly into my direction.

Ace stood, still facing me, in the same place he had last been.

"Good girl," the center man praised, his voice suddenly recognizable to me as the first one I had heard today, from downstairs.

The bossy one.

"Now, drop it," he coaxed.

I quickly complied, throwing my weapon to the ground by my feet.

The man smiled.

"Bring them in," he said, turning himself around soon after.

Then, almost instantly following that, the four men standing around him all lunged into my direction. Two of them broke off to approach Ace by both sides, and the others continued to pace rapidly toward me.

I watched as the two beside Ace grabbed at his upper arms, and then I glanced up at his expressionless features as they spun him around and began to guide him toward the opposite end of the hallway. After that, the remaining henchmen both stepped up to each of my sides and seized me by my arms in a similar manner. Then, they proceeded to pull me forward, leading me down the corridor not far behind the others.

Everyone eventually made their way to an opened doorway at the very end, on the left. I followed obediently, not that I had much choice not to, through it and entered a surprisingly large and mildly lit room, which had even more boxes like the ones downstairs scattered throughout it. Along with that, though, there were also tall metal shelving units placed in between the rows of stacked boxes that were so high they all pretty much touched the ceiling, although they didn't really seem to serve much purpose, since every single shelf I could see was completely empty.

Other than that, some light was allowed to spill in from the cracked window blinds lines up against the far wall and there was a small arrangement of metal folding chairs in the center of the room ahead, which happened to be the only place largely free of any storage mechanisms.

There, sitting in the seat closest to the opposite wall, in front of one of the windows, sat yet another man, looking to be somewhere in his mid-forties, with an older-fashioned business suit and big circular glasses, making him look almost like some type of foreign scientist.

"We were expecting you'd come," the bald... boss, I assume, remarked as the men holding me released their grasps.

I glanced over at him as he spoke, seeing that he was making his way past the circle of seats set up in front of everyone.

"Well, we expected *one* of you, that is," he went on, now grabbing a seat of his own next to the man already resting in the room.

I looked over to my right briefly and noticed that Ace was standing a few feet away, still held by his constrictors.

"But," the head man continued, pulling my attention back to him. "Two for the price of one? I won't complain."

He smiled and the scientist beside him let out a bit too hardy of a laugh.

"Please," he went on even further, after the other's chuckle had subsided. "Take a seat."

Immediately, Ace stumbled forward, and I shot my head into his direction to see his two holders each pushing their hands against his back. After a moment, he straightened out his spine and stepped ahead, soon after sitting down in one of the chairs completely opposite of the other two that currently sat.

"You, too," the boss commanded.

I glanced back to him, saw that he was staring right at me, and opened my mouth to speak.

I think I wanted to say something like, 'um, no, thanks, I'm good', but I opted out of saying a word, probably because there were two hand guns likely already pointed at my backside and I knew there were at least a couple more in the hands of unpredictable strangers also currently in the room.

So, instead, I closed my lips, silently nodded, and then walked forward to cautiously sit down in the chair to the left of Ace.

"You know," the bald man went on, once more, his eyes locked directly onto me. "You have beautiful hair, *Mae*."

I froze up.

"That's not her name," Ace abruptly piped up.

I glanced over at him; he was staring coldly at the two across the room.

"Oh, it's not?" the man shot back.

Ace shook his head, and then responded.

"No."

The man fell quiet for a moment.

"Well then, *miss*," he began, again, switching his eyes back onto me. "Tell me- what is your name?"

I remained still for a second, and then blinked myself out of my frozen trance.

"I-It's, um..." I stuttered out. "Uh... M... M-Mel... *isa*..."

The man squinted at me shortly after, and then formed another subtle smile.

"Well, whatever you prefer to go by, *Miss Brown*," he continued. "I want you to know that I'm just as happy to have you here as I am with *Mr. Barker*."

He turned his attention back to Ace.

"Who, I believe," he carried on. "Has been snooping around recently in the business affairs of others... Is that not right?"

I looked over at Ace; he didn't make a sound.

"Ah, yes, it *is* true..." the man muttered, and then switched his attention to the guard-like guys standing behind Ace and I. "Take him, now."

Immediately after his command, a clatter of noise piped up from behind me, and I spun my head around to see two of the armed men surge toward Ace's chair, a single pair of handcuffs dangling from one's hand. Hurriedly, both of them rounded around each side of Ace's seat, and then the one holding the cuffs reached out to snatch his wrists, which were currently resting in his lap, while the other pointed a gun into his direction.

"Wait," Ace started to protest, although he didn't pull back his hands as the one man tightened one of the clasps of the cuffs around his right wrist.

"It's too late for explanations, Mr. Barker," the boss across the area countered.

Ace fell quiet and stared down at his arms while his left wrist quickly became captured as well.

Soon after that, both men proceeded to grab his upper arms and force him upward to a standing position as well as hold each of their weapons directly at his sides. When they turned to lead him around the side of the chair opposite me, though, Ace resisted.

He glanced up at the men on the other side of the room.

"Don't you *dare* do anything to her," he snapped.

I looked gradually from him to the bald man across the way.

"Oh, we wouldn't dream of it," he said with a slight smirk.

I gazed back to Ace, quickly, and saw his two holders forcibly push him around the far side of his chair.

"Don't do it!" he shouted as he stumbled forward, away from his seat.

"No promises, Mr. Barker, but we'll do the best we can," the boss shot right back.

Ace's captors shoved him into the direction of the door, behind me, but he glanced sharply toward me as he passed by my side.

"Don't let them hurt you, 'Nesia," he said, his eyes piercing right into mine. "Don't you dare let them."

The two holding him threw him out of my sight, and then I turned around more in my chair to watch as they led him out of the open doorway.

A cold silence fell shortly after, as well as an icy, rush-like feeling over my body.

"Well, Miss Brown," the voice of the bald man piped up from the other side of me.

I carefully twisted back around in my seat to look toward him and the silent man that still sat alongside him, my hands grabbing at the cold edges of the metal chair underneath me in the same moment.

"I'm going to give you a small set of options," he continued, now leaning forward and placing his elbows on his knees. "Since it's not really in my best interest to let you back into the world where you can expose me, your first choice is to let me shoot you right here, right now."

My eyes widened, and my heart felt as if it had stopped beating for a moment.

"Or, option B," he went on. "I can give you exactly thirty seconds to vacate this property which, if you fail to do so, will also result in me shooting you." He paused and smiled, eerily. "So, Miss Brown, which will it be?"

I stared at him for a short moment, speechless.

"U-Um..." I started, softly. "Uh, o-option B... p-please..."

"Okay," he responded, leaning back in his seat as he did so. He fell quiet for a moment, and then abruptly continued. "Oh, your time already started, by the way."

He stared blankly at me another second, and then erupted into a fit of laughter.

I looked wildly around, noticing that every other man was following his suit.

Then, suddenly, a hand grabbed me by my right upper arm.

I screamed out as one of the men behind me whipped me around and pulled me toward the doorway.

He pushed me forward, let go of my arm, and made me stagger into the hallway.

I spun myself back around to face him, and then saw that he was facing me, preparing to raise his gun up to eye level.

I screamed, again, and then turned to the left, afterward placing all of my energy into scampering away. Somehow, I managed to actually sprint away from the doorframe and make my way to the opposite end of the hall, where I spotted my previously lost weapon.

Hurriedly, I rushed up to its side and let myself slide across the hard floor as I kneeled slightly down, snatching it up as I passed. After that, I stumbled in getting fully back up to my feet and actually slammed my back against the window in the end wall while I spun myself back around.

I threw the pistol I now held up in front of my face, ready to shoot.

However, the hall in front of me was completely empty.

At least, for a short second.

Immediately, I turned to jump toward the door that I remembered led to the stairwell, my free hand outstretched to it, but, at the same time, I could see the same man that threw me from the previous room step into the corridor from the corner of my eye.

I proceeded to grab at the door handle before me, and then rushingly thrust it inward, my feet afterward stumbling past the doorframe.

Suddenly, a loud pop bounced off of the floor close behind me, and I let out a screech as I lunged toward the stairs ahead.

Hastily, I started to trot downward, moving so fast that I had to grab at the railing beside me every other step to prevent myself from tripping and losing momentum. Then, once I had jumped onto the floor at the very bottom, I could hear the door above let out a sharp creak.

I instantly jerked forward and practically threw myself into the next door to pass, my one hand flipping its handle sideways in the same moment. I then tumbled into the next familiar hallway and turned to sprint directly to the opposite edge of it.

Once I reached the end, I could hear loud footsteps approaching from the other side of the stairwell door.

Immediately after that, I sprung into the closed exit in front of me, much in a similar manner to previously. Once through that obstacle, I continued to forge forward, now finding myself inside of the large storage room where this whole situation had originally started. I then pushed past a few rows of boxes and dashed into the direction of the building's exit point.

At nearly the same moment I had reached it, though, a loud, smack-like noise echoed throughout the entire room and I made the quick decision to throw myself into the door ahead, without the slightest want to turn around and see what had made the sound in the process. After that, I took off across the vast grassy area ahead.

And it did occur to me that the other armed men could have been observing my running path from the windows above and possibly have been preparing to shoot at me from their post but, then I actually remembered, there was currently a six foot adrenalized man chasing after me from not far behind, on foot, so I just made the choice to push onward and take the slim chances at survival that I already had.

Eventually, though, I reached the edge of the spacious area of trees straight ahead, placing me into a place of some type of safety. Once there, then, I began to run a bit more slowly as I weaved my way through the unpredictable arrangement of green wildlife set ahead.

At least an entire minute of my racing by foot passed without any sounds piping up from anywhere behind me, neither near nor far. After a few more long moments, then, I wound myself down a bit more, passed by the backside of the shady magic store from long before, entered another well-sized clearing, and approached the side of a thin, long dirt pathway.

By now, I was down to a quick-paced walk and I started to follow the path to the right, where it led through a cluster of brush and weeds. After a number of moments, I reached the end of it, where a familiar figment of shiny blue sat.

I stepped up to the side of Ace's sporting vehicle, halted, and took a well needed, extremely deep breath.

I think that was, honestly, the most exercise I'd had in... well, ever.

Although, that's just from what I remember.

After a few resting seconds, I walked closer to the driver's side door of the car and reached out to open the door.

But it was locked.

"No," I muttered, trying the handle again.

Still locked.

"No, no," I whined, stepping back a bit.

I twisted myself around, and then rested my back against the side of the door.

I loosened and retightened my fingers on the gun that I still held and titled my head to one side.

I started to stare at the mess of brush a few feet in front of my face and bit my lip, a moment of silence falling around me.

After a few seconds, I pushed myself away from the car, threw my gun up by the side of my face and slapped my opposite hand down to my thigh, completely out of frustration.

"Ugh," I groaned, turning my body back to face the side of the sports car. At the same time, I slid my hand from my mid-thigh to the lower edge of my waist, brushing it over my jean pocket in the process.

And then I remembered something.

I snappily looked back down and threw my left hand over to the opposite front pocket, across my body. I glided my fingers into it a little, and then both grabbed and whipped out the small earpiece it had housed in one motion.

Yes.

I flipped it over in my fingertips a moment, and then made the decision to push the small button on the very top of the device. Immediately after pressing it, a small, red light appeared from one side.

I carefully guided the earpiece up to the side of my left ear.

No sound currently escaped from it.

"Um... hello?" I muttered out.

I waited a few seconds, but no noise came.

"H-Hello?" I went on.

Again, nothing.

I let out a quiet sigh and closed my eyes for a second.

"Hello, Mae, is that you?"

I shot my eyes open and stepped forward.

"Yes! Is this Mel?" I responded.

"Yeah, it's Mel," she mumbled in my ear. "What's going on, Mae? Where's Ace?"

I paused for a moment.

"He's... um..." I started. "Well... um, he's not exactly here, right now, so—"

"Take a deep breath, Mae," Mel cut my words short, and then let out a very distinctive sigh. "I'm on my way."

Chapter Ten

"Had a feeling this would happen," Mel stated as she shuffled her way quickly across the floor in front of me.

"Well, let's just focus on what we can do now," Katie encouraged from her usual seat at her usual desk.

I took a few steps into the room, right behind Mel's trail.

"Well, I'll tell you what we can do right now," Mel started, stopping her pacing a few feet in front of Katie to cross her arms over her chest. "We can either, one, get ourselves killed trying to save *his* ass before something happens to it or, two, get kidnapped and thrown in jail for trying or, three... move far away and get new jobs before either of those things have a chance of happening to us."

I stepped up to the edge of the nearest empty desk to the back of the room as she spoke, and then allowed my body to come to a still, silent stand.

"We're not going to jail," Katie affirmed, turning in her chair a little. "And we certainly are *not* getting killed any time soon." She gazed over at me for a long moment. "Mae, why don't you come tell us exactly *how* everything happened?"

I opened my mouth soon after to respond, but Mel piped up for me, instead.

"She already told me everything on the way back," she shot out. "It was all a set-up."

Katie looked back over at her, quietly.

"Should've known that, though," Mel went on. "Should've known that chance was too good to be true... really, *really* should have."

I looked back and forth between the two for a few seconds, only now actually closing my mouth.

"Mel..." Katie began to coax.

"No," Mel continued, before she had an opportunity to finish. "*You* should have known, *I* should have known... and Ace should have known." She paused. "Not that he would have ever thought of it on his own, anyway, but he *should* have." She glanced toward my direction. "Hell, even *she* probably should have known..." She looked back at Katie, and then concluded. "And she hasn't even been here a whole month!"

She swung her hands up with her finishing statement, and then smacked them down on the tops of her thighs.

I glanced over at Katie; she was gliding her eyes to the ground in front of herself.

"I just," Mel began, again. "I don't know what to do."

Katie flickered her eyes back up to her.

Mel threw her hands up in the air, once more, and then repeated herself.

"I don't know what to do!"

Immediately after that, she threw her hands back down to her sides, whipped herself around, and strode her way to the door across the room. I turned slightly to watch both her exit the area and

step into the hallway, and then twisted back to Katie as the door she had slipped past slammed shut behind her back.

Katie sat still, her eyes glued to the ground, for... quite an extended period of time. After a few moments of which, my eyes started to wander the room and I leaned my weight onto one knee, unsure of... what to do, exactly.

After a well-length forever, though, Katie let out a small sigh and I darted my eyes right back to her.

"Well, Mae," she began as she gazed over to me. She paused to purse her lips before continuing. "You know, Ace will probably be fine and... we'll get him back as soon as we can; it's no big deal."

She turned in her chair for a moment, let a short silence fall once more, and then twisted back toward me.

"In the meantime, though..." she went on. "Why don't you and I have a little... *decompression* time?"

I looked her over as she gave me a sideways wink.

"Um," I started back. "Like... what, exactly?"

Katie smiled.

"Oh, it'll be fun," she stated. "You'll see."

—

"Yes, thanks for the ride!" Katie cheered from behind me as I stepped away from the side of the car and turned around.

I watched as she slid across the leather seats and into my direction.

"Y'all ladies have a good time, naw," I could hear the elderly, bearded driver say from behind the tinted front windows that shielded his face from outside.

"Thank you!" Katie responded, now stepping onto the sidewalk in front of me.

She slung her pink and white lace purse over her shoulder, and then grabbed the edge of the open, dirtied red door next to her.

"And be sure—" the man inside the car continued. Before he could finish speaking, however, Katie slammed the tattered door behind her back, promptly shutting off all current communication with him.

"No, I will *not* be sure to send a picture of me next to the broken airplane fountain to your wife," Katie mumbled while she stepped up to my side.

I let out a tiny chuckle as she slid her black-framed sunglasses over her eyes.

"Okay, Mae, where to, first?" she asked, now pacing forward, away from me.

"Um," I began to answer as I looked up at the long, wide walkway ahead. "Anywhere, really, I guess."

I started to step into Katie's footsteps, now glancing around to read the signs above a few of the buildings that surrounded the sidewalk area. One said, 'Victoria's Secret' and another read, 'Old Navy', both being places I actually knew existed. When I read yet another that said, 'Hand Jobs: Best Nail Salon Around', though, I was caught a little off-guard.

"Have you ever been to a taxidermy shop?" Katie asked, turning around to face me at the same time.

I glanced blankly back at her.

"No," I responded.

"Me neither," she smiled. "Let's check it out."

She turned back around and stepped along the right side of the sidewalk ahead, only pivoting toward the buildings next to us after a certain point. I quickly caught back up to her side and turned as well, now noticing that a propped open door sat in front of us, next to a large display window, which only actually displayed a small cardboard sign with the words 'taxidermy makes our earnings!' scribbled on it in red crayon.

Katie removed her sunglasses, collapsed them into her hand, and then made her way through the doorway to the store.

I squinted through the sunlight at the dark floor beyond the doorframe for a moment before following after her.

Once I had stepped inside, I glanced around at my surroundings.

I thought people only did taxidermy with deer heads, indoor cats, and pet dogs but, *clearly*, I was wrong.

Every single category, breed, and slight genetic difference of every non-extinct animal had become mummified, given a price tag, and placed onto a shelf somewhere in this room.

"Oh, look at this," Katie cooed, drawing my attention to where she stood, which was in the corner on the near right.

I paced up to her side and gazed downward at the creature in her palms.

A frozen blue jay with its wings spread completely outward and its beak in an open position.

"Oh, wow," I forced out, although my forged enthusiasm probably wasn't as convincing as it should have been.

Katie twisted the bird in her hands a moment more, and then set it back onto the glass cabinet top in front of herself. She turned to the left and began to walk farther into the store, so I did the same.

After just a step or two, though, she halted and pointed above her head.

"Oh, look," she urged as I glanced up at the unmoving spotted owl that hung from merely a thin string attached to a ceiling tile.

"Oh, my..." I, again, barely managed out.

Katie stepped forward, once more, and didn't stop again until we both reached the back-right corner of the shop, right next to a vacant glass sales counter.

"All of this stuff is crazy," she commented, now spinning around to head leftward.

"Oh, yeah, it's just..." I added as I stepped back to let her past my side. "It's *insane*, I mean, it's..."

I turned around to face a deceased cheetah pouncing toward me, its mouth forever stuck in a hungry growl.

"Yikes," I muttered.

I hurriedly turned toward Katie and followed her to the center aisle of the store, now noticing that two elderly men were conversing over a piece of... well, a dead animal for sale, I assume, near the other wall of the store.

"Could you lower it down a bit?" one of their voices inquired.

"Nah," the other replied. "*Seven hundred* is the lowest I go."

Katie made her way to the front of the store, walking more efficiently than before, and then turned back around to face me.

"Well, have you seen enough?" she asked.

"I've seen plenty," I shot back.

"Okay," she said with a smile, now beginning to exit the store.

Thank God.

Once I had also stepped back outside, I turned slightly to the right, somewhat in an attempt to shield my eyes from the blazing sun, but mostly because that was also the direction Katie began to move into. I watched her as she replaced her shades over her eyes and stepped along the sidewalk ahead, and then decided to do the same, minus the sunglasses thing.

"Banana Republic, Forever 21, Bath and Body Works," Katie listed off as I stepped up to her side. "Marion's Furniture, Kaylee's Cupcakes..."

After hearing the final two foreign names, I glanced up, squinted desperately, and saw each of the names she had just read on signs hung over the pathway in front of us, each sticking out from a separate building.

Then, suddenly, Katie halted, let out a dramatic gasp, turned to me, grabbed both of my shoulders, and spun me toward herself.

"Mae," she began, an excited smile forming between her cheeks. "What if *I* got you a *brand new* pair of shoes?"

I studied her animated anticipation for a split second, and then forced out a tiny squeal of enthusiasm.

"Of course!" I replied.

"Woo-hoo!" she shouted, now seizing my left wrist and turning to jog along the sidewalk once more.

I hurried along behind her, not that I had much choice in the matter to not to, since she had a surprisingly strong grip on me. Soon enough, though, Katie swerved us to the right and came to a slight stop to let my hand go as well as open the glass door that we now stood in front of. As she did so, I glanced past her to take in the image of what must have been a billion rows of chest-

high cabinets (well, chest-high to me) and the endless count of shoes in every different type and color that lined their tops.

As soon as Katie and I were both able to step inside the store, Katie turned to the right and rushed over to a section of footwear which was full of embellished heels and wedges.

"Oh, look at these," she cooed, now stepping down the row while her one hand ran gently across the tops of each of the shoes. "I haven't been able to wear anything like these out in a long time."

My eyes fell onto one red, shiny shoe with a flip flop-like structure and a stiletto on it that had to have been at least five inches high.

"I don't think I could ever walk in any of these," I commented.

Katie halted and looked back at me from over her shoulder.

"Have you ever tried?" she questioned.

I paused to think for a moment.

"I... can't remember," I eventually said.

Katie giggled.

"Oh, of course, *Miss Amnesia*," she laughed out.

She then twisted back around and stepped father into the store as I followed, both of us passing an older woman along the way.

"Well," she piped up, again, once we had reached the far end of our row. She reached down to grab the edge of the cabinet beside us, whipped herself around the corner of it, and then glanced over at me. "I know the *exact* kind of shoes *you're* gonna need."

I raised my eyebrows at her while she spun around and paced over to the next row. I stepped swiftly behind her, and then stopped at the same moment that she did, directly in front of a long arrangement of knee-high boots.

"These," she finished.

I looked from the organization of footwear to her focused expression.

"Um..." I began. "Isn't it a little... you know, *hot*... outside... to wear boots... right now?"

Katie gazed over at me and smiled.

"Yes, but..." she paused to pick up a brown boot with buckles and jewels embroidering its leg.

"You know how much more stuff you can fit in these things?" She put the shoe back down and stepped back to look at the stack of orange-colored boxes underneath the countertop. "I mean, gadgets, and gizmos, and gear..." She turned back toward me as she completed her explanation. "It might be hot out, yes, but... suck it up, buttercup, you could really use a pair of these!"

I looked her over and tilted my head to the side.

I guess you couldn't argue much with that.

"Okay, now," she went on, grabbing a lone, black leathered stiletto boot with a three-inch heel and a long shoelace winding up its front. "Try this on."

"Uh, no, thank you," I stated, shaking my head.

"And why not?" she inquired, her eyes flickering over to mine. "What's wrong with it?"

I answered within, pretty much, a fiftieth of a second.

"Everything."

Katie smiled and rolled her eyes, now turning to pick up a different one.

"How about this one?" she asked, holding up a sleek, tan boot that was very similar to the last, except for the fact that it was plain and held no laces.

"No," I declared, a hint of stubbornness probably felt in my voice by now. "No heels."

Katie let out a sound of offense.

"Well," she started, stepping a little farther down the row. "You know what? You're gonna at least *try* a pair of heels on... whether you want to or not." She glanced at me from over her shoulder. "And, Little Miss Mae, at your height... you might find adding a few more inches could be to your benefit."

I pursed my lips and didn't respond.

"Now," she picked back up as she reached for a tall, shiny black boot with nothing on it but one zipper and the outline of a wedge-like heel on its bottom. "Try this one on. It's a wedge, so it's like a heel, but easier to walk in."

She twisted around and handed the shoe over to me. I looked it over in my hands for a second, and then stepped to the side and took a seat on a nearby cushioned stool.

"Is it the right size?" I asked, still closely studying it.

"Should be," Katie replied. "You wear a six, don't you?"

I set the shoe down on the floor underneath me and squinted up at her.

"How did you know what size I wear?"

Katie smiled, again, and crossed her arms.

"It was just a guess," she said.

I raised one eyebrow and lowered my expression back down to the shoe. I then kicked the plain grey flat I wore off of my right foot and proceeded to slip the long-legged boot over my bare toes. I leaned forward to zip up the tiny metal zipper on the side, and then threw my leg outward to observe the result.

"Here's the other one," Katie proclaimed, throwing the opposite boot down by my side.

I continued to put it on the other foot in a similar manner and, when I was ready, grabbed the edges of the chair underneath me, extended my arms, and pushed myself up to a stand.

"Walk over here," Katie ordered, pointing to the floor beside her, just a few feet away.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I did just that, and, afterward, glanced up at a waist-high mirror by her side.

I stepped back and admired the shiny knee-high boots that overlapped with my plain black leggings.

"Black on black," Katie observed. "I like it."

I turned in place a little and we both looked them over a few more moments, up until the point when Katie screeched with joy.

"Alright, let's get 'em!" she yelled.

I turned to face her as she tossed a large, light brown box into my direction. I caught it swiftly, and then made my way back over to the chair behind her. I proceeded to sit, remove the shoes, put them neatly back in their captivity, place my original shoes back on my feet, and follow Katie up to the front of the shop with the shoe box in-hand.

Once there, then, Katie walked up to a slightly messy countertop with a young, dark-skinned woman with large framed glasses behind it and swiped the box away from me.

"Did you find everything okay?" the woman politely inquired.

"Oh, yes, perfectly," Katie answered, handing her the box and removing her purse from her shoulder.

I turned to the right, leaned on one hip, and looked the rest of the store over as Katie continued to purchase the shoes.

"That'll be forty-five fifty-two," the woman's voice declared.

After a few more quick moments, I turned back to see Katie already taking a large plastic bag from the lady.

"Receipts in the bag; have a nice day," she concluded.

"Thank you," Katie said, now stepping aside to make her way to the door.

I followed after her and glanced down to read the words on the side of the bag, which seemed to read something like 'AS Shoes'.

"Okay, now," she spoke while she threw the door in front of us and stepped outside. "Food? Lunch?"

We both turned right and walked down the sidewalk beside the stores ahead.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Okay," Katie went on, now stepping to the left to enter a large area where two wide walkways crossed over each other. I followed after her and stared at the humongous coin fountain that sat in the very center of everything, one that seemed to have a broken top. "There's a nice little Chinese place over this way."

I glanced up at the moderate number of people that were either gathering around the water fountain or passing by like we currently were. I noted that there were many middle-aged women dressed in high-end clothing, a few men traveling alone in the same age group, and an endless count of young, full families.

I also witnessed a young man who did not seem to fit into any of the mentioned categories abruptly bump into an older woman from the opposite side of the fountain that was now near my side.

"Sorry, ma'm!" he yelled out while, at the same time, covering the receiver of the cell phone that he, apparently, was currently using.

The woman was forced to tumble backward a bit and dropped two of her shopping bags onto the ground below.

What a jerk.

The woman proceeded to bend down and retrieve her dropped items. The man also leaned down to, I guess, help her and placed his free hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, wanna throw in a coin?" Katie asked, suddenly stopping in front of me and turning around to show her usual subtle smile.

I threw my attention back over to her.

"Sure, yeah," I responded, forcing a tiny smile back at her.

She proceeded to pull her purse from her shoulder and rummage through it. At the same time as her diligent search, I stepped closer to the fountain and gazed back over at the scene of the man and middle-aged woman.

"No, it's fine," the woman said, a tad sourly, as she stood herself back up.

The young man stood up beside her and it was then that I realized he was slowly slipping his one hand out of her shoulder bag, something small clutched in it in the process.

I stared as the woman stormed off, away from the fountain, and while the man slipped the little something into his front jean pocket.

"Okay, I know I have change in here somewhere," Katie mumbled by my side. She then stepped forward and dropped her purse onto the concrete edge of the fountain in front of me to look more thoroughly through it.

I stepped back slightly, since she had kind of just obstructed my view of the suspicious man, and returned my eyes back onto him. I watched him closely as he put the phone back up to his ear, although he didn't speak another word into it, and turned around to walk more toward our side of the fountain.

Then, again, as he passed by another man who was occupied with holding a young child by the fountain's edge, he bumped into his side and removed his phone from the side of his face.

"Oh, sorry, sir," he apologized and, at the same moment the words left his mouth, his free hand quickly reached into the other man's back shorts pocket.

He whipped out a small brown wallet, twirled it around in his fingers, and then slid the money holder into his own back pocket.

"Oh, no, you're fine," the other man, completely oblivious, replied from over his shoulder.

"Oh, here's some dimes," Katie piped up, although I ignored my urge to respond to her.

Instead, I kept my focus on the young man that was returning his cell phone to his cheek and pacing this way.

"H-H..." I began to mumble, far too inaudibly to really do anything with.

Then, I saw the man turn slightly to his left and start to walk the opposite direction of the fountain.

"H... H..." I went on bumbling. I took a deep breath after a second, though, and then yelled out in his direction. "Hey!"

"Mae, what's wrong?" I could hear Katie inquire.

"H-Hang on," I muttered to her without taking my eyes away from the man. I then began to step into his direction, hurriedly. "Hey, you!"

When he didn't stop or turn around, I stepped a little more quickly,

"Hey!" I continued. "Hey, you, man, guy!"

Suddenly, he threw the phone down by his side and took off in a sprint down the sidewalk ahead.

Immediately, I fell into a run not too far behind him.

"Hey, stop!" I shouted, now chasing his footsteps. "Stop!"

He hurried along in a straight line, past a few stores, and then abruptly turned and flew around a corner of one of the buildings on the left side of the wide path.

I followed directly behind him, about ten feet away.

Once around the side of the store, I saw him run to the very end of the thin alleyway that I was now inside of. He turned to the right and disappeared once more, so I proceeded to do the same.

After that, I found myself on the backside of a long row of shops with nothing but a large, partially full parking lot on my left side. I sprinted on with as much strength as I had, which was actually a lot more than I had anticipated. After a few more short moments, I saw him turn right, again, around another corner. Once I reached that point, though, I paused to see him turn left at the end of another tiny alley, and then an idea managed to strike me.

I turned forward once again and took off, continuing to run along the backside of the buildings as fast as I possibly could. Then, once another alleyway reached my right side, I turned into it and rushed to the opposite end.

After that, I halted and twisted to the right, where the man was a mere few feet away from ramming into my side.

"Stop!" I reiterated, now turning toward him.

He caught sight of me, skidded to a stop, and then turned around to take off back the other way.

I lunged toward him and screeched out, again, this time letting my voice reach an unusually high pitch.

"*Stop!*"

Before he could even take three full steps away from me, though, I had reached his backside and made the decision to...

Well, I jumped onto him.

"Ugh!" I screamed out as I threw my arms over his shoulders and latched myself onto his back.

"Get off me!" he shouted out, whipping himself back and forth in an attempt to throw me off.

However, I wasn't planning on going anywhere.

"No! You..." my voice trailed as I thought of the real reason I was in this situation. "Y-You give back the stuff!"

"Get off!" he repeated, completely ignoring my requests.

My hands started to slip from the collarbone underneath his thin red tee shirt, so I threw both of my feet over his legs and pulled myself up to an almost piggy-back-like style of hold on him.

"Not... until..." I shakily yelled. "You... give back the money and... the stuff!"

I threw my head up as he twirled his body around once more and noticed that a crowd of people were running toward the two of us, a man in a security uniform at the front of it.

"Ugh!" he continued to shout out, now stepping backward and ramming his backside, a.k.a. me, into the brick wall of a building nearby.

"Ah!" I screamed, pulling myself further up on him at the same time rather than letting go.

He then grabbed at my hands and tried to pry them off of his shoulders.

Like I said, though, I wasn't planning on getting off of him just quite yet.

"Freeze!" a different male voice shouted out from close by.

However, neither I nor the man I was currently latched onto froze.

"Officer, help, she's attacking me!" he yelled.

Oh, please.

"He has stuff!" I shot out, currently unable to move my head into a position where I could see anything but the brown, shaggy hair on the back of the guy's head, since I was kind of slipping downward again.

"I said *freeze!*" the deep voice repeated, now much nearer than before.

And then, suddenly, the uniformed man appeared from around the, well, *other* man's side and looked directly at me.

"Miss, get down, please," he commanded, now grabbing at the man's upper arm.

I slowly slid myself down to the ground below.

"H-He has stuff!" I said to the security guard. "He stole people's stuff!"

"Is this true, sir?" the guard asked, turning to the man he held onto.

"No, I don't have any idea what she's talking about," he calmly stated.

"Check his pockets!" I ordered.

"She was attacking me, officer!" the man proclaimed, his words almost overlapping with mine.

The officer looked him over for one short second.

"She really was, I swear!" the man went on.

"Yeah, right," the security guard concluded.

"But you saw her, officer!"

While he spoke, I snuck one hand into his back pocket and slipped the brown wallet he had taken out of hiding.

"Here, he stole this," I claimed, now holding the holder out to the officer beside me. He looked over at me after I had spoken, and then took it from my hand.

He flipped it open with one hand and studied a few of its contents.

"Are you Bret Robinson?" he asked. "And six foot two with dark brown skin?"

He glanced up at the light-skinned man with a short stature that stood in front of him.

The man fell quiet for a second, and then piped up.

"Y-Yeah, I am."

I looked over at the officer as he rolled his eyes.

"Come on," he said, now stepped around his backside to retrieve both of his hands.

I walked around to his front and stepped a bit away from him. I glanced up at his face a moment and he looked back momentarily, although he swiped his eyes away quickly after.

"Thank you, miss," the guard spoke to me as he pushed the man over to his side. "You... You've got quite a lot of courage for... such a little lady."

He then turned around and guided the man down the sidewalk.

I twisted around as well and came face-to-face with a large, dismembering herd of people along with a glowing Katie.

"Good Lord, Mae," she commented to me as she stepped up to my side. "That was awesome, though, really."

She started to pace slowly down the sidewalk by the stores on the left and I followed quietly beside her.

"You know what else, though?" she continued to question. "Right when I saw you take off running after that guy, I threw my little dime into the fountain and thought to myself, 'I hope Mae isn't about to get herself killed or anything', and... I guess I must've got my wish!"

I let out a little giggle alongside her and came up with a reply but decided not to say it out loud.

Because *I* wished Ace could have been there to see me do that.

I took a deep breath as I bent over and tucked the top blanket neatly under the mattress by my waistline. I then stepped back a bit, snatched Moo-riah Carey from the ground by my feet, and placed her nicely on top of the covered pillow.

After that, I turned around, made my way past the organized desktop of the nearby dresser, across the clear floorboards, and over to the closed door of my bedroom. Once there, I drew it open, stepped into the hallway, turned right, and paced toward the propped open doorway at the very end of it.

"Good morning," I cheered as I stepped into the familiar kitchen area.

"Morning, Mae," Mel, more dryly, responded from the table on the right. I glanced over at her as she spoke and saw that both of her elbows were propped onto the tabletop, each one of her palms cradling her chin above them, and her eyes were glued to a thick stack of printed papers underneath herself.

"Pancake?" I could hear Katie question from my side. I looked over to her, then, to see her offering a Styrofoam plate with a round, flat brown cake the size of a baseball on it into my direction.

"Sure," I said, now taking the plate from her hands.

After that, she turned back around and continued some type of work at the counter beside herself. I decided to spin back toward Mel and step up to a chair across from her side.

"What's that?" I asked as I studied the paper in front of her, pulled the chair backward, and took a seat in it.

"Well," Mel began while she scratched the side of her nose. "Mae..."

Her voice trailed off before she could finish, so I turned my head back to center and stared down at the pancake that sat before me.

I really hoped Katie didn't use as much vinegar this time.

Then, realizing I had no eating utensil to use, I looked the cake over a few seconds more and, afterward, made the decision to just reach out and pick it up with my hands. I folded the plain pancake in half, similar to a taco, and shoved a good portion of it into my mouth.

"How comfortable do you think you would be with..." Katie piped up, suddenly appearing by Mel's side from the corner of my eye. "Doing a little agent work... *solo*?"

I set the tiny remains of my pancake back onto my plate, chewed the contents of it in my mouth down to a more compressed amount, and then gazed over at both Katie and Mel.

"Um," I started, chewing furiously at the same time. "Not very much..."

Katie nodded her head in understanding and looked down at the papers set before Mel, which she actually had not glanced up from once yet.

"But," I continued, forcing Katie's attention quickly back. "I would still do it in a heartbeat."

Katie smiled.

"Well, good," Mel chimed in, now actually making eye contact with me. "Because, now, we've got the perfect opportunity for you."

Chapter Eleven

"Turn right and it should be right there," Mel informed me from her comfortably cushioned desk chair.

Granted, I couldn't currently see her figure, but that's the only image of her I could conjure up when I heard her voice send commands through my ear.

"Okay," I muttered out, barely over the soft purr of the mini motorcycle underneath my body.

I gritted my teeth and carefully guided the handlebars of my vehicle around the sharp corner of the empty street intersection in front of me.

"You know, Mae," Mel went on. "Just because you drive a souped-up moped doesn't mean you get to ignore stop signs whenever you feel like it."

"Oh, sorry," I spat out as I squeezed both of the levers underneath my palms, bringing myself to a slightly slower speed as I came up to a row of brick buildings and parallel parked cars, all on the right side of the road, under the black sky.

"Now, you should be able to park in a little parking lot near there, somewhere..." Mel told me.

I searched the area of the street ahead from behind my clear eye shield, although it was kind of annoying that I had to look past the reflection of the dim street lights as well the entire time.

I drove a little farther along, and then the scene of a young, bearded man conversing with three tall girls in short, tight multicolored dresses in front of one of the building's doorways caught my attention. The man was handing one of the women a container that was unmistakably shaped like a large, unlabeled pill bottle while she blew a puff of smoke into his face.

"Oh, please tell me I don't have to do *that* tonight..." I commented aloud.

"Do what?" Mel inquired.

I, of course, forgot that Mel couldn't also see what I saw, so I ignored her question and continued down the right side of the street until I came across a fenced, nearly full parking area with an open gate and a sign that said 'Parking for paying customers ONLY'. Whether or not I was a paying customer, I didn't really know, but also didn't really care at the moment; I just wanted to get off my bike before my luck with it ran out and caused me any broken bones.

So, slowly, I glided the motorcycle to the right and rolled onto a dirt path that led past the gate to the lot. After that, I drove to the back, past a number of full rows, and found a sliver of a parking spot open behind a dumpster.

I have to admit, it was kind of trashy, but it still worked.

After I braked the moped, I reached down, shut off its engine, slid my body down from its side, and kicked the metal resting stand out from in between the two wheels. I then removed my helmet, placed it on top of the seat in front of me, prayed no one would steal it by the end of the night, snatched the key from the ignition of the bike, turned around, and took off on foot down the dirt path I had come in on.

"Okay, Mel, I'm here," I declared as the brand-new heels of my black boots smacked the gravel underneath them.

Once I reached the entrance of the parking area, I brought myself down to a slow walk and turned around the corner of the building on my left.

"Okay, so, now, just go to the entrance and show your I.D. You still have that, don't you?" Mel spoke to my eardrum.

I halted.

"Um," I started, now patting each of the pockets placed on my dark blue skinny jeans. Soon enough, though, I was able to whip a tiny, white plastic card out from its containment near my right hip. "Yeah, I do, don't worry."

I looked down at the card and continued to walk forward as I read 'ILLINOIS DRIVER'S LICENSE', 'DOB 05/27/1995', and 'AMANDA N ROBERTS' as well as studied the picture of me sporting a facial expression similar to that of a serial killer printed next to all of the false information. After a few distracted steps, I glanced back upward and saw the same bearded man I had before standing in the middle of the sidewalk far ahead, this time talking to a casually dressed man of about his same age.

I took a deep breath and, apparently, Mel must have heard it.

"You can do this, Mae," she encouraged. "Don't back out, now; you'll be fine."

"Well, maybe," I whispered back to her.

She didn't reply after that, though, and I soon began to reach the backside of the man with the beard.

"Have a good one," he saluted to the other man beside him, who was now passing through the doorway of the windowless building on the left. I both watched and listened as the door he slipped past momentarily swung open to reveal a passage to seizure-inducing lights and stereo-bursting electronic music.

"Well, hello, little missy," the man left standing in front of me greeted, his voice in a state of disturbingly deep growling.

I whipped my wide eyes back to him and stared at his eerie smile a moment while he crossed his arms over his black skull tee shirt.

"Um," I started, my own voice probably as shaky as ever. "I-I'm m-meeting a, uh, a few friends in... in there, tonight, so, if you just, um, you know..."

He looked me over, a little too closely, before I threw the hand holding my identification card up to display in front of him.

"Ain't no way you're old enough to be roaming 'round here this late," he remarked, his eyes not once even glancing toward my card.

I moved my own eyes between his rough facial features and the piece of plastic for a few seconds.

"B-But..." I began to protest. "I am, though. Just look!"

"Don't need to; I already know it's faked," he stated.

He abruptly uncrossed his arms and stepped closer to me.

I took a step back and dropped my hand down to my side.

"I'd suggest you get out of here before somebody comes along and tries to take advantage on you," he grumbled.

"Mae," Mel piped up from my earpiece. "Walk away from him."

Then, suddenly, a hand gently touched my right shoulder.

Only, it wasn't *his*.

I looked to the right quickly, but no one was there. Then, I glanced to the left, where I noticed the appearance of a tall, slender man with a cigarette in his mouth and a fedora on his head. A mess of long, tangly brown locks fell onto his shoulders, which were covered by a leather jacket, and a pair of clearly unnecessary blue sunglasses shielded his eyes.

"Hey, hands away from my girl, dog," he spat out in some version of a British accent, his hand now actually grabbing onto my shoulder.

"What the hell?" I could hear Mel mutter.

My thoughts exactly.

"Oh, is she *yours*, now?" the untrimmed man in front of me questioned.

"Yeah, so back off, *be-yotch*," the other guy shot back, his voice oddly in a much, *much* higher tone than before. He stopped to take the cigarette away from his lips and blew a thin layer of smog directly into the man's beard. "I'll take *the it* from here, *sí?*"

Just then, he tugged on my shoulder a bit, and stepped to the side of the man.

Without much choice, I stepped forward, along with him.

"Don't either of you dare step into that club," the bearded man warned.

"Too bad for you, *mister amigo!*" the mess of a man pulling me alongside himself screamed out. Immediately after that, though, he pressed his mouth directly against the outside of my left ear and whispered to me. "You're a-have to gonna give me a little special something for this later, babe."

Eek.

I tilted my head over to the right after he spoke, forcing his lips off of me.

"Stop right there," I could hear the other man growl at us.

"*What?*" my holder actually *whined* out while he let go of me and turned around to face the other man.

I spun around in a similar suit and saw the man's black beard sway back and forth as he stomped into our direction. I stepped back a bit, sliding my I.D. back into my back pocket at the same time, and then watched as he lunged forward and grabbed at the other man's throat, forcing his hat to fly onto the ground below.

Both of them yelled out, surprisingly in similar tones, as the one man pushed the other against the brick wall close behind him.

I looked quickly from the two's beginning brawl to the closed door a few feet to their left.

"What going on? Are you okay, Mae?" Mel pressed.

Instantly, I jumped forward and slipped myself up to the door a few feet away. Hurriedly, then, I threw it open, stepped through, and then slammed it shut behind my back.

A pounding pulse of bass and stench of alcohol mixed with who knows what else filled the air around me. I glanced around as a numerous amount of people pushed past me and the exaggerated blinking of multicolored lights lit up the darkness that was everywhere.

"I'm... um, *in*," I stated.

Suddenly, a band of college-aged boys by my right side decided to let out the loudest chorus of laughs I had ever heard, and then two in the group stepped backward and simultaneously ran into me. I stepped quickly backward, also, and escaped their path. However, in the process of doing so, I found myself ramming my backside into a section of a nearby wall, which prevented me from stepping any further. After that, a quartet of young, screaming and giggling women flew past me, each holding a glass full of some type of beverage in either one or both of their shaky hands. Needless to say, as each of them ran past, the liquids they carried spilled frantically out of their containers and probably ninety-one percent of those lost fluids ended up splashing onto the front of my white and blue striped tank top.

"Okay, good job. Now, find the gambling room," Mel instructed of me soon after that.

I pursed my lips and slowly brushed the front of my shirt before softly responding to her.

"Copy that..."

I then stepped forward and pushed my way past a cluster of chattering people, a brown card table that was completely covered in blue solo cups, a tall man in an oversized peacoat taking a lengthy drag on something that definitely wasn't a cigarette, and an empty doorframe with ripped, purple paper streamers hanging from its upper edge. After that, I gazed around and saw that the room I had next stepped into was much less crowded and had absolutely no flashing lights in it. However, it did have a number of red tinted beams pointed at one corner, which happened to be sporting a mini stage area and three silver poles that stretched all the way from the floor to the ceiling.

Currently, a deeply tan woman with brown, pixie-cut hair and nothing but a red, lacy bikini bottom on was performing a dance in that very corner.

"Yeah, honey!" one man in the crowd standing in front of the stage area yelled out, immediately after another one had whistled.

"Oh my God," I mumbled, now turning quickly into the opposite direction.

I sped to the other corner of the room, where a tiny bar area and closed door sat. I first looked at the door, noticed that a little window was formed in the middle of it, although the room on the other side was just as dark as this one, so it didn't really help much, and then glanced over at the short bar countertop, where a young, slightly attractive man in a black suit and bow tie was sorting through a shelf of about a million different bottles of alcohol on the other side of it. A moment after I finished looking him slowly over, he spun around and glanced back at me.

"Well, hello," he greeted with a smile.

"H-Hi," I stuttered back, preparing to turn around and walk hurriedly away.

"How 'bout a drink?" he asked, before I even had the chance to move. "You look like you could really use one."

"Um, n-no, thanks," I paused to force a smile back. "I... I don't drink, really."

That was probably a pretty good observation, though.

"Well," he began, leaning one hand onto the counter in between us. "I've heard that one plenty times before..." He stopped to grab something from underneath the bar top. "But, don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

He flashed me a wink as he slammed onto the countertop an empty, red plastic cup and a tall, clear glass bottle with a label that read 'Absolut Vodka' on its frontside. He then tilted the capless bottle toward the cup and began to pour a hefty amount of liquid into it.

"Here," he went on, now placing the substance's container upright once more. "This one's on the house, straight up."

He grabbed the cup and stretched his hand into my direction.

"Uh... thanks?" I questioned, taking the cup cautiously from him.

"My pleasure," he responded.

I looked at the cup, then back to the man, smiled slightly, and turned around, just as a young couple was calmly entering the room from the closed door with the dark window not too far away. I then rushed over to them and took a hold on the door, afterward stepping through to enter a much quieter setting.

Once I had shut the door behind my back, I paced forward and saw that a few floor lamps were surrounding a large, black grand piano. No one else was currently in the small room, other than myself and a thin, dark-skinned man sitting at the instrument.

Abruptly, a long string of intricately interwound musical notes started to fill the air.

I walked over to the side of the piano and stared as the man playing it trickled his fingertips up and down the black and white keys that adorned it.

He went on for a good full thirty seconds, and then finished the short tune with five loud chords.

After he fell to silence, I stepped forward and spoke up to him.

"That was... that was *so* good!"

He turned his head to the side to look at me.

"You t'ink?" he asked, his voice heavily accented with something I really didn't recognize.

"Yeah, it was... great, yeah, really..." my voice trailed off. "I... I mean, I would, you know, put some money in your hat, or something..." I paused and motioned with one hand to the wool cap over his forehead. "But, I, um, don't exactly have any money, so..." I lowered my eyes downward. "Well, *here*."

I reached my red cup out to him.

He took it, smiling.

"T'ank you, my de'r," he thanked.

"Yeah," I replied, taking a step back. "Just keep on... doing... you know, *that*."

I smiled back at him, and then turned to walk to the next closed door.

"Making friends, tonight, Mae?" Mel questioned, catching me a bit off-guard.

I grabbed the handle of the door in front of me and swung it open after she had spoken.

A cloud of bitter smog struck me immediately.

"Well, uh," I began to reply to her, now stepping into the next room, which was partially quiet and slightly lighter than any other I had been in, while forcing back the urge to cough up a lung. "Aren't I... supposed to?"

I scanned the new wide area as I talked and noticed that a pool table with a crowd beside it was in one corner and a few card tables with a number of... well, card players sitting around each one were lining the rest of the room. Oh, and a young man and woman were both in the process of undressing on top of each other on a sofa in another corner.

"I think I'm there..." I mumbled.

"In the gambling room?" Mel questioned. She went on, though, before I could have even really answered. "Okay, good. Now, do you see *him*?"

I stepped a little more into the center of the semi-crowded room and glanced around.

"Um..." I muttered as I studied a number of unrecognizable faces in every direction that was close by. "N—"

Then, suddenly, a strong hand grabbed my left shoulder and forced me to turn completely around.

Of course.

"Hey, Jen, there you are!" a tall, bulky man in a red v-neck and dark skinny jeans, sporting a blue solo cup in his free hand, exclaimed from directly in front of my face.

I raised my eyebrows up at him.

"Uh, I-I," I started to stutter out. "I...I'm not... *Jen*, sorry..."

The man quickly took his hand off me and raised it up to cover his mouth, his eyes widening in the same moment.

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," he apologized, now removing his hand to take a sip of his drink. "Hey, let me buy you a drink, though."

A warm smile crept across his face.

"Oh, I..." I began, pausing to force a smile back. "No, thanks, I don't drink."

He kept his smile firmly in position as he replied.

"Oh, don't worry, I won't tell anybody. What do you like? Beer? A martini?"

I looked him over for a second.

"I... I don't drink, so—"

"Oh, yeah," he suddenly shot back. "*Right*... I'll surprise you, then." He paused to put his one hand up in a 'stop' kind of gesture. "Just hang tight a second."

He then spun himself and took off toward a closed door on the opposite side of the room, one of which I had not come from.

I let out a little sigh as Mel piped up once again.

"Mae, you do know that you can still get a DUI while driving a moped, right?"

She let out a tiny laugh in my ear.

"Yeah, well..." I whispered back as my eyes wandered onto a significantly large group of people beside the left wall. I watched as a few of them stepped aside and revealed to me a short card table with a mound of poker chips lumped onto the top of it as well as a young, but balding, man sitting behind all of it.

I immediately reached up, touched the side of the earpiece in my ear, and took a half step backward.

"M-Mel," I breathed out. "I see him."

"You do?" she questioned, although she, unsurprisingly, continued instructing me without receiving an answer. "Okay, good. Now, is he drinking anything?"

I stepped to the side a little as a pair of women pushed past my side.

"Uh," I responded as I glanced back at the table and pulled my hand back down to my side. "I can't really tell... but he's smoking, like, a cigar, or something."

"Okay, well," Mel went on. "Try to get closer to him, then."

I gave a little nod, even though the person I was nodding toward wasn't really able to see it, and stepped a bit more into the direction of the table. I craned my neck as I stepped, so that I could glance past the few individuals standing in my way, and studied the area of the table that was placed in front of the man of interest. I saw that a small scotch glass was set out in that specific place, right next to a deck of cards. As soon as I picked up on this information, though, I also caught the image of a young woman dressed in tight black shorts and a dark navy tank top lean over the side of the table and swipe the empty glass away from him.

"Hey, 'Not-Jen'!" a voice yelled out from close by my right side.

I turned toward the sound and saw the same tall guy from just a few minutes ago approach me with a martini glass containing a bright red liquid that nearly spilled over its rim each time he took a step.

"I got you a cosmo," he went on, now holding the glass out to me. "You seemed like that kind of a girl."

I took the glass gently into the fingertips of my right hand and pushed a smile across my lips.

"Thanks," I muttered out.

"No problem," he shot back, along with the slightest wink in his left eye. "You're not here alone, are you? Because you can definitely come hang with *us*, if you want to."

"Oh, no," I hurriedly responded. "I'm, um, waiting for someone."

"You sure?" he pressed.

I looked from the drink in my hand to his still smiling expression.

"No... I mean, yeah, yes, I'm... I'm fine, thank you," I sputtered out.

I forged another smile back at him.

"Okay, well, have a good time!" he cheered on as he started to step away.

I turned to watch him walk away and disappear between two groups of chattering people that had suddenly appeared nearby, and then flickered my eyes back down the 'cosmo' in my one hand. After that, I gazed up a little and took my eyes over to an end table that sat next to the sofa with the couple that was intimately making out still on top of it.

"Now what's up, Mae?" I could hear Mel ask.

"I've got a plan; don't worry," I whispered.

I took a long stride forward and made my way over to the end table a few feet away. I then reached down, grabbed one of the many empty blue solo cups that were mounded atop it, and proceeded to pour the martini that I held into it. After that, I set the cocktail glass down in the cup's place and leisurely brought myself down to a crouching position. Then, I slid my right hand down the inside of my right boot and reached around until I felt the little hand-sewn pocket on the side of it.

I swiftly pulled a small sandwich bag out of the shoe, although, no, there was no sandwich inside of it, and opened it carefully. I glided a few of my fingers into it and grabbed at a tiny, oval-shaped white pill, afterward bringing it completely out.

I leaned back a little, dropped the capsule into the blue cup, and shoved the now empty bag back into the side of my boot.

I then stood back up and turned into the direction of the card table close by. After that, I walked up to the side of it, stepped around a pair of people, and looked down as I placed the cup onto the table in front of the balding man.

"Your drink, *Mr. Hartford*," I spoke out.

"Bourbon or scotch?" his grumbly voice interrogated, his eyes glued to the set of cards in his hands as he did so.

"Uh," I began as I leaned back a tad. "Scotch."

Whatever the difference was between scotch, bourbon, and a 'cosmo', I had no clue, but I was sure he probably wouldn't have been able to tell the difference, either.

Then, without him speaking another word, I stepped quickly to the side and made my way back away from the table.

"I gave him the stuff," I mumbled to Mel.

"Already? Wow, good job," she responded. "Okay, so, now, remember what I told you... it won't kick in right away, but if he's been drinking already, then it's probably safe for you to go talk to him right away."

I twisted back toward the table and leaned to the left to see the man, Mr. Hartford, inhale pretty much his entire drink in just one swig.

I winced a little when I saw him slam the cup back onto the table and make a twisted sort of face.

"The hell *was* that?" he shouted out.

"A taste of Amnesia," Mel remarked in my ear, alongside a small laugh.

I smiled when I realized that she was referring to both me... well, my nickname, as well as the pill I had been instructed to give him.

After that, I watched him twist his head both left and right to glance around and search for the person responsible for giving him the drink. Of course, though, his short investigation was unsuccessful, so he quickly returned his annoyed focus to his playing cards.

"Okay," I murmured. "I'm going in... now."

I stepped forward and around the opposite side of the table he sat at, afterward pushing my way past a few people to make my way carefully up to the other side of him than before. I cleared my throat, quietly, and then leaned inward, toward his ear.

I wanted to whisper to him, but I had to speak up a little more than expected, because every one of the other three men at the table were beginning to chat vigorously.

"Mr. Corbin is here to see you, sir," I said, deepening my voice a tad as I did so. "He's waiting in the..." I trailed away a little and hurried myself to think of a way to conclude my statement. "In the... the piano room."

I snapped my back to a straight position and took a step back from his side.

"Mr. Corbin?" his head shot upward, but not toward me, as he questioned.

I looked the back of his head quickly over for a second, and then leaned forward once more.

"Y-Yes," I went on. "I wouldn't keep him waiting, either, sir."

I paused to hear his next comment, and then decided to step back, again.

"The hell..." he muttered.

He then threw his cards face up on the tabletop in front of himself and promptly stood, his chair squeaking back under him at the same time.

"You all can give me the money later," he ordered, glancing around at the others sitting around the table.

I looked down when he turned to the right and pushed past me, not glancing up until he had stepped away from my peripheral field of vision. I then watched him make his way through an incoming crowd of people by the pool table and began to follow after him shortly thereafter. I pushed past three men who were all in the process of tripping over their own shoes, two young women who were laughing at them, and four more random people who weren't doing anything other than standing still and sipping from drinks in their hands before I was able to catch glimpse of Mr. Hartford again. Once I actually could see him, though, I managed to watch his backside as he slipped through the doorway that led to the piano room I had been in earlier.

I stopped walking a moment, looked the now closed door over, and then proceeded to step completely up to it. After that, I reached out, grabbed at the door handle, and took a deep breath.

"Okay, Mel," I whispered, a little rush-like. "Here goes the hard part..."

"Okay," Mel promptly responded. "And I'm right here to help you remember what to say, so you'll be fine."

Hopefully.

I pursed my lips soon after her words left my ear and whipped the door open in front of myself.

I stepped into the small, silent, and surprisingly vacant room. I mean, vacant other than the appearance of the bald, shuffling man in the center of it, that is.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind me, he spun around, into my direction.

He squinted his eyes and studied me slowly, making no sound for a long few seconds.

I decided to open my mouth, but it took a number more moments before I, myself, could utter any words.

"M... M..." I started off. "M-Mr. Corbin couldn't actually make it, tonight. He... sent me, instead."

"*You?*" the man tilted his forehead forward and stepped toward me.

"Y... Yes, *me.*" I attempted to shoot back at him.

Mr. Hartford smirked and let out a soft chuckle.

"Yeah, right," he mumbled, now walking over to my side.

Before he got there, though, I piped back up.

"No, wait... he... he did, though!"

"Tell him about the silver pipe deal," Mel suddenly instructed to me.

"I-If you don't believe me," I went on, stepping to the side and turning a little as he started to approach the door. "Then I guess you won't find out about the *silver pipe deal.*"

The man halted.

He twisted toward me, and then spoke, again.

"*Silver pipe?*" he questioned.

I nodded.

"He sent me here to tell you about it," I stated.

He stared at me for a second, and then stepped to the side and threw his hands up.

"Alright, then tell," he commanded.

I watched him as he paced over to the unoccupied piano and took a seat at the bench in front of its keys. He glared back up at me, forcing me to open my mouth and talk once again.

"Well... it's..."

"At seven o'clock, next Thursday night," Mel prompted me.

"It's at seven o'clock, next Thursday night," I repeated.

"In the *Fourth Hacks* building," she continued.

"In the Fourth Hacks building," I said.

Mr. Hartford looked me over with lowered eyebrows.

"And *who* am I supposed to be bringing with me?" he asked.

I paused while I waited for Mel to give me the response I needed.

However... she didn't.

"Um, w-who," I started to stammer. "Are you... supposed to bring... with you?"

He raised one eyebrow and let a silence fall around us.

Mel was still unresponsive.

"Well..." I dragged on. "You know... just... the usual crowd..."

He eyed me for a moment longer.

"And who's that? Jeff? Ray? Derek?" he interrogated.

"Oh," I sputtered out. "Yeah, just... Jeff and Derek, yeah."

I leaned to the side a little and nodded.

Then, suddenly, a sharp, robotic beep rang out in my one ear. As a result of the disturbance, I jerked my body a tad and threw my hand up by the side of my head, although I restrained myself from continuing to touch the Bluetooth device that, I assume, made the sound. Instead, I took a slightly deep breath in and casually pushed my fingertips through a small section of my hair.

"Okay..." the man responded, a hint of question still lingering in his vocal cords. "And did Mr. Corbin mention anything about the *specific material* of this meeting?"

I glanced down to his feet, and then back up at his face.

"Uh," I began. "Well, you know, he didn't really say... to me, exactly. I'm just the messenger, you see, and I'm pretty sure I'm... not really supposed to know all the details, like that, so..."

He looked me over one more time, and then picked back up where I had trailed off.

"Alright, then. Thanks for wasting my time."

He forced out some sort of smirk, stood, and started to step toward the door once again.

I fell to quietness as he pushed his way past me.

I closed my eyes and pursed my lips.

"Okay," I shot out, just as I heard him crank the door handle to one side. "I *did* hear him say something about hostages..." I turned toward him and noticed that he was looking back at me.

"Or, well, *a* hostage."

"And?" Mr. Hartford questioned.

"*And*..." I continued. "He says... the hostage has to know something about section twenty-two."

He smiled, kind of oddly.

"Now you're talking," he commented, turning entirely back into my direction.

"And," I said. "It must be something really important... because *Mr. Williams* is the one holding the hostage... well, *hostage*."

"Must be an important guy," he nodded and stroked the stubble on his chin.

"Must be," I remarked. "So, he said he wanted you and your... *team* there next... next..."

Next... um...

"Next Thursday?" he concluded.

Thank God.

"Yeah, Thursday," I nodded my head, maybe a bit too vigorously. "And he wants you to call everyone and make plans for it *tonight*... like, right now."

"Right now?"

"Yeah," I went on, tilting my head to the side a little. "You know, before you forget, or... something."

He studied my expression for a moment.

"Well, I don't think that I—"

"I wouldn't chance it," I cut into his sentence. "Mr. Corbin has *big* expectations, you know."

He paused.

"Okay," he agreed. "But tell him that I've got big expectations, too."

"Of course," I replied as he turned back around to leave.

"And thank you for your time, miss," he added while opening the door in front of himself. He then twisted back toward me and held out his free hand. "Pleasure doing business with you."

I stared at his palm for a moment, and then shot my own up to take it.

"Thanks," I replied. "You... too."

He shook our interlocked hands up and down for a second, and then released his grip.

"I'd work on those speech skills a little bit more for next time, though," he commented as he turned back around and stepped forward.

I watched silently as he afterward slipped through the doorframe and let the door slam shut from behind.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled.

I then reached my hand up to the device in my ear and ripped it away from my skull. I brought it down to my chest and flipped it over in my fingertips, noticing that the little red light that had been glowing from the side of it earlier was now gone. After that observation, I pushed down on the small black button near where the light should have been and watched as it flickered back into illumination. I threw the earpiece back up to my ear and spoke up once again.

"Me!?"

I waited for a second, and then got a clear response through the device.

"Yeah, Mae, are you okay?"

I breathed in relief.

"Yeah," I answered her, stepping back in the room a bit as I did so. "I'm fine; I... I convinced him!"

"Good job," Mel, although not very enthusiastically, congratulated. "Did he call the others?"

"He should be... probably right now," I informed.

"Good," she went on. "Hopefully, we'll be good to go next Thursday, th—"

And then, of course, the communication device fell silent, again. I pulled it back down from my ear and turned it over to see that the red light was gone once more. I proceeded to hold in on the black button, again, but it didn't revive it, this time.

I breathed a deep sigh and threw my hands down to my sides.

I guess that was my cue to go.

I went on to kneel down and slide the tiny device into another pouch sewn into the inside of one of my boots, and then stood back up and turned toward the door opposite the one that led to the game room. I made my way over to it, opened it, and then slid past its side.

A wave of distant electric music and thick smoke, which *actually* smelled slightly like nicotine, blew into my face, forcing me to take a second before continuing to walk forward. I had to blink a few times, force out a strong cough into one fist, and glance down to the ground to get through that short amount of time.

I looked up from my feet after those few moments and, miraculously, spotted the slightly familiar face of a man who was standing not too far in front of me.

The face of man who was wearing a fedora and a leather jacket.

I froze up when he turned to look back at me.

"Hey, my girl!" he shouted, flashing a tiny smirk.

Oh, no.

I immediately spun myself around and took a quick step back in the direction I had come.

"Hey, wait up!" he continued to yell.

I took another swift step but was unable to take another after that one.

Because, just then, a strong grip had latched itself onto my right shoulder.

I halted and turned gradually back around.

I forced the weakest smile I think I've ever shown.

"Hi," I mumbled as I studied his almost too sharp facial features.

"Hey, girl," he giggled out. "Where you goin' so fast?"

"I-I," I responded. "I... kind of really gotta go, so—"

"Awe," he whined. "But you gotta meet my buds first, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Oh, no... do I?" I managed back, elongating each of my words just a tad.

"Hey, Horatio!" he literally *screamed* out, now gazing past my side. "Guys, come over here!"

He looked back at me and laughed, again.

I forced another smile.

Then, suddenly, a group of guys that each had a similar, messy kind of look to themselves ran up to my left side from somewhere behind. And, I mean... *ran*.

"Hey, boys, this is my señorita," the original young man proclaimed. "And you, my lady, these are my... uh, my... my peeps, you know?"

I looked from one boy to the next, noticing nothing about them but sweat-soaked tee shirts, saggy jeans, and completely ungroomed hair... as well as a few beards styled in the same manner. I then glanced back to one in the fedora, the first out of the complete total of four, and spoke up, again.

"They seem nice, *you know*, but, um..."

"Baby, let me buy you a *drank*," he went on, now beginning to pull my shoulder forward. I resisted his force at first, but soon found myself allowing him to drag me toward a cluster of people in front of the bar I had... sort of been at earlier. Once there, he twisted me back to face him and shouted at one of the other guys that were following close by our sides. "Horatio, get us some dranks!"

I looked him over, again, and took a much needed step backward when he released my shoulder from captivity.

"So, girl," he continued, returning his attention fully to me as he leaned his left elbow to rest on the top back edge of a nearby occupied barstool. "What was your name, again?"

I raised my eyebrows a little.

"Oh, well, it's... it's..." I paused. "J-Jen. Jen, yeah."

"Oh, that's a good 'un," he chuckled out. "So, what do you... *like*, Jen?"

He wiggled one eyebrow at me.

At least, he tried to.

"What... do..." I softly repeated. "I... like?"

He nodded and laughed again, this time turning his head to the left to practically breathe into the curly red hair of the woman sitting in the stool he was leaning against.

It took him a solid thirty seconds or more to calm down enough to look back at me.

"Yeah, you know, girl?" he questioned.

I opened my mouth for a moment before actually speaking back.

"Well, I..."

Then, abruptly, one of the other guys reappeared on my left side, holding two blue cups filled to the brim with a sloshing, amber colored liquid.

"Here," the man said as he pushed the drinks toward the both of us, making a little fluid spill over each of their edges in the process.

"Thanks, man," the fedora boy replied as he took the cup held in front of him.

I glanced down and stared at the messy beverage for a longer second, and then took it carefully in one hand without a word.

"So, Jen," I could hear the original man go on. "Why don't you give me your number?"

I shot my head up at him.

"My... number?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know, girl? Here, I'll write it on my hand," he answered, and then paused to turn to his friends. "Yo, someone give me a Sharpie!"

I looked over at the other three as they all scattered to check their countless pant pockets. Eventually, one whipped out a thin black marker and proceeded to hold it out to the leader of the group.

"Alright, go on, now," he went on as he both took the pen in his free hand and popped the cap off, letting it soon after tumble to the floor below.

I watched while he started to inscribe, close to illegibly, the letters 'J-e-m' on the wrist of his opposite hand, forcing a little more liquid to spill out of the cup he still held at the same time.

"Okay, I'm ready," he said, without bringing his eyes back up to me.

I paused, and then started to reply to him.

"Okay, it's... *eight*..."

"Eight," he repeated out loud.

"*Six*..." I continued.

"Six," he reiterated.

"*Seven*..."

"Se... Wait," he stopped and gazed up at me. "I feel, like... maybe I already have it... Let me check my phone."

He then threw the sharpie over his shoulder, reached into the side pocket of his leather jacket, and pulled out a small, white touchscreen phone with a cracked screen.

So... why was he writing the number on his wrist?

"Okay, say it again," he commanded, his face now illuminated by the bright light coming from the device in his palm.

"*Eight*," I repeated.

"Eight," he whispered, again.

"*Six*," I went on.

"Six."

"*Seven*."

"Seven."

"Five."

I waited for him to repeat me, but he didn't and, instead, stared intently at his phone, so I eventually decided to proceed.

"Three... Oh..."

He squinted his eyes and suddenly glared up at me.

"You l—" he began.

However, I cut him off before he could finish.

"Bye!" I yelled, throwing my blue cup upward, toward his face.

I accidentally smiled as I watched the light brown liquid splash itself over his features and make him yell out.

Instantly after he threw his hands up by his sides and dropped his own drink, though, I turned to the left and lunged away from him, pushing past the rest of his posse in the process.

"Hey!" I could hear one of the others in his group shout out as I squeezed by another trio of people.

I picked up my pace once I got through the crowded area and started to guide myself toward the open doorway ahead. Once I was through it, then, I hurried through the crowded front room of the building and pushed through the ear-bursting level of music and seizure-inducing amount of lights until I had reached the closed entrance. After that, I threw the door of exit open and stumbled onto the sidewalk on the other side of it.

Once to that point, I saw that the bouncer who was previously guarding the door was no longer there and turned to the right to rush way down the path beside the building. Then, I brought myself down to a slower jog and found my way efficiently back to where my mini motorcycle rested, around the corner of fencing up ahead. After I had reached its side, I reached down, swiped my helmet from its seat, threw my right leg over the top of it, and pulled myself up to a sitting position.

I fell still for a moment and stared at the red helmet resting in my hands. I then let a tiny giggle escape from behind my cheeks, tossed the helmet over my head, reached into one of my jean pockets, whipped out the key to my moped, inserted it into the ignition of the bike, and twisted it to start up the engine underneath me.

I went on to hum a little tune to myself as I kicked the kick stand upward and pulled out of the parking lot.

Jenny, I got your number...

Chapter Twelve

"I need to make you *mine*," I half-whispered, half-sang, my lavender-colored hair brush gripped tightly in my palm underneath my chin.

I looked my expression over in the mirror in front of myself and smiled.

"*Jenny* don't change your number," I decided to go on, now throwing my index finger of my free hand up to my ear and tilting my head to the side a little.

Then, suddenly, three loud knocks came from the other side of the bathroom door beside me.

I let out a miniature scream and dropped my hairbrush in the sink.

"Mae!" Mel's voice shouted from the other side of the door. "You ready yet?"

I took a heavy breath and placed one hand on top of my pounding heart.

"Y-Yeah," I shakily yelled back.

"Well, get out here, then," she replied.

Soon after her words left her mouth, I heard a pair of footsteps, presumably hers, begin to pace away from the closed doorway.

"Oh, o-okay," I mumbled as I picked my hairbrush out of the sink and placed it onto the countertop beside it. I then glanced back up to the mirror, nodded at myself, and spoke up once more. "Right, yeah."

After that, I turned to the door, swung it open, stepped into the hallway, turned left, and strode my way to the door at the very end. Then, I opened that one, slipped past it, made my way into the large office area, and walked over to the side of a small table that Mel currently sat at.

I pulled up a semi-cushioned metal folding chair and took a seat across from her.

"You did a great job last week, Mae," Mel complimented as she tapped a thin stack of papers onto the desktop between us.

"Oh... yeah, I... I know," I responded, watching her set the pages down and lean forward some more.

"But," she picked back up, snatching my gaze back to her face. "This is the mission that *really* counts."

I nodded in understanding while she looked down to sift through the information set before her.

"No pressure, though," Katie commented from her swivel chair, in front of her usual desktop computer, right behind Mel's backside. After she had spoken, she turned herself around to face me and wheeled herself swiftly up to Mel's side.

"Well, yeah," Mel went on, glancing upward once more. "*But*... know that we only have limited time here, *and*... we may not get another chance to even *get* a chance like this for another few weeks, which might be too late..." Her eyes trickled down to the tabletop in between us. "For *Ace*, at least."

I followed her gaze and fell quiet for a moment.

"But," Katie perked up. "That's more reason to just give it your all!"

I looked up and smiled at her smile.

"Yeah, okay, little miss sunshine," Mel laughed out. "Now, Mae, pay attention."

I switched my focus back over to her as she continued.

"This evening, you will be paying a nice little visit to the basement of Mr. Antonio's pawn shop and be retrieving the *official* information on the whereabouts of section twenty-two. Why they chose a pawn shop to store it, I haven't got a clue, but I do imagine the whole store will be heavily secured and on video surveillance, so *please* be careful when you're trying to get in. I'll walk you through the steps you need to take when you get there but, before that, I want you to really pay attention to where the security cameras are and stay away from them as much as possible, okay?"

"Okay," I softly answered.

"Okay, good," she went on, her eyes looking back down to her papers. "So, after you get in, which I'll help you do, you'll have to *carefully* make your way to basement, since I'm not sure if they'll be any security measures taken inside or not, too. After that, you'll make your way downstairs, where absolutely *no one* should be, since you already deterred everyone that was supposed to be there to someplace else, and you'll have to search everywhere to find the information. If there's a safe or something, which I would think is where it would be, I'll help you get into that, too. Other than that, you should be okay."

"I'll get you a little hand gun, too, just in case," Katie added, placing one hand, palm-down, on the table as she talked, and then standing herself up to make her way around to somewhere in the room behind me.

"Don't worry, though, Mae, you won't need it," Mel reassured.

"But," I started to object. "Won't someone who was supposed to meet... *those* guys be there?"

Mel shook her head.

"Not as far as I know," she replied. "They were supposed to come get it for themselves if they wanted it; everyone else is already on their way to wherever section twenty-two actually is."

Whoever everyone else was, I didn't really know, but I also didn't really want to know, either.

I looked from Mel down to the hand-written papers in front of her and studied them until she spoke once again.

"So, you ready?"

I shot my head back up to her and took a deep breath.

"Sure," I answered.

Mel smiled.

"Good," she commented, leaning back in her chair. "Now... go get your boyfriend back."

I hopped away from the seat of my motorcycle, and then threw my side into... well, the side of the brick building on my left. I reached my right hand up to my right ear and prepared to open my mouth.

"I'm..." I started, but then paused. "This is... Agent Amnesia... and I believe I have reached... um... my destination."

I could hear Mel giggle a tad.

"Okay, *Agent Amnesia*, do you see any cameras anywhere?" she went on to ask.

I turned toward the wall on my side, stepped forward until I reached the corner ahead, and then peeked out from behind it. I took in the view of the building in front of me, which was some kind of an old-fashioned dress store with mannequins dressed in Victorian-style skirts and corsets in the wide display window that the sun currently reflected off of in front of me. Beyond that, another building sat with a burgundy-colored awning coming off of its front, the word 'pawn' printed in yellow over and over again on the bottom boarder of it. I then glanced down to the display windows underneath that, but I couldn't really see anything in it from my current angle.

"Um... maybe?" I responded, now leaning back behind the building corner once more.

"Come on, Mae," Mel began. "Either you do or you don't."

"Well..." I started to protest as I poked my head forward, again. I looked over to the little shop yet again, studied the entire front side of it, including the underside of the awning, but didn't see any kind of camera in sight. "Could they possibly be hidden, or... something?"

I heard Mel sigh.

"Just be careful and go up to door. If you see a camera, stop and let me know," she ordered.

"Well, okay," I mumbled.

I took a few steps forward and pushed both of my hands down by my sides. I glanced over at the first store as I walked past it, taking in the sight of a long-sleeved, light pink gown with extravagant lace in the window as I did so. After that, I made my way up to the store window of the pawn shop, noticed that it was completely covered with a blue tarp from the other side, and then stepped up to the closed front door, the phrase "Buy, Sell, and Pawn at Mr. Antonio!" printed on the thin, clear window in front of me... which was grammatically incorrect, seeing how the apostrophe 's' was missing from the equation. I looked past the words, though, and saw that the inside of the store was entirely dark, the only real light seen inside peeking through the window that I was currently blocking from the sun's rays.

"I'm at the door, I think," I proclaimed.

"Still don't see any cameras around?" Mel questioned.

I looked up to the top of the door in front of me, over to the window on the right side of the store, which I hadn't walked past and was also covered by tarp from the inside, and up to the underside of the awning above my head.

"Not really," I answered.

"Okay, well," Mel went on. "They're probably all inside, then... Okay, now, let's get you in and out as fast as possible. So, listen to me, okay?"

"Understood," I responded.

"There should be a code pad on the door handle. You see it?"

I guided my eyes down to the rubberized set of numbers that rested above the door knob.

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Okay, now, enter these numbers," Mel continued. "And *don't* mess it up!"

I couldn't help but smile.

"Not like last time?" I remarked.

Mel took a few seconds to reply, trying to remember the very first time she had been the good ol' guide in my ear.

"Yeah, definitely not like that, this time. Can't believe you actually remembered that, though..."

"Me neither," I whispered.

"But, anyway," Mel picked back up. "Here's the code... one, two, five, eight, zero, five, nine, two, zero, seven."

I entered each number as she listed it, and then punched the green 'enter' button underneath all of them once I was finished.

I crossed my fingers in my opposite hand.

I waited for a click to sound out, but none came.

"Um... M-Mel..."

I reached down to the handle and tried to twist it.

"What?" Mel asked.

I nervously turned the door knob and pushed the door successfully forward.

"Oh, n-nothing..." I muttered as I stepped through the doorway. "It's just that... I'm..." I looked around at my dimly lit surroundings of long tables piled high with a number of random possessions, and then went on before I studied one of the piles in particular. "I'm in."

I stared at the nearest mess to where I stood and saw an opened box of macaroni and cheese, an unopened package of toilet paper, a purple, five-subject notebook with yellowing pages at its core, an oversized teddy bear that was missing one of its button eyes, and a tiny, clear plastic container with... a deceased blue fish floating at the top of the dirty water inside of it.

"Did this place go out of business?" I quietly asked, now turning to shut the door behind me.

"Yeah, about a month ago," Mel answered.

Well, I wonder why...

"But, anyway, before you go too far inside, look around for any of the cameras," she went on to instruct.

I pushed the door until I heard a little 'tick' noise emit from it, and then turned around to look into the nearly complete darkness in front of me.

"Um," I began. "Am I allowed to turn on a light, or... something?"

"No!" Mel shot out, almost making me jump at the urgency laced in her voice. "Don't; they'll definitely pick that up on camera."

"Well," I objected, stepping up to the edge of the small shadow of sunlight a few feet ahead. "They could just... think it's a ghost, you know."

"I doubt it," Mel countered.

I gave a little sigh as I let my eyes adjust to lighting of the rest of the room. I slowly saw that the whole area I stood in was super skinny and really long, filled with about a billion tables crowded with a bunch of stuff similar to that of which I originally saw next to me. At the end of the extended path set in front of me sat a plain wooden door, and on either side of it was a number of empty bookshelves. I looked up to the ceiling as well the upper boarders of the walls all around me and searched for a recording device of some sort, but saw absolutely none.

"So," I started, again. "I don't see any cameras."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I elaborated. "Could I maybe, like, just crawl around on floor, so if there are any, they won't be able to see me?"

I heard Mel resist a slight giggle.

"You know, Mae," she said. "You might as well."

"I..." I replied, raising my eyebrows a tad. "I... um, *really*?"

"Yeah, *really*. Go for it and get to the back door; it should lead you to the basement."

I stopped a moment and looked around, again.

"Uh, o-okay," I stuttered out.

I then proceeded to lower myself carefully to a kneel, and then brought my weight onto my knees. I leaned forward and put both of my hands on the floor, underneath my shoulder blades. After that, I... well, I crawled along the path to the door at the other end of the room.

"I guess even if a camera *did* see you," Mel went on as I moved. "You could probably get done and out of there before anyone could really do anything about it. So, you're probably fine... *maybe*..."

"You sound like Ace," I whispered, kind of accidentally out loud.

"No, actually," Mel replied, catching me off guard, since I didn't even realize what I had said until after I had said it. "Ace probably would have said, 'take a risk and have some damn fun with it.'"

I smiled a little at her comment.

That was true.

Eventually, I managed to drag myself all the way to the bottom edge of the door across the room, and then began to raise myself back up to a stand.

"Okay, I'm at the..." I started as I reached down to the door handle now placed in front of me. I twisted it, surprisingly without any resistance, and swung it forward. "The... I'm... I-I'm going to the basement."

"Okay," Mel said. "Tell me what you see when you get down there."

I glanced down at the trail of concrete stairs that led down into an abyss of darkness.

Oh, God.

I bit my bottom lip as I took the first step down. I then turned around a bit, grabbed at the door behind me, and pushed it shut. When I went to twist back around, though, my feet stumbled around quite a lot and I managed to trip down to the next step in front of me and fall harshly onto my knees, scratching both my hands on the uneven cement underneath me in the process.

"Ow," I whined, bringing myself up to a sitting position on the stairs.

"What did you do?" Mel asked.

"Oh... nothing," I answered, pushing myself back up to stand.

I mean, we all know stairs aren't exactly my best friend.

I continued to step lightly down the rest of the flight, and then landed myself gently on the concrete floor at the very end. I looked up and saw that the whole room was actually on my left but lit slightly more than the one upstairs by a few tiny slits of windows made in the tops of the walls all around. Straight ahead in the room, then, sat nothing but... um, nothing.

"Well, I'm... there," I began.

"What do you see?" Mel prompted.

I paused, and then responded.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Mel nearly yelled. "Well, look harder."

I blew out a puff of air and walked into the center of the large, empty area. I crossed my arms over my chest, gazed at each wall, one at a time, and then decided to step over to the one on the near right. I reached one hand out to run over it and proceeded to walk toward the far end of the room.

"Are you sure this is even the right... you know, place?" I interrogated as I strode along.

"I'm pretty sure," Mel opposed. "Are you sure there's nothing there?"

I stepped up to the corner of where two of the grey cement walls met and brought my hand back down. I turned to the left, then, and began to walk alongside the next wall, slowly bringing my hand back up to glide across it soon after.

"Well," I replied. "I—"

I halted and craned my head to look back at the wall beside me.

My fingertips had just run over an odd dip in the dark concrete.

I stepped back a bit, and then leaned back in to study the wall closely, both of my hands now feeling over the top of it in front of me. I rediscovered the dent I had first felt and found out that it was actually a long, vertical crack, after I let my fingers run over its tiny path. After that, I felt around some more and learned that two indented lines ran horizontally both above and below the first one I had found, all of them connecting at a couple of corners. I then discovered that another line ran along the left side of all of those, everything coming together to form a well-sized, box-shaped crack in the wall.

"Hang on a second," I commanded, now sinking my fingernails into the creases of both the vertical cracks. I yanked my arms inward a tad, and then felt the indentations widen up a little. I pulled back at the square a few more times and, on the fourth attempt I made, the whole cut out in the wall ripped itself out and I let it tumble to the floor by my feet.

It made a loud clash with the hard floor below, but I looked down as it fell to notice that it was actually nothing but a thin sheet of metal with its frontside designed to feel and look identical to the wall it had been placed in. I then glanced up to the square hole in the actual wall that I had just created and saw that a little metal safe with a keypad on its frontside was sitting inside on top of a cut section of the wall.

"Oh, wow," I commented. "I found it, Mel."

"Found what? A safe?"

"Yeah," I answered. "It was... hidden in the wall, I guess."

I reached out to gently touch it and look it over as Mel went on with her instructions.

"Okay, good. Now, there's a keypad on it, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," Mel went on. "So, I have a couple of codes for you to try... If none of them work, though, we're gonna have to come up with a quick plan B."

I ran one hand down the side of the safe, and then felt something... odd.

"Um..." I mumbled, now stepping to the side a little to look at what I felt. "Mel..."

The entire safe had somehow been cut in half, separating the front from the back with a small, rough crack all around its edges. I grabbed at the front section of the cut and pulled half of the safe forward, watching a tightly rolled white piece of paper fall out from inside of it.

"What now?" Mel nearly snapped.

"It... It's already..." I replied. "Kind of... opened."

"*What?*"

I reached down with one hand, snatched up the scroll that rolled in between the two pieces of the safe, and then pushed the safe back together. I afterward stepped back, unrolled the paper in my hands, and read the top few lines of it swiftly.

Alan-

Below are the official coordinates of Section Twenty-Two. Please be sure to inform your team immediately and book separate flights for each of your members as soon as possible.

"Mel, I got it!" I yelled out, jumping excitedly in place a bit. "I got it!"

"You did?" Mel enthused back. "Well, where is *it*?"

I glanced down to the middle of the page in front of me, and then read out the sequence of numbers I saw.

"Sixty-one-point-four-one-one-zero and negative one hundred and forty-nine-point-one-one-seven."

"I have no idea where that is," Mel said. "But you better be ready to pack your bags when you get back here!"

I smiled as I rolled the paper back up and crouched down to slide it into the side of my left boot. After that, I grabbed the slate of metal that once concealed the safe from the floor, stood back up, and proceeded to place it back in its place. I found it difficult to get it completely back in, though, so I started to kind of beat on it with the side of my fist in attempts to get it the way I had originally found it.

In between my soft thumps of labor, though, I heard a sort of shuffling noise pipe up from somewhere far behind my back.

I stopped and listened intently immediately after... but then all I heard was silence.

"Is this place haunted?" I whispered, intentionally to Mel, as I gradually turned myself to the left and brought my hands down from the semi-stable piece I had been beating into the wall.

Before I even had time to turn entirely around, though, a deep, crackly voice echoed out throughout the room.

"And what are *you* doing here?" it asked.

I physically jumped in place and twisted myself completely around so fast that the hair in my long ponytail actually whipped itself across my face. I scrunched up my expression as it did so but, instantly after that, I shot my eyes wide open and looked up to see the dark outline of a tall figure standing at the bottom of the stairs on the opposite end of the room.

Whether or not it actually was a ghost, I couldn't really tell but, either way, I was *terrified*.

"W-W-W-W," I stuttered out, unable to even utter one real word in that moment.

The figure stepped forward, into a ray of light, and I saw that it was a heavy-set man in a common black suit and blue tie with a mustache and a ratty mess of brown hair atop his head. It also should probably be noted that I caught the sight of a large pistol firmly gripped in one of his palms by his side.

Not again...

"You had better answer me," he grumbled out, taking another step into my direction.

"I-I-I," I went on.

"Mae? What's happening?" Mel questioned.

Honestly, though, I had no clue.

"Damn," the man remarked, now coming to a slow stop, still pretty far away from me. "Didn't wanna have to, but..."

He brought his gun up by his chest.

"W-W-Wait, I-I..." I stumbled out, raising my own hands up in front of myself.

"Mae?" I heard Mel speak in the background of my mind.

He continued to extend his weapon outward, ignoring my stutters.

Oh, no.

"Sorry, hun," he said. "This one's just business."

I felt a cry coming on.

And then, suddenly, a loud bang erupted out in the room.

And I felt the plate from the wall behind me crash both into the floor as well as the back of my ankles.

"The hell was that?" the man yelled out, spinning around in his place to investigate the sound.

Immediately, then, I dropped down to a kneel, shoved my right hand into the side of my right boot, ripped out the small hand gun from it that Katie had supplied to me earlier, threw my arm upward, and pulled the trigger to send a bullet flying directly into the man's direction.

I slowly stood back up as I watched him freeze up for a good moment or two, and then stared as he collapsed to the ground below.

"Mae!" Mel yelled at me. "*What* is happening?"

I froze up for a short second, and then responded to her.

"I'm getting out of here, that's what," I muttered, now lunging forward.

I rushed my way past the side of the fallen man, and then heard Mel faintly reply.

"Probably a good idea..."

Without even looking back into the room, I sprinted up to the end of the staircase on the far wall, reached out to grab the shaky metal railing beside it, spun myself around it, and continued to run up the stairs.

About halfway through tackling the feat, though, my front foot slipped, and I smacked both of my knees onto the corner of one of the concrete steps.

"Ugh," I grumbled as I picked myself back up.

Hurriedly after that, I went on pressing my way up the stairs, a little more slowly this time, though. Once I reached the end of the uphill battle, then, I grabbed at the door that led to the basement below, slammed it shut behind my back, and turned to rush toward the front door of the building. I made it there, surprisingly, without any problems, and proceeded afterward to push my way outside.

I looked around at the empty street ahead as well as the vacant store fronts on either side of me as I took a deep breath. I then turned around, pulled the door to the pawn shop shut behind me, and started to make my way past the old-fashioned dress store next to it. After rounding the corner of that building, I heard Mel pipe back up.

"Mae," she started. "What were the coordinates on the paper, again?"

"You think I remember?" I snapped back, now stepping up to the side of my resting moped.

"Well, *I mean*, could you read them off to me, again?"

"Well, I..." I began. "I could, I guess, but..." I scooped my motorcycle helmet from the seat of my scooter before going on. "Um... shouldn't I be going... before I-I get shot?"

I heard Mel utter a bit of a sigh.

"Katie just found out that we may be on a tighter schedule of time than we originally thought," she said. "So, either read it to me really fast before you get going or read it while you're driving. *I* don't care which you pick, but with the level of coordination I know that you have, I'd—"

"Okay, fine," I shot back, now placing my helmet back down on my vehicle's seat. I knelt down, reached into my boot, and pulled out the paper from inside of it. I unrolled it quickly, and then re-read the string of numbers I had announced earlier. "Sixty-one... point-four-one-one-zero... and negative one hundred... forty-nine... point-one-one-seven."

I waited for a moment after speaking but, when Mel didn't immediately speak back to me, I rolled the paper back up, bent forward, and slid it safely back into the leg of my footwear.

"Okay, well," she picked back up while I stood up straight and reached out for my helmet once more. "It looks like we're sending you straight to Anchorage, Alaska, as *soon* as you get back here... Agent Amnesia."

I froze, my hands hovering over the seat of my bike.

"I..." I replied. "*I... am?*"

Chapter Thirteen

"Yeah," I replied, wheeling my... well, *the* black suitcase I borrowed from Katie, up to my side. I looked up at the counter of the reception-style desk in front of me, which came nearly up to my eye level, and studied the friendly expression of the man standing across from me. "I *sure am* Miss Martin..."

I pushed an exhausted smile across my lips.

"Alright," the man, dressed in a silver suit with blue stripes down its sides, went on. "Your room is right this way, miss."

I stepped back as he walked around the left side of the desk and made his way up to my side.

"I'll take that for you," he declared, reaching out a hand toward the top of the suitcase that I was now... sort of leaning against.

"Oh," I shot out, jerking both my body and hand away from the handle of the luggage. I stepped to the side as he took it up in his own hand. "Th... Thanks."

"Of course," he went on as he stepped forward, past a large, round wooden column.

I rubbed the side of my nose for a second as I watched him move away, and then suddenly realized that I was actually supposed to follow him.

"Oh, yeah," I muttered, immediately throwing one foot in front of myself to begin chasing after him.

While I followed him across the spacious area, I glanced around to see that a gas fireplace rested against the left wall, right in front of a large arrangement of tan sofas and glass coffee tables. Above my head, two extravagant chandeliers hung from the ceiling and, below my feet, large panels of pristinely white tile adorned the floorboards. Other than that, nothing else was around, other than the countless number of impressionist paintings lining the walls and the two silver elevator doors close ahead.

Soon enough, the man pulling my bag reached the far wall and stopped to press the up-facing arrow on the keypad in between the two elevators. Almost instantly after that, a little dingy sound rang out, and he proceeded to step through the doorway that revealed itself on his left.

I followed him into the elevator, and then fell quiet while he reached out to touch the number sixteen from the keypad of numerals that stretched all the way to twenty-two, although I noticed the number thirteen was missing from one of the rows, and bit my lip a little as the door closed in front of me.

"Is this your first time visiting?" the man inquired.

I looked up at him to see his polite smile, and then forced one back as I answered him.

"Yes... As far as I know, that is."

I let out a soft laugh and watched him push a hardy one back in reply.

"And..." I continued to attempt a conversation, after a moment of silence started to fall around us. "How about you?"

The man's smile drooped a little bit and he paused for a long moment before replying.

"Well, I... I *live* here."

He afterward let another smile creep across his lips.

"Oh," I spat out, throwing both of my hands up by my sides. "Oh, yeah, you... you probably would, wouldn't you?"

I forced a slight laugh out as the elevator door by my side slid open once more.

"Yes," the man chuckled back a tad, now pushing my suitcase out in front of himself.

I stood still as I watched him drag both himself and the luggage past the metal doorframe, and then quietly began to follow after him once more, rubbing my fingers into each of my palms in front of my waistline as I proceeded to do so.

I glanced around at the long hall set before me and took in the scene of cream-colored wallpaper, rows of brightly painted white doors, and tiny end tables decorated with multicolored flower vases. Sooner than I had expected, the man guiding me halted beside one of the doors, pulled a small plastic card out of his pocket, swiped it across a device above the door handle, and then promptly... well, opened the door. After that, he stepped inside with my bag, and I traced his footsteps.

I looked around the brightly sunlit area, saw a gray couch resting against the wall on my left, an open doorway leading to a well-sized bathroom area on the right, a king size bed on the other side of the bathroom wall beside me, a large mahogany table in the far left corner of the room with matching chairs against three sides of it, a huge wooden cabinet with a forty-inch flat screen television resting atop it near that, and, above all, a clear window that stretched completely over the entire far wall with a view of a few other tall buildings and a vast mountainous area in the distance, one with a blue outline and snow-covered tips.

"Will this do?" the man piped up, now gently placing my suitcase horizontally over a stand beside the television cabinet.

"Oh, wow, it's..." I mumbled, looking quickly between him and the captivating view straight ahead. "It's... perfect, really. Thank you!"

I gave him a genuine smile, and then he bowed to me slightly with a grin back. After that, he stepped back around my side and I turned to watch him make his way out of the room.

"Please, let us know if you need anything," he said. "And enjoy your stay, miss!"

He swiftly twisted back to me, nodded, and shut the door behind himself.

I turned back around, stepped forward, and looked around the still room.

At least, until a hard knock came from the other side of the front door.

A little confused, I whipped my head back over to the door, and then another set of three knocks came from it. Cautiously, I stepped back over to it and pushed my weight onto my tiptoes as I peered into the tiny peephole at the top of it.

A different man in the same uniform that other had worn, although he was much heavier and... bald than he had been, stood in the hallway on the other side. A large box sat on the base of a tall luggage cart, one with golden metal rods that formed an arch at the top, and the box was actually so big that it barely fit longwise on the cart and its wide edges were spilling over the sides of it. I

watched the man as he knocked once again, and then fell back down to my heels and opened the door in front of myself.

"Hi," he greeted, bringing his hands up to his waist as he took in a shallow, wheezing breath. "Are you..." He paused to take another desperate inhalation of air. "Miss... Martin?"

"Um," I began, narrowing my eyebrows at the package on the cart beside him for a moment. "I don't..."

I stopped, processed what he had actually said through my slow brain synapses, or something like that, and then jerked my expression up to his.

"Y-Yes," I stuttered out with a sudden smile. "I am, yes."

"Okay," he panted out, now grabbing a clipboard from atop the box beside himself. "Sign here, please."

He held the board out to me and pointed one index finger at the bottom of the paper being held on it. I took it from him gently, glanced the page quickly over, although I didn't actually read anything written on it, and then grabbed the pen resting against the metal plate at the top of the clipboard. I proceeded to place my personal signature on the line, but halted about halfway through writing it... a.k.a. after I had rounded the second 'n' at the end of Mable-Ann.

Immediately, I scribbled all of it out, until absolutely none of it was legible any longer.

And then I continued to cursively sign '*Aurora Martin*'.

After that was completed, I placed the pen back into place and glanced up at the man standing in front of me and staring down at the paper.

"Here," I shot out, a little more aggressively than I really wanted to.

His upper body shuddered a little as I spoke and, after that, he quickly took the clipboard back.

"O..." he started, pausing yet again to take a breath. "Okay..." He turned back to face the box. "This is a heavy one, so..." Another wheeze. "I'll..." Another. "G-Get it in..." Another. "Your room..." Last one. "As best I can."

He then threw the clipboard onto the carpeted floor of the hallway behind himself and leaned over the top of the box. I stepped back as I watched him attempt to grab the sides of it, fail, try again, fail once more, and then step around to the other side to push it off of the cart and force it to crash to the floor.

I pursed my lips as he took a few more wheezing breaths, and then stared at the box, now on its side and too wide to push through the doorway, as he made his way back around the cart and knelt down beside it. He reached out to either side of it, pushed it forcefully back up to its original, upright position, and then stood back up to take a few more hard breaths. After that, he threw one foot forward, kicked the back of the box, and began to push it toward the doorframe with just his leg.

I stepped back a bit, and then turned around to walk back into the center of the room as he continued to struggle with the package.

Once I twisted back to look at him, I saw that he had just barely managed to get the box through the doorway and was already turning to make his way back out of the room.

"You have a..." he started, unable to finish until after taking a routine few breaths. "A good one, now..."

I kept my eyes on the box and remained silent, only looking up right as he reached out to grab the handle of the door behind his back.

He tried to pull it closed, but it caught on the side of the package pretty soon into his attempt. I watched him, then, while he jerked the door toward the hallway's direction, forcing the box to move a mere inch to the side at a time.

I waited a good entire minute or so before he finally shut the door behind himself, and then quietly spoke to myself.

"Okay, then..."

I stepped forward and approached the near side of the package. I brought myself down to my knees and reached up to grab at the tape on the top of the box. However, I quickly learned that my nails were not enough to break it open, so I stood back up, made my way over to an end table by the bed across the room, snatched a pen from it, came back to the package, clicked the pen into its functional position, and then stabbed the very center of the box's topside.

I dragged the pen along the flaps both in the center and on the outer edges that were confined by the tape and, afterward, ripped the box completely open.

I peered inside and saw that a shallow piece of cardboard was resting close to the top, covering everything else that was inside, except for the white typed sheet of paper that rested atop it.

I reached out, snatched the paper up, and began to read it from the very top.

AGENT AMNESIA:

I had to stop and give way to a little giggle before I continued.

Enclosed in this box is a few items that you may find very useful to your next mission, which is very vital in insuring the safety of both our beloved agent, Jeremy Barker, and, quite possibly, the world.

After that, three little asterisks fell across the center of the page, and the document went on in a slightly different manner.

Hey, Mae, this is from your two favorite girls. We just thought you'd like to hear from us before you send yourself off to your most intense mission yet. Mel will come up tomorrow, though, so don't get too stressed out just yet. However, she's not going to be able to communicate with you on Bluetooth this time, since we're not sure if where you're going will be able to detect our signals or not, so we want you to be as prepared as possible before you go. I've left some more papers in this box to walk you through everything again, but, before you go reading them, I want you to check out the rest of the stuff that I've sent you. I think at least some of it will make you smile. Also, be sure to call us as soon as you can!

Underneath all of that, the message 'You go, girl!' and the tag '-K and M' was placed, a small hand drawn heart placed next to it.

I smiled as I set the paper down on the floor by my feet, and then reached out to rip the cardboard cover away from the rest of the package. After that, I grabbed the sides of the box, leaned forward, and looked its contents over.

First, I noticed that my *entire* red moped was *actually* resting against the left side of the package, my matching helmet placed over its little black seat.

"Oh, wow," I laughed out.

Beside the mini motorcycle sat a small black handgun, one I had probably used before, although I never really take much notice as to which type of pistol is which. Next to that, then, rested my familiar stuffed farm friend, Moo-riah Carey.

I let out another giggle as I reached down and picked her up, but I paused when I saw a manila folder sitting underneath where she had rested with the term 'Classified' hand-written across it in red ink. I twisted to the side a little, set Moo-riah down on the carpeted ground, and then turned back to swipe the folder up from the bottom of the box. When I stood back up completely, though, I saw a small plastic card fall out of it and tumble to the ground.

I promptly stepped back, knelt down, and picked the card up from the floor.

I stared at it for a long moment, and then felt a sting come to one eye.

—

I threw one foot down to drag against the dirt below as I squeezed both of the silver handlebars on either side of my motorcycle. I gazed upward as I slowed to a stop directly in front of a tall, rocky slope.

After that, I reached down to the front panel, twisted the key out of the ignition, and tossed both of my legs over to the left before stepping off of the bike. Once I had removed my helmet from over my eyes, placed it on the seat in front of me, and tapped the kickstand into place with the toes of my boot, I stepped back and reached into my back-right pocket to pull out a little rectangular card.

I held out the scene of a bright winter snow storm in front of my eyes for a moment.

I took a deep breath, blinked away the feeling of oncoming tears, and then replaced the card into my dark jean's pocket, along with the tiny key to my moped.

"Okay," I whispered, just to myself, as I crouched down and reached into the sides of both of my boots at the same time.

I then whipped out a small black handgun in my right hand and a super tiny black box in my left.

I brought myself back up to a stand, and then proceeded to walk around the backside of my bike. After that, I made my way cautiously around the corner of the rocky mountain side beside me, slid my gun down to my side, and stepped up to a large area of the hillside that was covered with grass. I proceeded to gaze down at the black box that I held and tapped the big round button on the top of it with my thumb, forcing a red light to begin blinking next to it.

"Please, please, please..." I, more or less, mouthed while I stared at the little light.

I held my breath for the next few seconds, and then I felt a wet drop hit the brim of my nose. I looked up to the light, but cloudy, sky for a brief moment, felt another cold ping on my cheekbone, and returned my gaze back to the box in my hand.

I watched the light flash a bright red a few more times while I took a deep breath.

And then it turned to a stable green color.

"Yes," I mumbled, now rushing forward and pressing my hand holding the device against the grassy surface in front of me. I pushed against it gently until a sharp, straight cut in the rocks revealed itself, and then I used both arms to push even more against it, soon uncovering a dark doorway.

After I pushed the grass-covered door completely open, I stepped past it, turned around, and shoved it shut once more.

I twisted quietly back around and glanced upward, squinting my eyes a little at the dim light ahead as I brought my pistol up to my chest. I tightened my grip on it and kept my gaze forward as I knelt down and slid the black box back into the side of my boot.

I studied the short, thin corridor ahead and saw nothing but half of a staircase leading down to another empty, dark hallway laid out a few feet in front of me.

I brought myself back up to a stand and took a gentle step forward, now wrapping both of my hands over the handle of my gun. I continued to step until I approached the edge of the first step in the short set of stairs ahead, and then proceeded to cautiously make my way down them.

As soon as both of my feet hit the floor underneath the steps, though, a loud, siren-like noise started to scream out around me.

"Oh, no..." I muttered, glancing around snappily at the dimly lit, vacant hallway that extended both to my left and right.

I turned to the right, permanently, and rushed to the side of an open doorway, one of which was completely black on the other side. I peered into it for a short moment, and then made the quick decision to jump through it.

I threw my backside against the wall on the left-hand side of the entrance and scanned the dark room I was now in to the best of my current ability. It looked like a moderately small room with a number of tall tanks scattered about it and... that was pretty much it.

Soon after making my observations, though, I heard the pounding alarm suddenly cease.

"God, again..." I heard a soft female voice mumble from the hall outside.

I then listened as a pair of heavy footsteps made their way hurriedly past the doorway beside me. I waited for them to gradually become an inaudible trail, and then I let out a silent breath.

I craned my neck to look to the right and slowly leaned forward, now peeking gradually out from behind the doorframe, my hands shaking at the base of my hand gun.

The corridor was empty and still, although it was now lit more brightly, somehow.

"Okay," I barely breathed out to myself.

I made my way up to the very edge of the doorway and peeked out, again, this time looking in both quiet directions. Once I saw that nothing was around, then, I stepped out of the small room, twisted to the left, and pushed myself forward, toward the end of the hall, where it turned a corner. After I reached that specific corner, I bit my bottom lip a little, refocused my grip on my weapon, and very carefully tilted my head forward and around the edge of it.

The hallway went on even further, curving around another left corner at the other side of it, and absolutely no one else currently occupied it.

I walked quickly around the corner in front of myself and stepped a little more swiftly to the opposite end ahead. I observantly glanced around as I forged my way, noticing that not even one door or doorway adorned the dirtied white walls, however, I had to bring myself to a stop when I saw that an even thinner path broke off to the right about halfway down the hallway.

I spun into its direction and stepped up to its side, now looking down to the long end of it. I noticed that the walkway was lit only by one partially broken light in the ceiling of the far side of it and that the walls were even dirtier than the ones behind me. At the opposite end, though, a large, bright plain area could be seen.

I turned back to the hall behind me, hesitated to walk away for a split second, and then twisted back to the thin pathway and made the decision to softly tread through it.

I stepped as quietly as I could until I began to approach the end of it and, once to that point, I slowed down dramatically and brought my gun closer into my chest.

I pushed my right side against the wall beside me and peered around the corner ahead in both directions.

I picked up that the whole area in front of me was a large room with bright, flickering lights and nothing in it but a large column of extra wall in the center and the appearance of a few thin metal bars that stretched all the way to the ceiling resting somewhere behind it.

I stepped over to the backside of the pillar, and then peered out from behind it to look more closely at the tall, rusty bars.

I immediately noticed that the bars were actually a part of a small, enclosed box-shaped area that looked very much like a prison cell.

And, on the other side of the bars, a tall man with his back facing me sat on the floor, his messy blond hair poking slightly out between the rods of metal.

"A-Ace?" I partially shouted out.

The man jerked his body forward and twisted his shoulders to face me.

But he wasn't Ace.

"What do *you* want?" the man growled out, his unibrow furrowing at me.

He definitely wasn't Ace.

"Oh, sorry, s-sir," I stumbled out, now backing back behind the column beside me.

Before I started to step away, though, I heard another male's voice yell out an echo from far to the right.

" *Nesia!*"

I threw my body forward, once again, and spun into the direction of the shout. I then noticed that another long, thin pathway branched away from the far wall, and I started to rush toward it, speeding past the man in the cell in the process. Once there, I sprinted right into the skinny hallway and heard the familiar voice call to me again.

" *Nesia!*"

I ran to the opposite end of the thin corridor, halted after sliding into the next room, which was way darker and smaller than the last, and spun my head quickly in all directions until I saw an enclosed cell similar to the last sitting against the wall to my right.

And the sight of Ace standing with his body pressed up against the other side of its bars.

He smiled.

I smiled back.

"God, am I glad to see you," he said.

I rushed over to the other side of the bars in front of him.

"M-Me, too," I replied.

Just then, though, his expression turned and he threw his hands down from the metal rods.

"Nesia, look out!" he shouted.

I pulled myself swiftly back and whipped my head around to come nearly face to face with a dark-haired woman that had a stature similar to my own.

She held up a large silver hand gun by her shoulder.

I screamed as she reached out and snatched the fabric of my black jacket that covered my upper arm.

"Don't think so," she spat out through gritted teeth, now pointing her barrel toward my face.

"Ugh!" I yelled, now bringing one foot up to kick her harshly in her side.

She shouted out as well and stumbled backward for a short moment.

I threw my own gun upward as I jumped back and hurriedly pointed it at her.

She glanced up and lunged toward me.

And then I pulled my trigger.

My eyes widened and my heart pounded while I watched her freeze up.

After a quick second or two, she collapsed to the floor, directly in front of Ace's cell.

"Wow," Ace commented, bringing my focus back over to where he stood. "I really *did* miss you."

He let out a soft laugh as I attempted to relax my muscles.

After another moment or two, I managed a smile and slight giggle out in return.

"Now," Ace began, gazing back down at the woman. "There's a key in her back pocket."

I looked him over as he turned back toward me and only now noticed that he had managed to accumulate the slightest trace of facial stubble since I had seen him last.

"For the *door*, 'Nesia," he elaborated.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," I shot out, now jumping forward and crouching down beside the unconscious lady. I then reached my free hand carefully into one of her back black pockets, felt nothing in it,

tried the other, grasped a hold on a cold metal key, and then swiped it out and brought it up to my face. "Got it."

I brought myself back up to my feet and glanced back at Ace.

"Okay, good," he responded, stepping back a tad from the bars between us.

I looked downward, noticed that a tiny keyhole box was connected to one of the rods in front of me, and then gazed further down to the woman's body that was sprawled out on the ground, which was kind of blocking me from stepping entirely up to the side of the lock.

"Um," I mumbled as I tried to step over her, although I soon realized I wouldn't find a good place to place my feet, so I instead leaned my upper body forward and grabbed at the bars on the other side of her for stability as I prepared to bring the key up to the lock's tiny hole.

At the same time, though, my gun slipped from my one hand and bounced onto the woman's middle back underneath me.

"Whoops..." I whispered, although I proceeded to shove the key into the lock and twist it to the right.

I heard Ace chuckle as I pushed both myself back and a section of the cell's bars forward.

"Yeah, I missed you," he remarked.

I straightened my backside and flickered my eyes up to him.

"You know what's *really* funny, though?" I questioned as he stepped up to the sliver of opened doorway. "The first time I met you, *you* were saving *me*. Now, though—"

"Yeah, I know," Ace cut me short, now stepping over the side of the fallen lady between us. "The tables have turned, haven't they?"

He turned to face me and I glanced over and up at him, a mere inch or two away.

"You know what else is funny?" he asked.

I looked his expression over and responded.

"What?"

"The fact that you *remembered* that," he said with a bit of a laugh.

I returned a tiny giggle as he turned, squatted down, and retrieved my dropped gun from the woman's back.

"Here," he directed, standing and spinning back to me with the shooter held out in one hand. I looked down at it, took it gently, and then gazed back up at Ace as he grabbed my other wrist and went on speaking. "Now, come on, we gotta get out of here."

I made no reply while he spun me around and sprinted forward, his hand dragging me close behind at the same time. I rushed behind him as we made our way back down the thin hallway ahead, through the next room with the unbrowed guy who yelled 'hey!' at us as we passed by, and to the end of the next thin path.

After that, Ace slowed down, let go of my hand, and stepped carefully into the hallway ahead.

I made my way up to his left side, turned into the direction that I at least *thought* led out, but stopped when I noticed Ace was frozen, staring in the complete opposite direction.

"You... okay?" I mumbled to him.

He paused for a short moment, and then spun back toward me, snatched my wrist up once more, and took off in the direction that I had been facing.

"Come on," he urged, not stopping to actually answer my question at all.

I ran around the corner of the hallway as he pulled me around it and obediently followed him to the bottom of the short staircase not too far away from that. After reaching that point, he turned to the left and started the trot quickly upward, myself struggling slightly to keep up with him.

Once all of that was accomplished, then, he lunged forward, me still in-hand, threw his side against the outline of the front door, and pushed himself through the crack of the exit, only then releasing his grip on me.

I continued to follow him through the slit of doorway and immediately felt a rush of cold air hit my face.

I looked up with squinting eyes as I walked onto the soaked grass of outside and realized that it was currently pouring down rain.

Of course.

"Nesia, come here," Ace commanded.

I glanced over to him and noticed that he stood still a few feet ahead of me, right in the middle of the drenching rainstorm.

"Do I have to?" I whispered, although, at the same time, I proceeded to follow his order and brought myself to a stand of my own close in front of him.

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest, my gun still in one hand, as water practically dumped itself on top of me. I flickered my eyes up to him, expecting him to turn and grab my wrist to take off again, but he didn't.

He took a deep breath and blinked a few raindrops off of his eyelashes.

"Listen," he started, looking down at the earth below. "There's... I..."

I guided my eyes down to the center of his drenched green tee shirt, and then back up to his face.

"Okay," he picked back up, a little more stable this time. "Remember what I told you a while ago, that you never really *know* something?"

He glanced up at me and studied my rain-streaked face.

"No, but—" I began.

"Well," he snatched my words away. "I know something..."

He paused for a brief second, and then went on.

"There's a countdown to a release a bunch of nuclear bombs all over a bunch of cities going on in there..."

"Wait, what?" I shot out.

"And," Ace continued. "There's also a countdown to blow up the whole place going at the same time."

I fell silent as my wide eyes stared at him.

"And I want *you* to stay *here* while I go try to take care of it," he went on.

"W-Well, w-why?" I stuttered out, one raindrop blinding my right eye in the same moment.

"Because," Ace answered. "I *know* that I'll have enough time to stop the bombs in the cities... but, I don't *know* if I'll be able to get back out of the building in time... before it blows."

"Ace, w-what are you even... what are you... t-talking about?" I muttered as I shook my head at him.

"They've been talking about it forever in there," Ace stated. "The whole building will either blow exactly thirty seconds after you stop the nuclear weapons, or at the same time that they release; I don't know how much time is on the countdown right now, but I have to stop it."

"I-I can go with you," I said, only now throwing my soaked arms back down by my sides. "We... We'll have enough time!"

"No, 'Nesia," he countered, shaking his head. "You don't *know* that."

I froze up as he glanced quickly to the ground, and then back up to my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I gotta go."

He then brushed up against my side and began to push past me.

"A-Ace, s-stop..." I bumbled out, turning quickly around after him. "P-Please, stop!"

He halted in front of me.

"God..." he muttered.

He then spun back around.

And seized me by both arms.

"Stop stuttering," he commanded.

He then pulled me inward, brought his gaze directly in sync with mine, and bent overtop me to crash his lips right into mine.

I threw both of my arms around the back of his neck and closed my eyes for a long moment, feeling a rush of emotions suddenly fall over me as well as the cold sting of raindrops on nearly every inch of my face.

I arched my back a little and came to a position of stillness for an even longer moment.

And then Ace tilted his head back from mine.

He rested his forehead against mine and let out a soft whisper.

" 'Nesia..." he started. "Don't you forget about me."

He pulled his head back, again, and took a step backward from me as he let go of my shoulders.

I felt a burning sensation come to both of my eyes.

And it wasn't from the pouring rain.

"Ace..." I cried out, sliding my hands from his neck down to his wrists. "P-Please..."

A rush of tears mixed with the water droplets already underneath my eyes.

Ace didn't respond and took the gun from my right hand.

"Ace," I sobbed, not releasing my left hand from his. "Stop, please, d-don't..."

He stepped back, again, and jerked his hand away from my final grip.

I glanced up from behind my blurry eyes and watched as he whipped himself around and rushed to the cracked doorway in the rocky hill ahead.

"Ace!" I screeched out.

He continued to run away, now approaching the door.

I let out another cry as he slipped past it and disappeared from sight.

"Ace!" I screamed, again.

I fell still for a moment, and then brought my hands up to cover my nose.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

I sniffled as I listened to the rain shattering against the patches of rocks and puddles all around my shivering body.

After a while, I opened my eyelids and wiped my cheeks with each sleeve of my jacket. I then brought both my hands and my eyes downward and took another deep breath.

I shook my head.

"No," I muttered.

I was going after him.

I lunged forward and rushed up to the hidden doorway in the mountainside ahead. After that, I reached both of my hands out to touch it, and then managed to slip my body past the crack in the side of it that Ace hadn't closed back up.

Once inside once more, shielded from the rain, I pushed onward and trotted down the small set of stairs in front of me. Then, I turned to the right, sprinted both around the corner up ahead and to the end of the next section of hallway where it curved to the left, which was an unfamiliar part to me.

I halted by the next corner and peeked around it cautiously, my heart pounding furiously.

The next section of corridor was similar to the last, but was a tad shorter in length, came to a complete stop at the opposite end, and had a vast number of open, lit doorways lining it along both sides.

It was also completely still and silent.

I pushed away from the corner of wall in front of my face and stepped slowly forward. When I came to the first doorway, one on the left, I came to a stop and gradually leaned my upper body forward to peek into it.

It was an entirely empty white room.

I proceeded to step up to the next one, this time across the way, and glanced carefully into it as well.

It, too, was small and empty.

I picked up my pace as I walked up to the side of the next doorway.

I looked into it; it was the same.

I gazed forward once more and saw that there were only three doors left.

Before I stepped up to the next, though, I paused to listen for any sounds that I could have been currently missing out on.

"A..." I mumbled out, taking a deep breath afterward to bring more volume to my voice. "Ace!"

I waited, but no noise arose from around me.

I continued to stride more swiftly past the final few doorways, glancing briefly in each as I passed them.

Of course, they were all vacant.

Once I reached the end of the hall, I turned back around and ran back to the other side of it. After that, I made the decision to turn again, and then again, until I made my way back to the entrance area of the building. Instead of turning to exit, though, I went on to run into the hallway on the other side of the front door, another one I had not yet explored.

I tossed myself around the next corner and saw another hallway nearly identical to the one I had just been in with all of the open doorways.

I stepped quickly up to the side of the right wall and yelled out, again.

"Ace!"

I halted and listened.

Some type of soft, mechanical beeping came from far ahead.

I jerked myself forward and approached the first doorway.

I peered into it; nothing was there.

I rushed over to the next door across the hall and looked into it.

Nothing.

By the time I got to the side of the next doorway, I didn't even stop. Instead, I shuffled right past it and gave its interior a quick glance, which was the same as every other I had encountered. I did the same to the next, which was also, unsurprisingly, empty, realizing at the same time, though, that the beeping noise was becoming much closer.

When I gazed into the next door in line, though, I came to an instant stop.

And froze.

And, I swear, my heart did, too.

I widened my eyes and twisted into the doorway's direction.

A cold feeling flew over my body.

I stepped up to the doorframe and threw my hands up to cover my mouth.

I paused for a moment and began to squint my eyes, feeling a burning sensation suddenly overcome them.

I shook my head and threw my hands down to my sides once more.

"A-A-A," I stumbled out, a sudden lump in my throat scratching my voice at the same time.

I stepped through the doorway, looked down at my feet, and then threw my backside into the doorframe, catching myself from a feeling of faintness.

After a second, I shot my eyes back up to the floor a few feet ahead.

"A-Ace!" I screeched out.

I let out an uncontrollable sob.

I took a weak step forward, and then another, and then another, but physically collapsed onto my knees after trying the next.

"Ace!" I cried.

I reached both of my trembling hands forward and gently touched his chest.

I screamed out as I brought my fingertips back and saw the staining of bright red blood on them.

I threw my upper body forward and heaved my forehead into my palms.

"A-Ace," I sobbed.

I shakily breathed for a long moment, and then brought my head back up to center.

I focused my impossibly blurred vision at his frozen expression, up to his dirtied blond hair, and then down to his stiff limbs.

I screeched out with another cry and closed my eyes.

Then, suddenly, a creak piped up from behind me.

I rolled my shoulders back from my hunched position and quieted my cry for a short second.

And then an unrecognizable, raspy voice whispered into my right ear.

"So glad you came, Mae."

I jerked my body to the side and fell onto my hips as I threw my hands behind myself and glanced up to see whose voice it was.

An unfamiliar man in a black suit with a pistol and a smirk was kneeling down beside me.

I didn't fight my urge; I immediately lunged at him.

"You!" I screeched out, grabbing at his shoulders and pushing him down to his back.

As soon as he fell backward, though, he reached out and snatched my upper arm with his free hand, rolled himself to his side, and then pulled himself up to a stand, dragging me up with him.

"Now, wait just a second," he said, now twisting in place a little. He stepped me to the side a bit and threw me up against the wall beside the doorway before continuing, not once removing his strong grip from me. "Your turn will come, don't worry."

He let out a low laugh, and then went on.

"Recognize me, Mae?"

I threw both my hands against the wall behind myself and tried to push off of it, but he pushed me right back. I then searched his face from behind my tears, noticing nothing of recollection about him, other than maybe the scar that was formed underneath his left eye.

"I killed your parents," he declared.

My heart thumped in my chest.

"And *I* killed Ace," he added.

He flashed an eerie smile.

I flickered my eyes from his mouth to his scarred eye.

"And I've been waiting to kill *you*," he chuckled out.

And then I remembered.

"But, before I do," he went on, retightening his grip on my arm. "I wanna tell you a few things."

The man with the scar was the last person I saw before blacking out.

He tilted his head to the side a bit and continued speaking.

"I only kill people who get in my business," he paused. "Both of your parents did just that a few months ago..." He stopped, again, and took in a noisy puff of air. "Well, your father did, I should say. But, you know how it goes..."

I searched his threatening demeanor before he went even further.

"*Derek Anthony Brown* was your father, am I correct?"

I didn't respond.

He smirked.

"I thought so..."

He abruptly stepped back, pulled me to the side, and then threw my body downward, causing me to collapse forcefully onto the floor below his feet.

"Derek was the worst crawler on me," he pronounced, his feet shuffling back from underneath my nose. "He just crawled all over my shit and ruined every plan I had worked so..." The volume of his voice suddenly amplified. "So God damn hard to create!"

I propped my wrists up underneath my backside and glared up at him, now noticing he was pacing by the doorway.

"He even bought out the building of my main office just to slow me down," he stated, no longer looking over at me.

"I don't believe you," I spat out.

He halted his shuffling, turned toward me, and took two slow steps into my direction.

"Oh," he started. "You *don't*, do you?"

I squinted my eyes and shook my head.

He let out a slight laugh, took another step toward me, and knelt down a mere inch in front of my face.

"Well," he grumbled, his stare piercing into mine. "Guess you don't have to, now."

Immediately after he had spoken, he stood back up and turned around.

He stepped over to the right wall, where a small, beeping box with a set of red numbers reading twenty-four: fifty-eight was displayed on a tiny screen on the frontside of it, making it look very similar to the face of a traditional alarm clock. The box itself was sitting on top of a short, wooden table, and it was the only setup of items anywhere in the room.

The man sighed and stepped to the side of the device.

"This bad boy is going to set off a strategically arranged setup of explosives in just a few of my favorite American cities... Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Phoenix, just to name a few, along with this building itself in about..." He shot a quick look over at the countdown of numbers. "Twenty-four minutes."

I flickered my widening eyes in between him and the box a few times.

"And then," he went on, now taking a step toward me once more. "Step one of plan twenty-two will be complete."

He let out a deep chuckle, and then turned his back to me.

Immediately, I looked down to my legs underneath my body and threw one hand silently into the side of my left boot.

"*Do* do me a favor, though, Mae," the scarred man went on.

He spun back around on the balls of his feet right as I tossed my hand back behind my back.

He grinned and brought his gun up to eye level.

"When you see your parents," he continued. "Tell 'em 'you're welcome' from *Mr. Williams*..."

His voice trailed off and he removed his focus from his weapon for a brief moment.

"For me," he added.

He brought his attention back to his gun and began to laugh once more.

I let out a scream.

And then threw my one hand in front of me once more, releasing a small knife with a tiny blade to fly into his direction.

At the same time, though, that a loud shot pierced the air.

He abruptly stopped chuckling.

And I stopped screaming.

He looked down to see the knife lodged into his upper arm.

And I glanced down to see a tiny hole in the ankle area of my right boot.

The man let out a wail and I pulled my head back upward to see him pointing his gun into my direction once again.

I immediately threw myself up to my knees and lunged to the left as I heard another gunshot ring out in the room.

It bounced off the floor behind me.

My right foot began to throb in a numbing pain as I forced myself up to a wobbly stand and jumped toward the left wall of the room.

The man yelled out again as I threw myself forward and dropped to my knees once more.

I reached one hand out to snatch the gun left on the floor above Ace's head as he shot another bullet by my side.

I grasped the abandoned pistol and flung my hand over my shoulder.

I pulled the trigger.

I looked over at the man, refocused my aim onto him, and then pulled it again... and again... and then again.

I stared as his face froze, arms fell heavy, and legs collapsed underneath him.

My heart thumped uncontrollably for a moment.

I fell still, searched the fallen man with my eyes, and then shifted my gaze back to the source of the stinging pain in the side of my ankle as I fell down to a sitting position.

My eyes filled with a rush of tears.

And I screamed out.

After a few seconds, I brought my breaths back into sync with a soft cry and glanced over to where Ace lay, right beside me.

I shook my head and dropped my gun.

And then my ears picked up the sound of a soft beeping from underneath the ringing inside of them.

I flickered my eyes over to the black box on top of the small table that sat a few feet in front of me.

Cautiously, I pulled myself up to a stand.

I winced as I put a slight amount of weight onto my wounded foot, and then I breathed heavily as I pushed myself to walk over to the ticking clock.

I snatched the device up from the tabletop and read the numbers now displayed on it.

Twenty-two: forty-nine.

I flipped it over in my hands a few times; there were no cords, buttons or switches anywhere on it.

"Ugh," I grunted out, slamming it back onto the table.

I paused for a second, and then glanced down at the man sprawled out on the ground nearby.

I painfully stepped up to his side and knelt down.

"God," I mumbled, reaching out to check the pockets on the front of his black dress jacket for... just anything.

However, there was nothing in them.

I let out another tiny noise of frustration and grabbed at the inside edges of his jacket. I whipped them into opposite directions, effectively ripping the button away that held the two pieces together, and proceeded to search the inside cloth of both his jet black jacket and bleeding white shirt.

Again, nothing.

After that, I moved downward and patted down both sides of both his legs.

"Come on," I grumbled, now leaning even more over him to pop each of his shoes off of his feet. I took both of them up in both hands at once and examined them thoroughly.

Still, I found nothing.

I let out a tiny whine and threw them onto the floor.

I crawled back up to my feet, my pain beginning to now turn into even more of a stabbing feeling and shot my head into every direction of the room, coming to realize that, not surprisingly, *nothing* else was around.

I rushed over to the doorway as quickly as I could, paused a moment, turned back, swiped the gun I had previously used from the floor below, and then proceeded to step into the hallway beyond the doorframe.

I looked around, saw no one, and then began to hobble quickly to the right, toward the end of the hall. I peered past each door as I walked by, but I saw absolutely nothing in any.

Once I had reached the very end of the hall, I bit down on my tongue, spun back around, and jogged to the other end, where the corner was. I then turned around it and rushed over to the only door around other than the entrance, which was the one I had hid in earlier.

I stumbled into the dark room and glanced around at the number of tall, silver tanks placed sporadically within it as my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. I pulled myself up to the nearest one, felt around a bit on its smooth surface, and read the label 'WATER ONLY' that was slapped onto its side. I then turned to the next one, did the same, noticed it was labeled 'GAS ONLY', and continued to study the next three across the room. However, the last few had no labels, and were just as plain and buttonless as the others.

I let out a frustrated sigh and darted back out of the room, my foot still stinging with every step I took.

I turned left, rushed into the next hallway, and then turned again, the opposite way, to proceed back down the thin corridor from before. After I had reached the end of that, I rushed up to the jail cell that contained the man with the unibrow.

However... the man with the unibrow sat slumped against one wall of the cell, his eyes stuck in a wide position, with blood drooling from one corner of his mouth.

"Oh, God," I muttered, now continuing to stagger into the hallway that led to the next cell area. However, that area was still the same as it had been before, so I twisted back around and hurriedly made my way back to the main hallway.

Once I reached that point, though, I slowed to a stop.

I looked around at the silent, vacant doorways around me and pursed my lips.

I stepped to the side and rested my back against the wall behind me.

I lifted my weight from my injured foot.

"Oh, God..." I whispered, feeling a wave of emotion suddenly rush over me.

However, I held back my urge to cry.

Instead, I closed my eyes for a moment.

I took a shaky breath.

And then I shot them open, turned back around, and rushed all the way back to the room with the beeping bomb.

"Okay," I whispered, now completely returning to the black box with the bright red numbers. I swiped it, once again, and flipped it over in my hands.

It now read seventeen: twenty-eight.

"How..." I went on mumbling as I squeezed the box in between my palms. "Do I..." I stopped and slammed the device down on the tabletop, hard.

And then, suddenly, the entire box split in half, directly down the middle.

I threw my hands up and stepped back a moment.

But it continued beeping.

I leaned forward and reached out to pick up the two pieces that had just been created. The back half, without the number screen, was hollow and empty, broken off with jagged edges. The other part, though, had a small, smooth square placed up against the interior wall, on the other side of the numbers, and had the phrase 'Override Only' engraved in white writing above it. Next to that, then, sat a tiny raised button with similar writing below it that read 'Scan'.

I dropped the other broken section to the floor and studied the little smooth box for a moment longer.

Immediately after, I turned toward the man in the suit on the floor, dropped down to my knees, and snatched up one of his cold hands in mine.

"Pl..." I started, now grasping a hold on just the sides of his thumb. "Please..."

I proceeded to press the front of his thumbprint against the smooth surface inside the box.

I held my breath as I pressed the tiny plastic button with my own.

Three odd clicking noises then sounded out from the box as I stared down at the back of his limp hand.

And then, suddenly, an alarm began to ring out throughout the room, the same one that had when I had first entered the building.

I shot my head up at the sound, and then hurriedly glanced back downward and flipped the box over in front of me.

The numbers on the screen were now counting down, starting at just twenty-seven.

I immediately dropped the device to the hard floor and jumped up to my feet.

I rushed out of the room, not once looking back.

My heart pounded as I raced down the hall and around the corner up ahead.

I breathed heavily while the ear-piercing alarm screamed out around me.

I rushed up to the miniature set of steps nearby, and then trotted quickly up them.

After that, I flew past the cracked door that led outside.

The pouring rain pelted my face as I began to sprint through it, my ankle throbbing almost too forcefully to even feel.

And then, after a number of long strides, my one good foot slipped forward, overtop an area of slick mud.

I threw my hands out in front of myself and toppled into a puddle of cloudy water.

Quickly, though, I lifted myself up to my knees and pulled myself up to a stand, just as a loud, explosive popping sound filled the air from behind my back.

I continued to run across the slippery grass, until I came up to another rocky slope far ahead. Once there, then, I slowed to a stop, turned back around, and watched as a large, fiery cloud of yellow and orange erupted from where the hidden building had been placed in the mountainside, a good distance away from where I stood.

I stared at the smoky explosion of color for a long second.

I felt a tear come to one eye.

I shook my head a little.

"I..." I mumbled out. "I..."

I paused when I felt the release of the tear.

"I won't..." I croaked out. "I won't forget, Ace..."

I let out a small cry.

"I won't," I forced out. "I-I promise."

Chapter Fourteen

Don't you... forget about me...

"Oh, God, sorry," I spat out, now reaching into the pocket of my thin white jacket to pull out a small, black prepaid cell phone.

Don't, don't, don't, don't...

It continued to ring out in song as I scanned the front screen to see a simple green telephone icon and the phrase 'The Girls' typed above it.

Don't you-

I swiftly tapped the green button and threw the phone up by my ear.

"Yeah?" I asked aloud while I pressed the receiver against my cheek.

"Mae," the familiar voice of Katie spoke from the device. "We need you back at headquarters as soon as you're done."

"Okay," I promptly responded, now glancing down at the desktop that sat in front of me.

"So... have you done it yet?" Katie went on to question.

I smiled a little.

"Not yet," I answered.

"Oh, okay," she continued. "Well, I'll let you get to it, then. See you, later!"

"Okay, bye," I finished.

Immediately after that, I heard a tiny beep, and then brought the phone back down to my lap.

"Um," I started, now gazing up at the woman with short, curly graying hair and wide-framed red glasses that sat across the wooden desk set before me. "Sorry about that..."

I looked down to the papers that were placed underneath her resting elbows as I slid the cell phone back into my pocket.

"Oh, it's..." the lady piped up, promptly returning my gaze onto her. "Just... fine."

She pushed a weak smile at me, and then went on.

"Now, are you *sure* you want to do this? It's... very creative, but I—"

"Yeah," I cut her short. "I... I mean..."

I trickled my eyes from her, to the papers on the top of the desk, to the filing cabinets against the wall behind her, to the tall, wilted potted palm in the corner by the bright, open window.

"I had this friend, once..." I decided to continue, now refocusing on her unamused expression.

"Who... Well, he taught me that life's... it's just... no fun when you don't take any risks."

I felt a burning sensation start to form in the back of my throat, but I quickly cleared it away and went on.

"And... sometimes, you have to pretend like you're... you know, in a..." I paused to purse my lips and tilt my head slightly to the side. "A cartoon."

I took a deep breath and fought back the stinging that was forming in my eyes.

"A-And," I added, my voice beginning to shake and crack a bit. "Only *you* can make your... your *own* decisions."

I let my eyes fall to the desktop once more, and then reached up with the back of one hand to wipe the areas underneath each of them.

"Well, okay," the woman picked back up after a few seconds. "I just need you to sign the bottom of this, then..."

I took a deep breath and glanced back up at her as she pushed one sheet of paper across the table.

"Both times, there," she instructed, now placing a plain black pen on top of the long, typed page.

I studied the paper for a short moment, then took the pen up in my hand and clicked the ball point end into place. I guided my eyes to the bottom of the paper, where two printed boxes were placed almost on top of each other.

"I'll get it sent in later today," the lady added, afterward shuffling some of the other papers that sat in front of her.

I looked once more at her, and then fully returned my attention to the boxes at the bottom of my page. I read the small text above the top one, which said 'Signature of presently legal name'.

I proceeded to cursively scribble the words '*Mable-Ann Rosemary Brown*' in the box.

After that, I moved my focus downward and read the similarly-printed text above the next rectangle, which said 'Signature of proposed name change'.

I brought the pen to a hover overtop the blank box and paused for a moment.

I smiled, and then proceeded to scribble a new signature.

Amnesia Brown.