

Insubstantially Me

By : [kanne83](#)

Sam always had a good life. It was never perfect, of course. She never had many friends and had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, but she knew it would all work out eventually. She just has to figure out what she wants. But when Sam is kidnapped and supposed dead by the world, a future of her choice and her freedom are ripped away. She is completely at the mercy of Dr. Wescott, the scientist Sam soon learns to hate. She must either find a miraculous way to escape or resign herself to a life of being held captive to be used as a guinea pig. Escape, however, is impossible, but staying is unthinkable.



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Insubstantially Me : Chapter 1

I hate it when my mother is right.

It's not that I don't love my mother. Now that my dad's gone, she's the one person in the world I know I can really count on. The one person I know loves me.

But I really hate it when one of her paranoid warnings turns out to have some merit.

She watches the news way too much and is constantly warning me about anything and everything she sees a story on. I swear if she had her way, I would live in a bubble and never leave the house.

She hates it when I go out alone. She especially hates that I come to my little secluded spot at the reservoir so early every morning to read, but I love it here. It's the only place I'm able to go, to really relax. It's so peaceful, sitting on the dock with the sun shining down on me, and the ducks and occasional boats going about their business.

Plenty of people know about the reservoir, of course, but no one knows about my little spot. I had to really hunt for it, originally.

Today was like any other day. I sat in my leopard print lawn chair, coffee nearby, and the sounds of the water and wildlife keeping me company as I read.

The story was just getting good when my attention was abruptly torn away from the fictional action.

A beefy hand clamped over my mouth as an equally proportioned arm went across my chest, pulling me out of the chair.

Whoever it was, never would have had a shot to get near me if I'd been paying attention. Unfortunately, I wasn't.

Appropriately freaked out, but still not scared stupid, I was about to free myself.

Before I could do anything, though, more ridiculously strong hands latched onto my arms and legs, effectively immobilizing me.

I'd been able to claim plenty of useful qualities in my life - photographic memory, perfect vision, envious metabolism. Unfortunately, super strength was never among those qualities and my avid attempts to free myself were completely useless as I was hauled toward an unexceptional white van.

The thing that bothered me most wasn't that I was headed for a creepy van or that I was currently helpless against the four men that held me. Or even that I was apparently being kidnapped.

The thing that really scared me was that the men weren't even trying to hide their faces. That, and the fact that they seemed to be completely organized. They hadn't uttered one word, yet were working in perfect synchronization.

I could deal with a few random guys who happened to catch me unaware. I was an expert at self defense, usually.

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I could even deal with the van situation, once my arms and legs were free.

But I knew they wouldn't give me the opportunity. They had to know enough about me to know that it would take more than one or two guys to subdue me. And if they knew that, they would also know they couldn't drop their guard even slightly.

They had this planned.

The fact that they obviously didn't care whether I was able to identify them, told me that they were planning on either keeping me wherever it was they were taking me or killing me.

Neither option sounded terribly appealing.

They loaded me into the van and, as expected, they didn't give me the chance to free myself. They kept their vice-like grips locked on me as another one of them shut the door and the van started driving away.

The driver wasn't even speeding. He was just driving the stupid snail like speed limit while in the parking lot, calm as anything.

I assessed the men surrounding me and figured out who would be the easiest to take down when they let me go. They had to move eventually. Someone was bound to have to shift at some point. I'd wait.

I realized that my chances against five strong and organized men weren't great in a cramped van, but I was, at the very least, breaking some noses. Whatever their plan for me, I wasn't going down without a fight.

I only waited for my opportunity for a minute before I knew for sure I wasn't getting one. ĩ½

The guy who had shut the door, turned around and revealed what he'd been doing while he had his back to us. He'd been setting up a syringe with clear liquid that was, no doubt, bound to knock me out.

Wonderful.

I tried once again to free myself. I was more insistent than before, but it still did absolutely nothing.

A second later, I grunted as I felt the needle prick my exposed arm and the sting of the liquid as it was forced into me.

Whatever it was, was extremely fast-acting. Almost immediately after the needle was withdrawn, I started feeling the effects. My muscles involuntarily relaxed and my head started going fuzzy.

I fought to stay conscious as long as possible, but every second it was becoming harder and harder.

The last thing I thought, before I passed out, other than wondering who I could have possibly ticked off so badly to deserve this, was how annoyed I was that they made me lose my place in my book.

That, and I really hated it when my mother was right.

Chapter 2

I opened my eyes and stared at the unfamiliar, white ceiling, momentarily dazed. The ceiling in my bedroom was painted to look like a cloudy sky and had glow in the dark stars scattered across it, which I'd added back in high school.

It only took a few seconds for reality to come crashing back and for me to remember that I'd been drugged and kidnapped.

I shot up on the bed and quickly scanned the room for my abductors.

I relaxed minimally when I realized I was alone in the unfamiliar room. Locating what had to be the door, I threw my legs over the side of the bed and dashed for the exit.

Or at least, I tried to. A second after I'd stood up and tried to take a step, my legs gave out and I landed flat on my face.

"Ow," I grumbled as I pushed myself up with unsteady arms. Apparently whatever I'd been drugged with hadn't completely worn off yet.

It took quite a bit of effort to pull myself back up onto the bed while the phrase 'this is not good' repeated in my head. A monumental understatement, of course.

I tested my arms and legs a few times before realizing that I'd have to wait a little while for them to be of any use to me. I was, for all practical purposes, paralyzed at the moment.

Instead, I assessed the room I was in. It was like a mix between a bedroom and a hospital room. There was nothing typically 'hospital' about it. It had all the normal bedroom furniture - bed, dresser, book shelf, even a television and a computer. But it had a very institutional feel to it.

Maybe it was the fact that the room was in desperate need of some color. Everything was white and silver.

Not what I would have expected.

If I'd had time to give it much thought, I would have expected to be in some dark holding cell or a basement or something. Probably headed for Mexico or somewhere beyond to be sold on the black market.

I suppose the room I found myself in was, at least, better than being a victim of human trafficking.

Unless, of course, they'd kept me drugged for days and all of that had already taken place and I actually was a victim of human trafficking...

But this seemed to be something else. It was too organized to just have been a random thing where one girl was as good as another. They targeted me for whatever reason.

Even if this wasn't about trafficking, a kidnap victim wasn't that much better, really. But I guess I could be glad that I, at least, woke up. So I guess the killing me idea wasn't the objective. Or not yet anyway...

I sat there for a few minutes before the door opened. And not like a regular door. It was like something off of Star Trek. It swooshed open and tucked itself into the wall, leaving an open doorway. Very high tech.

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I watched warily as an older man in a white lab coat entered the room. The door swooshed closed, behind him.

"Oh good, you're awake," he said pleasantly, like he knew me and thought it was totally normal that I was here.

I didn't say anything as he walked over to sit in the chair a few feet away from me. I really wished my arms and legs didn't feel as much like jello as they did. I was starting to feel a little stronger, though.

"You must have some questions," he prompted, after watching me for a minute, in silence.

I looked at him, incredulous. Was he kidding? Questions? I had monologues running through my head!

"How about these questions," I said when he didn't say anything more. "Who the hell do you think you are? And where the hell am I?"

"Now, now," he tisked. "You are really much too intelligent for such language."

He was scolding me for my choice of words after kidnapping me?

"I am doctor Raymond Wescott and we are in a secluded laboratory in New Jersey."

Ok, so not exactly a hospital, but the same idea. And at least I knew I hadn't left the state.

"And do you routinely abduct women and bring them to your lab?" I asked.

He actually had the nerve to smile. "Not generally, no."

"So I guess I'm just lucky, then?"

"You, my dear, are very special, yes," he said.

"You don't know anything about me," I said defensively, even though I knew he had to have known at least a few things about me beforehand.

"I think you know that's inaccurate," he said. "I know quite a bit about you, actually."

"Really?" I asked acidly. "Like what?"

"I know that your name was Samantha Joy Corsini and that you went by Sam. I know that you lived with your mother, Rosemary, at 43 Washington Place, the home that you grew up in. I know that she and your late father, William, adopted you as an infant, nearly twenty-seven years ago. I know that you attended Princeton University on a full academic scholarship, graduated with a double major and a perfect 4.0, and that you have yet to live up to almost any potential you possess. I know that you've jumped from job to job since you graduated college and to and from various hobbies for much longer than that."

I just stared, thoroughly freaked out. It wasn't impossible for someone to know so much about me, just improbable. Unless they'd studied me - followed me for a long time.

I also wasn't comfortable with how he said all of that in the past tense. Like that wasn't all true any longer.

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Who was this person and why was he so interested in me?

Before I could say anything, he continued.

"I also know that you do not actually exist," he said. "At least not according to the U.S. government."

I attempted to say something several times before I spit out, "You're crazy." Not the most intelligent thing I could have said, maybe, but true.

"So you know things about me," I said, recovering a little. "So what? That just proves you're a stalker, not to mention a lunatic. I've seen my birth certificate. I certainly do exist. How long do you think you can keep me here? My mother is going to miss me. People are going to be looking for me."

"I do not doubt that you've seen your birth certificate," he said. "But it did not come from the government. It came from me. There is no record of your birth because you were never born. And I'm sure your mother will miss you, however no one will be looking for you."

I just looked at him, not knowing what insane idea to address first.

"We've seen to it that, to the world, it appears as if you lost control of your car and drove off the bridge, into the river. Your body won't be found, of course, but that will be explainable by any number of things. I expect it will be a big story on the news."

Dead? I was supposed to be dead and not just missing? He was planning on keeping me here forever? Or however long I was to be allowed to live.

I stared at the floor, dazed. Mom was going to be crushed.

"You can't just keep me here," I said, still stunned. "I'm a person! You can't just-"

"You will learn that I can and I will," he said, cutting me off. "You belong to me. I created you and I control what happens to you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, putting together some of what he said. That I didn't exist to the government. That I was never born. That he created me. Not that it made any sense.

"As I said, you are very special," he said.

"Special how?"

"That's a very broad question," he said. "You are not the average person. I'm sure you're well aware of your many abilities. It is unlikely that one person should be gifted with so much, don't you think?"

I just watched him, growing more uneasy by the second. I had, in fact, thought that, many times.

"You are...well, I suppose the closest idea would be to say that you're a clone. Although, you're really so much more than that."

"A clone?" I asked skeptically. "So you're telling me I have a twin walking around somewhere?"

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"You are not merely a copy of another person, my dear. That's a rather unambitious goal. I strived for more than xeroxing what was already there. I assure you, you are not quite like anyone else. You are only a clone as far as the barest, most essential genetic construction is concerned. You are significantly enhanced and as near perfect as, I believe, is possible. You are my masterpiece."

"You're insane," I said. "I'm not some stupid science experiment-"

"That's exactly what you are," he cut me off. "Although, not stupid," he amended.

I looked at him and tested my arms again. They felt stronger. Soon they would be strong enough to fight my way out of this place. For now I was at the lunatic's mercy.

"I know you aren't quite convinced. I designed you to be extremely logical." He smiled and I continued to scowl at him.

"I'm sure you must have thought how odd it was that you should be the best at everything. That anything you attempt to learn, becomes second nature. You've always been able to learn things in a fraction of the time it should take a normal person. You have unparalleled reflexes, a perfect memory, perfect coordination, and a nearly impenetrable immune system. You have the potential to do anything, to become anything and, whatever that may be, would be as effortless as breathing."

"Your rightful name is Abi," he finished.

"What no fancy scientific name for your masterpiece?" I asked sarcastically. "It's just 'Abi'?"

"Well that's really just an abbreviation," he said. "It's short for abiogenetic enhanced replication via somatic cell nuclear transfer."

I blinked at him for a second before I said. "You screwed up then, didn't you?"

"How so?" He raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not exactly perfect."

"Aren't you?"

"Shouldn't I be the pinnacle of beauty if I were perfect?" I'd always been completely average, looks-wise. "Shouldn't I be able to utilize my brain's full potential and therefore be able to do some super-human ability?"

"I did not aim to create a super model or a super hero," he said. "I designed you to be perfect and you are. Your looks are perfect - perfectly average. Beauty means different things to different people. Some prefer being tall to short, dark to fair, freckles to none, etcetera. You are precisely in the middle. You are the average height, build, skin tone, and hair color."

"And my eyes?" I asked, extremely uncomfortable. "They're not exactly average." They were not quite blue but not quite green. More of a turquoise with an almost gold ring around the outside and flecks of purple around the center. They were anything but average. I'd been asked, countless times, if I wore contacts.

"No, they certainly aren't." He smiled. "That was my little personal touch. I was showing off a bit, I suppose. Demonstrating the kind of thing I was capable of doing. They are rather striking, aren't they?"

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Apparently, he had an answer for everything, which really bothered me. He couldn't just be making things up as he went along. There was too much. If it wasn't true, it had to have been extremely well thought out.

"So what do you want with me, anyway?" I asked. "If what you're saying is true, it worked. What do you need me for?"

He watched me for a second before he answered. "I'm quite certain you could figure that out on your own. However, I know you've had a rather difficult day and that this is quite a lot to take in, all at once. I'll humor you."

"You are, as you put it, my science experiment, Abi. A vastly untested science experiment. There was only so much I could do with you as an infant, but now...Now I'll be able to test just about everything. I'll be able to improve upon you, if that is at all possible. You were not just created on a whim, nor were you meant to be one of a kind forever. You are the tip of the iceberg of a very profitable and sophisticated field."

"Profitable?" I narrowed my eyes.

"What do you suppose you were created for? My own personal goal?" He smiled. "Although that is certainly part of it, your purpose was to be the starting point. The sample of the things I am capable of doing. Once we have enough research and answers, we will be able to market the idea."

"You mean sell," I said, flatly. "You're going to sell people."

"Don't be so negatively narrow minded," he chided. "If I merely wanted to do things so crudely, I could simply pull subjects off the street. I certainly have the means to do so, without much hassle."

Sure. What was a few more apparent traffic accidents?

"I'm giving people the opportunity to get exactly what they want - the perfect child."

Or sex slave, or organ donor. The disgusting possibilities were endless.

"For rich people, of course," I added.

"Naturally, it will be rather costly," he agreed. "What I will provide, will not be available at the mall."

"You're sick," I said. "You can't just play God. You're talking about people's lives." My life.

"As far as you are concerned, Abi, I am God," he said. "Come now, has your life been so terrible? Has it been an enormous burden on you to be able to achieve anything you put your mind to? To be able to recall with perfect clarity everything you've attempted to remember?"

It has if having all of that has led me to being imprisoned and used as a guinea pig.

"My name is Sam," I said, ignoring his questions. "I don't care where you say I came from or what you say I am. I'll never be part of your twisted research."

"You don't have a choice," he calmly said. "You are here and you are not leaving. I suggest you get used to it."

My eyes flitted to the door and I noticed my arms and legs were starting to feel much better.

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"The door will not open for you, Abi," he said, realizing what I was thinking. "Even if you were to somehow get through it, there are many safeguards in place to ensure that you do not escape."

I looked at him and stood up, determined to try for myself.

Dr. Wescott only sighed and watched me as I made my way over to the exit.

I glanced back at him to ensure that he wasn't about to come up behind me. He was still sitting in the chair, completely relaxed.

I looked back to examine the door. No door knob, of course. I ran my hands along it to try to figure out if there was some panel or a button. Anything. But there was nothing. It was just a big, probably thick and strong, piece of metal.

Not able to think of anything better at the moment, I hit it hard with both hands before I backed up and gave it a good kick.

Nothing. There wasn't even a scuff mark on the surface.

Frustrated, I kicked it again and again, feeling my newly recovered strength, waning. I guess I wasn't quite back at 100% yet.

I stopped and turned to glare at Dr. Wescott who sat, calm as anything, observing me like a rat in a maze.

"I don't want to hurt you," I warned. "Let me out." Sure, he was basically pure evil, but I still didn't relish, inflicting pain on anyone. Especially not someone who looked like the old, nerdy scientist, he was.

"Sit down, Abi," he said, unperturbed by my threat.

"Open the door," I ordered, taking a step that I hoped came across as threatening. My hands balled into fists automatically.

"I have ways to subdue you," he said, still perfectly calm. "Do not make me employ them."

"I think you're bluffing," I said. "I think you're lying about everything. Let me out."

I honestly had no idea what to believe. It was impossible. Or at least highly improbable. I wasn't some freaky bride of Frankenstein! I was a person with a mind and will of my own. But it scared me how much he seemed to know about me. Even the things I'd never been able to completely express to anyone.

"No you don't," he sighed. "Abi, this would be so much easier if you would just comply. But then, I suppose you are not designed that way," he mused.

I'd had enough of his stupid mind games. One hit, I told myself. After that he would know I meant business. I lunged, aiming for his face.

A second later, I was curled in a ball on the floor, not even realizing how I got there. I was unable to focus on anything but the ear piercing noise that made me feel as if my brain were exploding. My hands were clamped over my ears, desperately trying to block out the painfully shrill, unfamiliar sound.

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All at once, it stopped.

I opened my eyes and hesitantly peeled my hands off my ears, not sure if whatever had just happened was really finished.

It didn't seem to be starting up again, so I risked dropping my hands to the floor to push myself up.

What in the world was that?!

I got up, panting, and got an idea of what must have happened when I saw Dr. Wescott still sitting calmly in the chair, watching me interestedly.

That must be one of his 'ways to subdue me'.

"What was that?" I demanded, still trying to normalize my breathing as I stood up.

"I did warn you, Abi," he said. "If you insist on becoming violent, I will be forced to stop you." He indicated the tiny black remote in his hand.

"What-?" I tried.

"It's my own little invention," he said, obviously quite pleased with himself. "I couldn't be sure of it's effects, of course, until I tested it, but it seems to work perfectly as intended."

"It works like...a dog whistle," he said. "You are the only person it will affect because your hearing is altered. I don't even think it would affect a dog, come to think of it," he said.

I stared, horrified. I couldn't deny that was actual proof to at least some of what he was telling me. No wonder he'd been so calm when I was threatening him.

"Every person who has direct access to you, will of course have one of these." Again he indicated the remote. "They have strict orders not to use them unless absolutely necessary. Please don't make it necessary, Abi."

"My name is Sam," I said stubbornly. "I don't care what you do to me, I won't help you. If you know so much about me, you know that I will have realized that you'll be needing my cooperation for your experiments. You can't document my reflexes and thought patterns if I don't comply. And what good is all your research if your results are faulty?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"You should also know how stubborn I can be," I said. "You may as well let me go because I'll never help you with this."

"I said I had ways, Abi," he said refusing to acknowledge my actual name. "That was only one. I hope you will soon understand that I mean what I say. I do not wish to threaten you further." He stood up. "Don't make me."

I crossed my arms and glared at him, wondering if I could take him by surprise before he had a chance to use that remote.

"Don't try it," he said, apparently one step ahead of me. "I don't want to do that again."

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"But you will," I said bitterly.

"If I have to." He nodded.

"Aren't you worried you might damage your precious masterpiece?" I asked sarcastically.

"Not at all," he said. "It is quite painful, I gather, but essentially harmless."

I just scowled as he walked over to the door.

"Adrian," he said before the door swooshed open again.

I eagerly looked at the now open doorway, knowing I'd never make it passed Dr. Frankenstein with his little remote.

He raised his eyebrow, not bothering to warn me again. He knew I wasn't that stupid.

"Ah, here's your dinner," he said as a girl in white scrubs carried a covered tray into the room and looked anxiously at me.

"It's alright, Bridget," he assured her. "Just put that on the table."

I watched disdainfully as little Bridget scurried to the table and then back out the door.

"Have your dinner and relax for a while," he said. "The bathroom is through that door, and you'll find fresh clothes in the dresser."

Relax. Sure. No problem there.

"I'll return later for your first few tests," he said before disappearing out the door.

I ran after him just in time to have the door close in my face. Angry, I pounded on the door, even though I knew it would be useless.

I went over to the table and uncovered the tray. It was a perfectly fine meal, I supposed. I mean, if it wasn't laced with a sedative or something. Too disgusted to even think of eating, I picked up the tray and threw it as hard as I could at the door.

I smiled tightly at the mess it'd made. They couldn't force me to eat. Maybe I'd go on a hunger strike until they let me go, I thought unrealistically.

I knew they weren't letting me go. Ever. But that didn't mean I'd give up trying to escape. And I could make things difficult for them while I was stuck here.

I walked over to the bathroom and took a peek inside. All white, of course, and no lock.

I sighed and turned, noticing the window.

The window! Why hadn't I thought of that yet? It didn't open, obviously, but it was glass, wasn't it?

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I looked around for something to smash against it. There wasn't much in the room besides furniture. I doubted the tv would do much without at least a crack first.

Realizing my best option was probably the desk chair, I ran over to grab it before I ran back at the window and, with a running start, threw the chair. It crashed loudly to the floor with no visible damage to the window.

I got closer to examine it, to see if there was even a small chip.

Nothing. It was probably double layered. Well, that didn't matter. I'd beat it all day if I had to.

I picked up the chair and started wailing it against the window again and again.

All I accomplished was bending the crappy chair and putting a few shallow scratches in the glass of the window.

For a minute, I just stared at the worthless piece of metal - well, probably aluminum judging by how easily it bent - in my hands and it finally began to sink in.

I was trapped. A prisoner.

Unless I could somehow get past the crazies in this place, with some miraculous escape, I was never leaving. I would die in this prison after being subjected to who knows what kind and how many tests like some lab rat.

And then, there would be more people like me. Some would be trapped here to be experimented on like I was apparently going to be, and some would be sold off to whoever wanted to pay for them. To do with, whatever they wanted.

It was just plain sick.

With another burst of energy, I began beating at the window again. I knew it wasn't going to do any good, but it made me feel like I was doing something. Like I was, if nothing else, showing them that I'd never give up. I'd never accept this and be their good, cooperative little guinea pig. I would fight every step of the way.

I might be helpless as far as getting myself out of here, but I wouldn't be at all helpful, either.

Chapter 3

After what had probably been a few hours, I sat curled on the window ledge, with the mangled chair at my feet.

I stared out the impenetrable window at the lush forest that I would most likely never be allowed to get any closer to, and fought the overwhelming feeling of depression that threatened to consume me.

As much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't deny that I had absolutely no reason to reject what Wescott told me. It all made sense.

I'd been adopted, just like he said, as a baby. I don't know how many times I'd heard the story.

After years of trying for a baby, my parents learned they weren't able to have any kids of their own, so they decided to try adoption. They waited for so long to even get approved since my dad had a lot of health problems and agencies were reluctant to agree.

Finally they were approved by one agency, but then had to wait for another few years, without even a hint of a promise for a baby.

They thought it was a little odd that everything happened so quickly after that. Not to mention, away from any conventional office. But they were so happy to finally have their child, they didn't question it.

I'd always just accepted their 'miraculous' story as one of those things that just happened. After all, what other possible reason would there be for two loving potential parents to receive the child they craved for so long?

And I had seen my birth certificate. It looked authentic and the DMV accepted it.

I never questioned the absurdity of it all before.

Now, I had to admit, Wescott's story explained everything. It explained why, despite my dad's health problems, they got a baby, at all. Why it never happened through the countless agencies that they'd hounded for so long, but then one day a baby fell in their laps through some smaller agency they didn't remember applying with.

If my guess was right, they were only 'approved', in the first place, to placate them. I'm sure there was probably some indicator on their account that said in no uncertain terms, they weren't actually going to get a child. Let alone a completely healthy baby.

There was no miraculous intervention in my placement with my parents. Just a twisted scientist who knew that my parents were desperate enough not to care to dig too deeply into the situation.

I also grudgingly had to admit, even if his motives were selfish and even if what he was doing was completely wrong on so many levels, he'd given my parents the best gift anyone ever had. The one thing they wanted most.

He'd made them happy by giving them the child they craved. Even if he planned on ripping it away again twenty-seven years later...

I couldn't help wonder, though, what took so long?

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My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the door open, behind me. I didn't bother to look at who it was. I guessed it was probably Wescott back, like he said he would be.

There was silence for a few seconds before he spoke.

"Well, really, Abi," he scolded. "I'd hoped you would be more mature than this." I didn't know or care if he was talking about the chair or the mess I'd made of the food.

I didn't turn to look at him and I didn't respond. I continued to stare out the window, hoping he would just go away and leave me alone.

I knew he wouldn't, though.

I sighed when I heard him move closer and stop a few feet away from me.

"Is that all out of your system now?" he asked.

"Sorry, no," I said. "I sort of got used to freedom. Old habits and all that. Guess it's a glitch in my perfect design."

"You're hardly chained to the wall," he said dryly.

"Right," I mumbled. Like being locked in a room was much better.

"This doesn't have to be nearly as unpleasant as you're making it," he said. "You can have or do just about anything you would like. You can have any book, movie, or specific gadget you might want. We have a pool, a jacuzzi, a weight room, allotted time for you to be outside and get some sun. You can have a pet if you'd like. And if there's something we don't have like...I don't know, a rock climbing wall or something, we can get it. All you have to do is ask."

I looked at him. "Sure, I can have anything," I said. "Anything but maybe a phone or a ride home."

He frowned.

"You can dress this place up as much as you want," I said. "But in the end, it will still just be a fancy prison. And I'm guessing that all those wonderful things I'm allowed," I put extra emphasis on the word. "To do will be heavily monitored as part of your research and to ensure that I don't go anywhere, right?"

He watched me for a minute before choosing to ignore me. "There's paper in the desk," he said. "You can make a list if you think of anything."

I shook my head in disgust and glared at him.

"And you'll find the book you were reading, on the shelf, amongst others that I thought you might like," he continued.

I glanced at the book shelf, involuntarily. There had to be a couple hundred volumes stacked on the shelves. My desire to escape reality and explore them warred with my aversion to complying with Wescott on any level.

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"Plenty of time for reading later," he said, regaining my attention. "For now, you are needed elsewhere for some tests." He watched me expectantly, apparently thinking I was going to jump at the opportunity.

I continued to scowl at him and had no intention of moving.

He sighed. "I suppose everything is going to have to be the hard way, with you, for a while?"

"Glad we're understanding each other," I said, sarcastically. "I told you I wasn't helping you, so this is a waste of your time."

"Luckily that battle of wills can wait a while," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Right now it'll just be blood tests and things."

I stared at him, coldly. "Well, I'm still not volunteering."

He pursed his lips and was quiet for a minute.

"Have it your way, then," he said before he turned and went back to the door.

For a second I stupidly thought I'd won and he was leaving me alone. I knew better when he stopped and called Adrian.

When the door opened this time, three beefy guys filed in the room. They all had on black pants and black shirts with a little logo in the corner that said, Bender Pharmaceuticals. I recognized at least one of them as being one of my abductors.

I shot up off the window ledge, kicked the chair away, and watched them with narrowed eyes. I was glad that I felt like myself again. I'd be able to fight back this time. And getting a little payback wouldn't suck.

They looked between me and Wescott, not moving.

"Sir?" Ninja #1 asked, glancing at the little remote that was in Wescott's hand.

He raised an eyebrow. "I hardly think the situation is that dire," Wescott said. "You are simply to escort her to the laboratory."

The same guy looked back at me resolutely and took a step in my direction.

I crouched into a defensive stance, making him glance back at Wescott.

"Subdue but don't hurt her," he said before he looked at me again. "You can still make this easy, Abi," he said. "I promise, you won't win this little contest."

I raised my chin defiantly and didn't answer.

"Alright, then," he said with a gleam in his eye that told me he was hoping for that response. He wanted to see how I would do against his lackeys. It was one of his stupid tests.

I scowled, realizing I was playing right along with what he wanted. I certainly wasn't backing down, though.

Wescott nodded and they all came at me. Ninja #1, followed by the other two who looked confident and fairly

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unconcerned about me posing any threat to the three of them.

Why was it that guys like this always expected me to be an easy target?

Too bad for them, I guess.

I dropped the first one with a sweeping kick that he didn't see coming. I was back on my feet, almost immediately and the other two stopped and glanced nervously at each other, apparently realizing they'd underestimated me.

They didn't wait long. They took a second to assess me before charging together.

I was a little disappointed when they came at me wide open for such easy hits and I was able to deflect them without any real effort. Was this the best Wescott could find? Were these really the buffoons that kidnapped me?

The first one recovered and made a grab at my arm. I easily avoided his grasp and sent him reeling back with a kick to the chest only to have the other two close in on me again.

The second guy got the same kick to the chest that I gave the first one. The other one, the one I recognized, got a well deserved punch to the face. I smiled sadistically when I felt his nose break under my fist.

While he held onto his nose, the other two charged again, getting a little smarter about their moves. They were fast, but I was faster and they were never able to get close enough to grab hold of me.

I'd never admit it to Wescott, of course, but this actually felt good. I'd never had a real test like this before. It was always in the controlled setting of a tournament or sparring practice, where the worst thing that happened if I lost was getting a few bumps or bruises and having to deal with the gloating of the winner. It was never so vital that I win. Never quite the rush of adrenaline.

We went on like that for a few minutes after the one with the broken nose, rejoined them. He wasn't fighting so great anymore. Not that he'd been fantastic before, but now he was more hesitant - afraid I might go for his face again, I think.

They all looked for a weakness in my defenses and I blocked their moves easily.

I got sick of the stupid little dance we were doing, after a while, though. They weren't getting anywhere and neither was I.

I also knew my endurance had its limit and I was rapidly approaching it. It might have been easy for me to anticipate what they were going to do and block them, but I was fighting three guys. They didn't have to expend nearly as much energy as I did.

Picking up the pace, I fought a little more aggressively and managed to drop two of them, saving the injured one for last.

Using a few fancy maneuvers, I positioned myself behind him, with his head in my hands so that all I would have to do is apply a little force to snap his neck.

The other guys got up and froze when they realized what I was ready to do.

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I looked at Wescott, breathing hard. "You know I could do it," I warned. "Tell them to back off and let me go."

He stared back at me, not seeming the least bit worried. I was really starting to hate that about him.

"Release the guard," he ordered.

"I'll do it, I swear." I tightened my hold.

"No, you won't," Wescott said calmly.

I glared at him, "You don't know-"

"You're not a murderer, Abi," he said.

I didn't move for a minute and neither did he. He was right, I wasn't a murderer. But did this really count?

"I'm not exactly the same person I was yesterday," I said. "Maybe I've changed."

"The great humanitarian that you are?" He smiled. "I don't think so. If I'm not mistaken, you don't even like to kill rodents. You, who volunteered at animal shelters, nursing homes, and various children's programs over the years? I really don't think you've changed quite that much." He tilted his head.

"Yeah, well I might just be that desperate now."

"I doubt that," he said.

I stared at him, not even sure, myself, for a minute.

"Alright fine," he sighed. "Do what you must and get it over with. But that isn't going to get you anywhere. You'll still be headed for the lab. I'll just have to find a replacement."

Was he serious? He didn't even care if I killed this guy?

The look of horror on my face must have been enough question for him.

"These men know that their job may be dangerous," he explained. "There are no guarantees."

From the look in his eye, I knew he meant it. He really wouldn't care.

"Here are your options, Abi," Wescott said. "You can release Danny and be escorted to the lab or you can follow through with your little plan, become a murderer, and still be escorted down to the lab. The second option would be quite inconvenient, I'll grant you, but the end result will still be the same."

I glanced away, starting to feel hopeless. It wouldn't make any difference. I'd thought a hostage might give me a little leverage, but I was wrong. Wescott was too cold, too uncaring. He'd probably do it himself if he saw the need.

"And I don't want to have to use this again."

I looked up to see him indicate the little black remote in his hand.

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"What's it going to be, Abi?"

What choice did I even have? I couldn't murder anyone and he knew it.

I dropped my hold and stepped away from the guard, seconds before the other two pounced on my arms and held me tight.

I probably could have freed myself, but there wasn't much point, right now. I was outnumbered and while I'd be able to hold them off for a while longer, it wouldn't be forever. Besides that, Wescott did have that stupid remote.

No, I'd wait for a better opportunity. At least I knew that whatever they had planned for me wouldn't do me any harm. At least not physically. Wescott couldn't risk it.

I'd be their calm little lab rat, for now. Let them think they had me under control.

This way I'd be able to get a good look around and plan my escape better. In all honesty, even if I was able to get away from them just now, I had no idea what awaited me outside the door, how to get out of the building, or even where to go once I did.

No, I could wait.

Chapter 4

"Is this really necessary?" I asked, irritated that my hands and feet were locked into place in addition to the unyielding strap around my waist.

I was currently strapped to the most uncomfortable metal chair ever made, in the lab that I'd heard so much about, surrounded by expensive looking equipment and instruments.

"After the few displays of yours I've seen in the short time you've been here?" Wescott asked. "Yes, I think it is."

I rolled my eyes. "What if I have to scratch my nose?" I wasn't kidding either. Inevitably, whenever my hands were tied up, my nose would start itching like crazy. Of course, up until now, they had always only been figuratively tied up...

He glanced at me. "You'll survive."

I huffed and sat, annoyed but passive as the woman in the white coat began sticking my arm with needle after needle.

"What? No objections?" He raised an eyebrow from his table a few feet away, as the woman injected something into my arm. "No angry tirades?"

"Would it make any difference?" I asked, giving him back the same sarcastic tone.

He smiled slightly. "Not really, but that didn't seem to deter you before."

"Yeah well, maybe I've decided to cooperate." I said, tentatively. May as well work on appearing that way, at least.

His smile became more pronounced as he glanced down at the computer in front of him. "I doubt that." He said confidently. "Playing possum is more like it."

The woman finished up with my arm and I scowled, annoyed that Wescott was apparently a step ahead of me.

"So, what took you so long?" I asked, when he started applying sensors to my pulse points. The woman walked across the room and started experimenting with my blood.

"Why'd you wait till I was so old to take me? Why even give me away at all, if I'm supposedly so valuable?"

He hooked the sensors up to a machine and fiddled around with the controls for a minute.

"If it had been solely up to me, you would have never left," he said.

What a miserable life that would have been. I probably wouldn't have even thought it was odd for a long time.

But something else registered in my mind. Wescott didn't have complete control. Something or someone had superseded his decision.

"So why did I?" I pushed when he didn't volunteer anything else.

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He regarded me for another minute before deciding to tell me.

"Your....mother, for lack of a better word, grew a conscience."

I snorted. "What a shame," I said sarcastically. "What do you mean by my mother?"

"The woman who's DNA we used to create you," he said. "She was my partner, from the beginning. We had this dream together. We worked tirelessly for years to perfect it. The plan had always been to keep you here. But then, after she saw you...how normal you seemed to be..." He sighed. "I suppose that's what comes from doing this particular project with a woman."

I rolled my eyes. As if only a woman would see the vast ethical problems of that plan. I glanced at the woman working with the blood to see her reaction to that comment. Either she didn't hear or she didn't care, she didn't even glance up.

"Considering we used her DNA, and she was one of the leaders of the project, she had more say in what happened to you than anyone else. I didn't see it as being a problem when we had the same goal."

"But then it became a problem for you," I guessed.

"Not actually," he said. "I was annoyed at first, but then I saw the advantages of having you raised normally. Growing up in this environment, I would never be sure how practical many of your results would actually be. You wouldn't have the same family ties, opportunities for friends and achievements, or exposure to the real world. So, I agreed it was for the best and you were to be raised under fairly close surveillance until you turned eighteen, when you would be returned to this facility."

I looked at him curiously. I was twenty-seven.

"Obviously, we did not retrieve you on schedule," he said, reading my expression. "When the time came, Helen thought it would be best to allow you to finish college, so the age was pushed back to twenty-one or twenty-two. Then, she said you ought to get some real life experience, so it was twenty-five. Then it was something else."

"It was obvious, Helen had no intention of bringing you back. She was ready to throw away all our work, all our time."

I couldn't help but notice, I hadn't yet met Helen.

"Let me guess," I said. "You were able to convince her otherwise?" I asked, not really expecting that to be it.

He smiled. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose."

"So where is she?" I asked, warily, already guessing the answer. "Will I meet her?"

Wescott pursed his lips. "I'm afraid not. Helen's no longer with us. She...passed away."

"You killed her," I said, realizing I somehow knew that as soon as I heard she'd gotten in his way.

He raised his eyebrows as if to say 'and?'.

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I stiffened at his callousness. Not only was he a murderer, he was almost proud of it. And he had complete control over me at the moment.

"She lost her vision," he said.

"You mean, she got in your way," I accused.

He shrugged. "I set out to accomplish something and I'm not about to let anyone stand in my way now that I'm so close to my goal."

"You don't even care, do you?" I said.

"I care that she had a brilliant mind and, for a while, was an exceptional partner," he said. "But about the rest, no, not particularly."

"You have no soul," I said, wanting more than anything, to be able to distance myself from him, right now.

"Alas, no," he said. "I rid myself of that long ago."

I shrank back into the chair when he moved to adjust one of the sensors.

He paused. "Don't worry, Abi, you're safe from my soullessness, for now. You're far too valuable."

I just glared at him as he continued with his tests.

"Is that what you're going to do to me?" I asked. "When I'm not useful any longer?" To the world, I was already dead.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," he said, nonchalantly.

I almost laughed. "Right," I said. "Why should I be worried about that when you're a cold-blooded murderer. Silly me."

He smiled. "I meant, you're going to be useful for quite a while."

"Meaning what?" I asked. "How long do you intend to keep this up? How many tests could you possibly have to do?"

He met my eyes. "I intend to test absolutely everything about you. Every body system, your mental capacity, your entire life cycle."

I just stared back at him not wanting to believe any of this. Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice.

"Of course, I probably won't personally document your death, since I expect you will outlive me by several years. But someone will, I assure you."

I was supposed to live out the rest of my natural life in this awful place? Another sixty or seventy years? That was worse than being murdered after he finished all his tests.

"And what am I supposed to do until then?" I asked. "Are you just going to lock me up for fifty years?"

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"Oh, there will be plenty about you to keep us occupied in the meantime, I'm sure. Besides, I doubt it will be from old age. There are all kinds of tests we could do that might be fatal, which, of course, aren't exactly practical, right now. But given another forty years or so..." He shrugged.

Wescott turned his back to me and I tried to squeeze out of my arm restraints, rethinking my plan to appear cooperative. He wasn't buying it anyway.

He turned back, caught me trying to free myself, and raised his eyebrows, looking amused.

I slumped back in the chair. My attempts weren't doing anything anyway.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, wanting to know what he was planning. "What about me, specifically, is supposed to keep you busy? What tests?"

"Let's not worry about any of that just yet," he said, vaguely.

I scowled as he typed things into the computer. If there was one thing I hated more than my current situation, it was not knowing what was coming.

He met my eyes. "I'm not trying to be cruel, Abi. This is the way your life is going to be from now on. The faster you accept it, the better off you'll be."

"Well, maybe I'll give up," I said "If everything's as hopeless for me as you say. Maybe I'll ruin everything for you." There was no point to a life like this.

"I highly doubt that," he said, unconcerned.

I just watched him, daring me not to try something.

"You're hardly suicidal," he said. "Anyway, you wouldn't be allowed to be."

"Really?" I asked, almost smiling. I could think of half a dozen ways to end my life, off the top of my head. I think it might be worth it to ruin this for him.

He watched me for a second, judging how serious I might be. "Alright," he finally said. "Have it your way. I'll put you on suicide watch, even though it's unnecessary. It's really just more inconvenient for you." He shrugged. "Less privacy."

"Like I have any anyway." I rolled my eyes.

"Still, you aren't the type of person to commit suicide," he said, confidently. "You're highly logical, yet somehow an optimist. You're a fighter. You'd never simply give up. Even though I'm telling you otherwise, you'll never stop thinking that you'll somehow be able to escape."

That was all true, however, I wasn't about to admit it. Besides, it wouldn't be like giving up. It'd be like winning.

"You can watch me as much as you want," I said. "No doubt, you will anyway, but accidents do happen, you know. And you can't force me to eat."

He crossed his arms and leaned against the counter behind him. "On the contrary, I can. If necessary, I'll have

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you hooked up to a feeding tube and put in a padded room," he said. "I certainly have the means to do so, and it would, again, merely be more inconvenient for you. I'm sure it won't be necessary, though."

I just stared at him defiantly. Apparently he didn't know how stubborn I could be. Even then, I'd figure something out.

"But enough of this," he said. "We are wasting time. We can have this battle another time."

Yes, we would, I thought. So much for getting him to think I was going to accept any of this. Like he said, I was a fighter, and fight, I would.

Chapter 5

"You may as well get rid of that, because I'm not touching it," I said, nodding at the tray of food on the table.

The guard assigned to watch me, stood five feet away, looking ready to wrestle the plastic spork from my hand at a moment's notice.

Honestly, how were people even supposed to eat with those things? And did Wescott really expect me to do something as unimaginative and painful as stabbing myself with a fork? Besides, I wasn't inclined to do something so obvious.

Wescott hadn't wasted any time putting me on suicide watch. By the time I got back to my room, every hard surface, that I could potentially hit my head on, was now padded. The bathroom door already didn't lock, but now I couldn't plug the drain in either the tub or the sink, and any time I was in there, I was accompanied by a female guard.

At the moment, it happened to be Maggie, a girl with dark hair pulled into a pony tail. Despite being equipped with one of those remotes, she looked terrified of me.

The fact that I would have company in the bathroom certainly wasn't an incentive to start eating, either.

The guard didn't move after my comment. Apparently, he was prepared to wait a while. Well, fine. Let him wait. I crossed my arms and slouched down in the chair.

"It's ok, Ralph." Wescott's voice came through the speaker in the ceiling. "Take the food away."

I looked around for the camera that was obviously hidden somewhere. Maybe the smoke detector doubled as a camera...

"You will not be allowed to be difficult after today, Abi," he said addressing me.

I attempted to look as bored as possible and wasn't the least bit convinced. He'd have to put the feeding tube in me. And then he'd have to keep it there. I certainly wasn't going to sit still for it.

"I suggest you take a shower now," Wescott continued as Ralph cleared the tray of food away.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not in the habit of showering with an audience." Let them deal with my bad hygiene too.

Wescott sighed over the speaker, but otherwise didn't comment. Good, I hoped I was frustrating him.

I sat stubbornly in the chair for a while, fighting the depression again. Sure, it was fun to thwart Wescott where I could, but it was a small consolation to being held prisoner.

The lights suddenly went out, except for the night light, glowing from the bathroom

"You've got to be kidding me," I mumbled. "Lights out?" I asked incredulous.

"Lights out will be every night at eleven." Wescott's voice came through the speaker again. "I did tell you to take your shower earlier. You will need to be well rested for tomorrow."

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I shrugged and didn't move.

"I will give you a sedative, if necessary," he threatened.

I glared into the darkness for a minute before deciding to give in. At least sleep would be an escape from this nightmare. I was pretty exhausted, too.

"Fine," I said, going over to the bed.

"You'll find pajamas in the dresser," he said.

I flopped down on the bed, ignoring him. I lay back, got comfortable, and proceeded to lie there, completely wide awake.

After, what must have been a few hours, Maggie was replaced by someone else and I was no closer to sleeping than I'd been before.

My mind wouldn't shut down. I kept trying to think of possibilities for escape and I was coming up with nothing. I was going to be watched, literally all the time.

The fact that they thought I needed a person to guard me in the bathroom, told me there wasn't a camera in there. So at least I'd have a little privacy once I got rid of that. Not much considering the door still didn't lock, but at least it was something.

Other than that, I was going to be monitored 24/7. There was exactly one way out of my room and I had no control over it. When I was allowed to leave, I'd be heavily guarded, no doubt.

Even if I somehow managed to get away, my trip to the lab earlier, let me know there were a lot more people and secure doors to get passed. Not to mention the remotes everyone would have.

I'd never felt so utterly hopeless before. I didn't like the feeling. Wescott had been right to say I was an optimist. I always looked for that bright spot. Even in the most depressing of books, I could always find something to hope for.

My life hadn't been ideal before now. I'd never had a lot of friends and no boyfriends. I just didn't connect easily to people. Growing up, I'd always been the smart kid. At first I'd been teased, but once the other kids learned that I could beat them up, they pretty much left me alone.

I didn't get a lot of genuine offers of friendship. Partly because I was, admittedly, not that friendly all the time. I didn't have patience for the whole high school drama thing. I didn't care about gossip and quite frankly most of them were down right whiny. I craved more school work, while other kids griped about the bare minimum we were actually required to do.

Yes, I know I'm a nerd.

Any interest I had in boys, was generally just admiration for their looks. I hadn't met many that held my attention for very long. The ones I seemed to attract were either only interested in getting physical, not all that bright, or highly immature. Or all three. Which, again, I had no patience for.

The only boy I ever would have considered as more than just cute was Daniel Quincy from college. He was a mechanical engineering major who was taller than me with dark hair, baby blue eyes, played the piano, and

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hated tomatoes. In other words, the perfect guy for me. Or so I thought, anyway.

We had exactly two dates before he found out I was a pre-med major in addition to my mechanical engineering major and had a perfect 4.0.

He was not a double major and didn't have a 4.0.

Apparently, he didn't like the idea of me being smarter than him because after he found that out, he hardly spoke to me and then started dating some other girl.

I basically gave up on guys after that. I still thought I had plenty of time to fall in love. If there was such a thing.

But I always had that hope in the back of my mind that one day, my life would come together. I'd know exactly what I wanted to do instead of jumping from one job that bored me to the next. I'd have that perfect guy to love, or at least like a whole lot and be able to totally trust, and I'd be totally happy, no matter how unlikely that all seemed as I got older.

I'd always been able to see things changing somehow. I'd hoped.

Now, I had no hope. I couldn't think of a single way to even get free of this room, let alone the building. I was living in a nightmare with no hope of waking up.

I struggled to keep from crying as I lay there, staring at the ceiling. I did not cry and I was certainly not going to give Wescott the satisfaction of seeing it happen now.

But deep down I just wanted to curl in a ball and sob. For the first time in a very very long time, I wanted my mother. Now I regretted pushing away from her coddling so much as I was growing up. I'd never been that cuddly little kid. I'd always been independent. I didn't want my mom holding my hand when something was hard. I wanted to do it myself.

Until now. Now, when it was too late.

What I wouldn't give for one of her hugs right now and to be able to tell her I loved her.

Chapter 6

I must have drifted off at some point because the next thing I was conscious of was a loud, obnoxious noise assaulting my ears.

After failing to slap off the non-existent alarm clock, I covered my ears and squinted to locate the source of the noise.

I groaned when I realized where I was. Sleep had proven to be a temporary escape from my prison.

"Good morning." Wescott's voice came through the speaker, after the noise cut off and I uncovered my ears. "I hope you slept well."

I sat up and glared at the smoke detector, not knowing where else to direct my hatred. I was positive he'd see it though.

The door swooshed open and a burly guard carried in a new tray of food. It was the same guard, in fact, who's nose I broke yesterday. He put the tray on the table and gave me a spiteful, superior look as he waited for me to walk over to him.

I crossed my arms and turned my glare on him.

"I have something to do," Wescott announced. "When I come back, I expect you to have eaten, Abi. This is your last chance to do things the easy way. Don't make me become unpleasant," he warned.

I rolled my eyes and only moved to throw my legs over the side of the bed.

"Nice bandage," I said spitefully to the guard, after a minute. "Does it hurt?"

He narrowed his eyes before he smirked. He walked over and stopped a foot in front of me, making sure to flash the little black remote in his hand.

I continued to scowl at him as he towered over me.

"Just give me a reason to use this," he said in a low voice.

"You people don't need a reason," I scoffed. "But I'm sure you have to justify it to your boss," I said, not afraid of him. "You couldn't just use it for any little thing, now could you?"

"Maybe," he said, trying to intimidate me.

"Well, go ahead then," I taunted, knowing he was bluffing. "You seem to like being a bully. Tell me, do you get your jollies by abducting and beating up women?"

"You're not exactly a regular woman, now are you?" he said.

I just glared at him.

"Then again," he said before he sat down next to me. "Maybe you'd be better." He was way too close and was obviously trying to make me cower away.

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I refused to be intimidated. I gave myself enough distance to turn and glare at him, daring him to try something. It would be fun to beat this moron up again.

He leered back, leaning in a little, trying to force me back.

I didn't budge.

After a minute, his hand found my leg.

I glanced down at it before I turned my cold gaze back to his face.

"Get your hand off of me," I warned.

"Or what?" He smirked and rubbed my thigh with his thumb.

I smiled coldly before I hauled off and punched his already broken nose.

His hands flew to his face as he cursed profusely. I stood up, willing him to come at me for more.

In another second, though, I collapsed on the bed, holding my ears against the excruciating noise. Apparently he felt justified to use his remote.

I was vaguely aware that I was screaming as I waited for the head-splitting noise to subside. It wasn't though. When Wescott had done it, it had only been a few seconds as a demonstration. Now it was being used to inflict pain out of spite and could go on for a while.

I pushed against the bed, trying to burrow down into the blanket, hoping to muffle the noise, but it didn't help in the slightest.

After an eternity, it cut off. I lay stiffly on my side, shaking, panting, and sweating.

I was aware of Wescott's angry voice as he yelled at the guard, long before I was able to open my eyes. I couldn't focus on what he was actually saying though.

I opened my eyes and pushed myself into a sitting position, still shaking and trying to get my breathing under control. I didn't say anything as I scowled at Wescott and the other guards behind him. The idiot with the broken nose was gone.

"I'm sorry," Wescott said. "It isn't meant to be used in that way."

"No," I said, through my teeth. "But it was." I almost fell over in shock that he bothered to apologize.

"Danny will be punished," he said. "That sort of thing shouldn't happen again."

"Gee, that makes it all better," I said spitefully. "As long as it exists, it will always have the potential to be used in that way."

Wescott pursed his lips before he apparently decided to just drop it.

"Eat your breakfast," he said, turning to leave.

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"No." I crossed my arms.

He turned back. "You've already had a difficult morning," he said. "Don't make it worse. Eat."

I raised my chin. "Do whatever you want to me," I said. "Go ahead, press your stupid remote all you want. All you'll accomplish will be to make me hate you more. I told you, I'm not helping you. Nothing you do to me will make me want to cooperate with you."

He watched me for a minute before he turned back to face me.

"Alright, fine," he said. "Apparently you need a little motivation."

I tensed waiting for whatever he had planned, as he reached into his pocket.

I watched curiously as he pulled out a phone.

A phone?

He put it on speaker and dialed.

"Sir?" Came the quick response after two rings.

"Yes, is everything in order?" Wescott asked.

"Yes sir," the man answered.

"Very good," Wescott said before he looked at me. "At this moment, Charlie is stationed outside your mother's house in a van that would appear to be from the gas company."

I narrowed my eyes.

"As soon as I tell him to, he will proceed to tell your mother that he's there to check out her house to make sure there are no gas leaks." He raised an eyebrow.

"I don't believe you," I said, stubbornly. He was only trying to scare me. He wouldn't just murder an innocent woman, would he?

I was afraid I already knew the answer to that, though.

"Alright, Charlie, go ahead," he said into the phone.

Charlie shuffled around and I heard what must have been the van door slamming. A few minutes later I heard my mother's voice answering the door, sounding tired.

Wescott watched me intently and I fought the angry tears that threatened to spill down my face.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Maam," Charlie said. "But we've had reports of a few gas leaks in the area and we've been doing routine checks to make sure everything's in order. May I come in? Here's my ID."

Say no, Mom, I thought. Say no!

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"Oh, I guess that would be alright," my mom said after a minute.

I bit my lip and closed my eyes, feeling like I was about to lose the battle with the tears. She was always so cautious about everything. Why couldn't she be that way now?

I imagined him walking through my house, behind my mother as she made little comments, apologizing for the state of the house and other things.

"Now we both know there's no leak, right now, Abi," Wescott said. "But it's up to you if there will be one by the time Charlie leaves. After that, all it would take is a tiny spark. Lighting a match perhaps," he said.

My mom always had candles going. Wescott probably knew that.

"Here we are," my mom said. "Can I get you anything?"

"A glass of water would be great," Charlie said. "Thank you."

A few seconds later, he asked, "Boss?"

"What's it going to be?" Wescott asked me.

I gave him a look of pure hatred and he raised an eyebrow.

"I want your total cooperation," he said. "Or your mother is going to have a very unfortunate problem."

I looked away from him, hating that I really had no choice.

"Here you are," my mom said. "Is everything alright?"

"Running out of time, Abi," Wescott pushed.

"Fine," I mumbled, grudgingly.

"I'm sorry?" he said. I'm sure I wasn't imagining the taunting in his voice.

I glared at him. "Fine," I said again. "I'll do what you want."

"I thought you might." He smiled. "Alright Charlie," he said. "No need just yet."

"Everything seems to be fine, Maam," I heard Charlie say before Wescott disconnected the phone.

"Keep in mind," he said. "I can always send Charlie back there, should you decide to become difficult."

I looked away, disgusted.

"Now," he said. "After you've eaten, you will shower and put on one of the outfits provided in the dresser. Top drawer."

"I'll shower when I can do it alone," I said stubbornly, looking back at him.

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"You were the one who convinced me you might be a danger to yourself," he said, almost smiling. Probably laughing at me, actually.

I rolled my eyes. "I think you know I'm pretty safe in the bathroom. Besides what am I gonna do? Give myself a concussion on the floor? You ought to know I'd go for something else. I'd pick something a little more guaranteed."

He watched me for a few seconds before he looked towards the bathroom. "Alright, Amy," he said. "You may go."

The girl in the bathroom didn't waste any time. She came through the open bathroom door before scurrying out of the room.

"I do hope, for your mother's sake, you won't be foolish enough to even attempt anything," he said. "Successful or not, your mother would be the one to pay the price."

I just scowled.

"Eat," Wescott said before he turned to leave, followed by the two guards.

After the door swooshed shut again, I sat sulking on the bed for another minute, before his voice came over the speaker.

"That wasn't a request, Abi," he said.

I sighed and, having no choice, got up.

I still wasn't sure where the camera was, but knowing he was watching, I flashed my middle finger at the empty room before I went over to the table and sat.

It wasn't a gesture I was prone to use often. Unfortunately it was all I could do at the moment. He couldn't make me be pleasant about any of this, at least.

Chapter 7

Over the next few weeks, I fell into a routine. I was woken up, by that obnoxious alarm every morning at seven. I'd have breakfast and get ready before doing my mandatory morning work out until lunch. After lunch, I'd participate in whatever testing Wescott wanted for the day, have a few free hours outside and then go back to my room for dinner and to relax before lights out at eleven.

I despised that I was getting used to it, but I really had no choice.

I wasn't going along blindly, though. I made Wescott prove to me, every morning that my mom was fine.

He wound up setting up a surveillance camera facing into the kitchen window, so I could see her for myself.

Of course, I knew he wasn't above lying and telling me she was fine, using old footage and slapping today's date on it, so I demanded more, sometimes.

It was getting funny to watch him come up with plausible excuses to have someone knock on the door, so I could be sure what I was seeing and hearing wasn't fabricated.

But it broke my heart to see my mom the way she was. I was really all she had left. My dad died a few years ago and even though she had other family, she wasn't very close to any of them.

Now whenever I saw her, she just seemed so lonely and broken. She didn't exactly mope around or go catatonic or anything, she just seemed so sad. Her eyes had a sort of hollow look and whenever I heard her speak, she sounded exhausted.

I usually couldn't bare to watch her for more than a few minutes, just to ensure that Wescott hadn't done anything to her.

After I was satisfied that she was, indeed, safe, Wescott would proceed to threaten me, by telling me I better cooperate completely before telling me the unpleasant and/or inane tests he had in store for me today. He also assured me that he had a pretty good idea of what my results should look like and if they weren't at least in the ballpark, he'd assume I wasn't cooperating.

It became part of my daily routine. I'd demand to see my mom and he'd threaten me.

The testing hadn't been too bad, really. That first week, I'd been running laps and doing other types of exercises, testing my speed and endurance. Then it had been puzzles and things, testing my logic and sequencing skills.

Now I was onto some hands-on tests. Taking things apart and putting them back together, that sort of thing.

Thankfully, that was over for the day. It wasn't difficult, really, just boring. I'd much rather be doing the mind puzzles than the mechanical stuff.

I was sitting outside, in the courtyard, during my free hours, which was really a joke. None of my time was free. I couldn't even opt to stay inside for my supposed free time. I was forced to at least sit outside to get sun.

It was pretty cruel, I thought - being so close to the highway, yet not being allowed to go near it. There wasn't even a fence to hold me here. Just three or four guards hovering around me and surveillance cameras trained

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on me.

Most days I'd just sit and stare at the road, fantasizing about my escape. But of course, it was completely impossible with so many people watching me.

Now that I'd sort of become resigned to staying here, at least until some miraculous circumstance arose, I started noticing that many of the guards looked familiar. I realized that I'd been seeing them all my life. Not that I ever met any of them, they'd just been hanging around in the background of wherever it was. Some of them I could place, others I couldn't.

The tall blond guy had been one of my coworkers at my summer job at the super market, during college. The petite red-headed girl had been a camp counselor when I was about twelve. Another man had been the guy I always assumed was homeless, who I saw when I would walk to and from my car at one of my jobs a few years ago.

It was crazy how many people I recognized. I really had been watched my whole life. Creepy.

"Where do I know you from?" I asked the guard standing a few feet to my left. He looked to be about my age. He had black, wavy hair, brown eyes, and was fairly short for a guy. Unlike a lot of the guards around here, I noticed he seemed to be relatively human. He never made rude comments or looked at me like I was beneath him. If I wasn't mistaken, he actually looked like he felt a little sorry for me.

Not that pity was something I necessarily wanted, but decent human contact wasn't very easy to come by here.

He looked a little startled that I actually spoke to him. Usually I just ignored everyone.

"I was at Princeton with you," he said after a few seconds.

"Ah," I said. "You're the guy who would always avoid looking at me or talking to anyone."

"Yeah," he said. "Not really allowed."

"Right," I nodded. "So was it worth it?"

He looked at me curiously.

"I hope you were paid well," I said sarcastically. "By the way, what is the going price of a conscience these days?"

He seemed flustered. "I didn't...it wasn't..."

I raised my eyebrows.

"It wasn't really like that," he said.

"Yeah? What was it like?"

"I didn't know about you," he said. "I didn't realize you were..."

"Human?" I supplied.

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He nodded. "I didn't really understand what I was getting involved in," he admitted. "It was this ideal job. I'd get paid to go to Princeton and be guaranteed this well-paying job for at least five years after graduation with great benefits. I couldn't turn it down."

I just looked at him. Were people that naive? Things are never so easy.

"Once I got in...there wasn't any getting out," he looked at me seriously. "I mean, I can quit if I want, but I'll never really be free again. I'll be monitored forever and if they suspect I'm about to do something...undesirable, well..."

I nodded and looked down, understanding the rest. If Wescott thought he was going to tell anyone what he'd been a part of, he'd either be killed or something equally bad would happen. I guess I wasn't the only one who was trapped. Although it wasn't nearly as bad for him.

"I sent your mom a letter," he said suddenly.

I looked up at him curiously.

"I just..." He flushed. "I just said I knew you from school and that I heard about what happened. I told her how much you loved her and if she needed anything...well..." He shrugged.

I half-smiled. "Thanks." I guess that was as close as giving my mom actual closure as I could hope to get.

He blushed and looked down.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Mark." He looked back at me.

"Well, Mark," I said. "I can't really say I appreciate what you're doing, but it's nice having a decent person to talk to for a change."

He gave me a small smile. "I know it doesn't help, but I'm sorry," he said. "If I could..." He looked around nervously, afraid to even say it. "Well, you know..." He glanced to the highway.

"Thanks," I said. He was right it didn't help anything, but at least one person knew how messed up this all was and would help me if he could.

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"You're not trying, Abi!" Wescott ranted after I failed a second time, to complete his stupid test in the time he wanted. I was trying to reassemble a particularly complicated motor.

"I'm not perfect, you know," I said irritably. "Sometimes things take a few tries."

He narrowed his eyes at me, trying to figure out if I was telling the truth or just trying to annoy him.

"Why would I try to screw things up now?" I asked, annoyed. "Don't you think I remember that my mom's in jeopardy every single second? You remind me often enough."

He just watched me for a few seconds. "We'll pick this up tomorrow," he said before turning to leave the

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room.

I rolled my eyes, looked down at the pile in front of me, and couldn't help smiling. I might not have done it on purpose, but it was fun when I succeeded in frustrating him.

I started cleaning up the smaller pieces in front of me, putting them in the designated box, when my eyes landed on the small metal tool I'd been using as a screw driver.

It must have been an oversight. Wescott never left me alone with tools. It's not like I could really do much with them, it was just a precaution so I'd be completely helpless all the time.

Not knowing what I'd be able to use it for, I quickly shoved it in my pocket before I continued cleaning up the other stuff as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

By the time the guard came in the room, I had everything put away and I got up to be escorted outside.

It was very hard not to put my hand in my pocket to make sure the little tool was still there. But I knew if I did, I'd only draw attention to it and they'd take it from me.

I didn't know why it was so important that I got to keep it. It wasn't a gun or anything terribly useful, but it just felt good having it. It was a small rebellion. One of the only things I could really get away with.

I spent my free hours talking to Mark. I discovered he had this shift pretty much all the time. I got to know him and he'd give me updates from the real world.

Even though talking to Mark was, sadly, the highlight of my day, I was itching to get back to my room.

Once I finally got there, I nonchalantly went into the bathroom and took the little tool out of my pocket, needing to make sure it was really there.

After looking at it for a minute, I started looking for a place to hide it. Obviously anywhere in my room was out of the question, since whatever I did in there, was on camera.

It had to be somewhere here, in the bathroom.

I looked around, disappointed that there didn't seem to be any place to put it. There wasn't any furniture in here - no cabinets or anything and I couldn't hide it behind the toilet because it would be too visible to whoever came in to clean.

I looked up, noticing the air vent.

I watched it for a minute, wondering if I stuck it in there, if I'd be able to get it back, when it hit me.

The air vent, stupid! I could get out through the air vent!

It was screwed to the ceiling, but thanks to my new little treasure, that wouldn't be a problem. The vent was more than big enough for me to fit through. The only problem would be actually getting up into it. I could reach if I put one foot on the tub and one on the toilet. I'd just focus on pull-ups in my work out for a little while, until my arms were strong enough to get me up there.

I smiled and felt hope for the first time in more than a month. I was getting out of here.

## Chapter 8

I spent the next week, working relentlessly on strengthening my arms and perfecting my plan in my head.

I figured with another week of exercise, I'd be able to pull myself up through the ceiling without a problem.

Potentially, my problems would start after I got up there. I wasn't sure where the vent would lead me. I saw several places, outside, that could be possibilities - all unsettlingly high. Not that the height bothered me, so much, but the uncertainty did.

I already decided my escape would have to be at night, when the guards were most likely pretty lax. How exciting could watching me sleep be? Especially since everything was dark on the screen.

Also, I didn't know if there were guards outside, at night. I was hoping that Wescott was cocky enough to think he didn't need them, but I couldn't be sure.

And then of course, when I finally did get away, I'd have to figure out how to stay that way. I didn't know where I was or where to go, I didn't have any money or food or anything else helpful. I didn't know anyone that I'd be able to ask for help. I was supposed to be dead, so going to the police wasn't exactly wise. There would probably be a story on the news and my mom would be notified. And, by default, so would Wescott.

And then there was my mom. That was the real problem in all of this - I couldn't be sure Wescott wouldn't hurt her if I escaped. Especially if I failed in my attempt.

I tried not to worry about it, though. I wouldn't fail and Wescott was only using my mom as motivation. He couldn't motivate me if I wasn't here.

I pushed those thoughts out of my head and focused on the stupid task that Wescott had me working on for the day. I'd been distracted all last week, thinking about my escape, and it showed in my work. I knew Wescott was getting annoyed and I worried he might try to 'motivate' me, to get me to meet his expectations.

He came and stood over me as I worked.

I ignored him and kept working for a minute, but then I gave in and looked up. I'd never worked well with an audience.

"What?" I asked, annoyed.

"You aren't performing well, Abi." A slight threat colored his voice.

I sighed. "Well maybe I need a break." I'd been working on assembling and disassembling these stupid things for too long.

He raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you need a little motivation."

I stared at him for a minute, doubtful. His threat was getting old.

"And what motivation would that be?" I asked. "I'm not sure if you've realized it, but you can only kill my mother one time." Not that I wanted that to happen, but I knew he wouldn't waste that resource on me simply being unfocused.

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"So if I'm not doing as well, because I'm burned out doing this stupid work day after day, and you use that, what then? What's to make me want to do anything for you after that?" I asked. "I think you're full of it."

He watched me for a few seconds. "Your mother's not the only motivation I'm willing to use," he said.

"Meaning what?" I challenged. "I don't have any close friends and no one else I care about enough for you to use." I was more thankful than ever that I'd always been a loner.

"No one at all?" he asked in a tone that said he didn't agree. "Perhaps no one you love quite like your mother. I'll give you that. But there is an endless supply of people in this world," he said. "For instance, all those darling children you volunteered with over the years, or others like them."

I just watched him warily, wondering what he was getting at.

"It would be a shame for some unfortunate accident to befall them, don't you think?" he asked. "And for you to have to see it and know it was your fault." He shook his head and tisked in mock sympathy.

I just glared at him.

"Or perhaps other people you've known over the years," he mused. "Some old school friends, perhaps? Former co-workers? Or maybe our very own Mark, who you seem so fond of. Oh, I know you don't have quite the loyalty to any of them as you do to your mother, but I also know you would hate for anything to happen to any of them on your account."

I clenched my jaw, my resolve for escape growing stronger.

"Do not push me, Abi," he said. "I assure you, I can come up with plenty of motivation for you."

He watched me for another minute before he said, "Now, try again and I'd better see some improvement."

My hands balled into fists and I had to force myself to do what he said. I couldn't act as if I had a plan. For now, I had to play the cooperative little inmate so he wouldn't suspect anything.

Let him think he had me under his thumb, for now. In a week, I'd show him he didn't.

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"Why are we going this way?" I asked the guard who escorted me from where I'd been working. We turned the corner, going back to my room, rather than outside, like usual.

"Your free time's been canceled today," the guard said.

"Why?" I asked. I didn't care so much. I was a prisoner either way, but I didn't like spontaneous changes.

"You'll be informed once you're back in your room," was all he said.

I rolled my eyes and huffed in irritation. Did this idiot not know anything or was he just trying to be obnoxious?

I got back to my room and found my dinner waiting. Which wasn't unusual, but the time was. I normally

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didn't eat for another two hours or so.

The really unusual thing was the shimmering, gold dress hanging on the hook on the wall and the high heeled matching shoes underneath it.

I was about ask the guard what was going on, but by the time I turned around, he was gone.

Before I could even think of what to do next, Adrian's voice came through the speaker.

"You are to eat your dinner and then get dressed in the outfit selected for you," he said.

I crossed my arms and glared at the speaker.

"Well, what if I don't feel like eating right now?" I asked, annoyed.

"Either you eat now, or you don't eat," he said.

I shrugged, walked over to the bed and flopped down on it.

"You are to be dressed within the hour," Adrian said.

"Am I going to the prom?" I asked sarcastically. I'd never been the kind of girl to wear dresses and I had no intention of putting that one on. Especially not knowing what it was for.

Adrian didn't answer me and I continued to lie on the bed for the next forty minutes until the door opened and Wescott walked in, looking unhappy.

After glancing at him initially, I looked at the ceiling and attempted to ignore him.

"You were instructed to eat and get dressed?" he asked.

"I was," I said, not bothering to look at him.

"Then why haven't you done either one?" he asked, irritated.

I shrugged. "Didn't feel like it."

"It wasn't optional," he said. "It's too late for you to eat now, but I'll give you ten minutes to get yourself dressed."

"And if I don't?" I challenged, sitting up and looking at him.

"If you don't," he said. "You'll be overpowered and someone else will do it for you. Which, I'm sure, will be very unpleasant."

He turned to leave the room.

"I don't like surprises," I said, annoyed. "I want to know what's going on."

He paused and looked back at me. "Fine," he said. "I'll tell you what you want to know, after you're dressed."

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Wescott continued out of the room and the door closed behind him.

I frowned at the door for a minute before I got up to put on the ridiculous dress. I honestly wasn't in the mood for a power struggle right now. Besides I didn't doubt that he was serious about having people dress me. And judging by the way he said 'overpowered', I doubted they would be females.

No thank you. I'd had to endure more than Danny's crude behavior, since I'd been here and I didn't want to give those perverts any leverage.

I could wait a week to fight. That's when it would really count. For now I'd go along with whatever stupid plans Wescott had for me.

I'd be able to get some information from him this way, too.

I wasn't planning on sticking around past this week, but I was still curious about what they could possibly be planning on. I mean, it had only been a month and they'd tested nearly everything about me. What more could there possibly be? I couldn't be assembling and disassembling things for much longer.

I suppose there could be something coming up for my memory and reaction time, but really another month or two would be more than enough time for that. There had to be a lot more in Wescott's plans, otherwise why bother faking my death? He could have kidnapped me and had me suddenly reappear if this was really all he wanted.

But I couldn't think of anything that I would be needed for, for longer than maybe a year if they were really dragging it out.

Heck, I might even voluntarily have come back from time to time if he'd offered to let me go back home and live a normal life.

Well ok, probably not voluntarily, but he obviously had the resources to make me come back. There was no reason he should need to keep me here forever.

And sure, he wasn't exactly a saint, but I could admit, he wasn't unnecessarily cruel. His cruelty all had a purpose in his mind.

So why keep me here and make me miserable unless it was completely necessary?

I had no idea why it would be necessary, but I was suddenly very glad I had an escape plan.

Chapter 9

I was sitting, cross-legged, picking at the bread from my dinner, dressed and ready, when Wescott came back into my room.

We regarded each other for a minute before he said, "I think I might fall over in shock. You voluntarily cooperated, for once? I think I'm a little disappointed."

The way he said it was a little funny and if I didn't completely despise him with a fiery passion, I might have cracked a smile or something. Instead, I popped another piece of bread into my mouth and shrugged.

"It was worth more to me this way," I said, reminding him that he was obligated to give me answers.

He sighed. "Bribery, of course. I'll have to remember to use that more often."

As if there was just so much that I wanted from him that bribing me would work more than this once. Not that I'd be here for it anyway. I just watched him waiting for him to tell me what was going on.

"I'll tell you where we're headed, in the car," he said.

"Car?"

"Well, you didn't think I dressed you up to stay in your room, did you?" he asked, sarcastically, making me feel stupid. Obviously, I was going somewhere.

I looked at him, unable to think of a snippy remark to that.

"Well?" he said impatiently, gesturing toward the door.

Deciding to play nice for now, and, admittedly curious about where we were going, I got up and walked to the door.

I was led through the building, in a direction I'd never gone before, and wound up in a garage full of cars. Like everything else I'd seen since I'd been here, the cars mostly looked expensive.

I hadn't recognized the name on the label on my dress - I'd never cared much for fashion - but based on the look and feel of it, I knew it must have cost upward of \$500, at the very least. And I guessed that the tux he had on was pretty costly, as well.

No one could accuse Wescott of being cheap.

We got into a black Mercedes and I looked at him expectantly as the car started moving.

"Well?" I gave him the same snotty tone he'd given me back in my room.

"We are going to a benefit, of sorts," he said, looking at the phone in his hand, rather than at me.

"Benefit?" I asked. "For what?"

He looked up. "For you."

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"Me?"

"Well, for the idea of you, anyway," he said going back to his phone. "You are the proof of my progress."

I stared at him, not knowing if I was more disgusted or outraged that other people - supposedly decent people knew about this and were supporting it.

"Do they know about me?" I asked, angry.

"Yes, of course they do." He still wasn't paying me much attention. "The money has to come from somewhere. And now they want to see some results from all the money they've invested over the years."

I crossed my arms, settling on disgusted. It was one thing for the people like Mark, who got pulled into this without being aware of what they were doing. It was completely different for the people who would be at this benefit.

They were the ones knowingly enabling Wescott. They were abominable.

Wescott looked up after I was silent for a minute.

"Well, you didn't think I was paying for everything myself, did you?" he asked, again making me feel stupid for missing the obvious. I hadn't thought about where the money was coming from. It's not like Wescott could be an accountant by day and mad scientist by night. This was all he did. And there were the many people he employed, the building, and all the expensive equipment.

Obviously he had to have some rich supporters for this. People who would be among his first clients, no doubt.

Could this even be legal? How did you put something like that on your taxes?

Well, I was apparently going to be in the same room with these people. Maybe I could do something to convince them, this wasn't such a good investment...

"And before you start planning anything stupid," Wescott said, interrupting my thoughts. "I'm warning you, it would be very unwise."

I scowled, hating the fact that he always seemed to know what I was thinking.

"Unwise how?" I challenged. I'd endured that stupid little remote before and sure, it was painful, but not necessarily something that terrified me. Not enough to make me behave in this kind of situation.

He watched me for a few seconds. "Let's just say, what would happen to you, should you become...unpleasant, would make this," he indicated the remote in his hand. "Seem desirable."

I narrowed my eyes, debating whether or not to believe him. I didn't think he was above lying to me to scare me into submission, but I also hadn't seen any evidence that he ever lied to me before.

Plus, I doubted that he would take a chance with all his important guests tonight.

"What would happen?" I asked.

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He thought for a second. "Something similar," he said. "But rather than only affecting your hearing, it would target your entire nervous system. And I can't guarantee there won't be any lingering affects as with the type of...deterrent you've experienced before."

I just watched him, still torn.

"Don't test this, Abi," he said. "I promise you, it won't be worth it. If necessary, I will give you a tranquilizer and give an excuse as to why you are lethargic. I prefer to have you alert and your usual...charming self."

I rolled my eyes at his obvious sarcasm.

He sighed. "Just do us all a favor and behave for once," he said.

"If I do?" I asked, wanting to see what he might give me in exchange, since he seemed so willing to bribe me.

"If you do," he said. "I'll give you more information."

"You already promised me that," I pointed out.

"No, I said I'd tell you what you wanted to know," he corrected me. "I didn't specify how much. And I believe I've already answered some of your questions."

I scowled at him. "I want to know everything you've got planned for me," I said. "I want to know why you would need me for so long. Why you couldn't just keep me for a while and let me go."

"Anything else?" he asked dryly.

"I want real answers from now on. No more of those stupid vague answers about me not worrying about something. I don't like not knowing what's expected or what's coming."

The car turned into a parking garage and weaved its way downward, stopping at a door that was obviously not the main entrance.

He thought about it for a few seconds. "Alright. I suppose there's no harm in you knowing everything at this point."

I watched him curiously. What would it have hurt for me to know everything before?

Wescott opened his door and got out. He stood outside and was joined by four security guards who'd been traveling in the car behind us.

"Abi," he said impatiently after a minute of me not moving.

"I still have plenty of questions," I said, stubbornly.

"And I'll answer them later," he said. "If you want me to follow through on this, you've got to earn it. Besides, I don't want the guest of honor to be late."

I glared at him, not really convinced that I ought to cooperate with this. Wouldn't it be better to try to discourage anyone I could tonight? Even if I had to act like maniac or hurt someone? Anything to stop

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Wescott would be worth the effort. And probably pain from whatever he was planning on using on me.

He waited a minute before he spoke again. "I'm not asking again," he said. "And I'm not going to be so accommodating if I have to resort to force with you tonight."

But would my actions even accomplish anything with these people? They obviously were already void of a conscience. Or at least, pretty apathetic. Any negative behavior from me, might backfire. They might see it as a kink in an otherwise perfect project. Something requiring more money, not less.

Plus, I had to keep Wescott completely ignorant of my impending escape. He had to think I was still anxious for any little crumb of information he was willing to give me. He needed to think I was still at his complete mercy. And acting like I suddenly didn't care about what was going to happen to me passed this week, might just make him suspicious.

"Fine," I said. "But I want to know everything tonight. As soon as we're done here."

"If I have your cooperation right now, you'll have mine later," he said.

I stared at him for another few seconds, allowing my hatred and disgust for this whole thing shine through, before I gave in and got out of the car.

"Perhaps there is hope for you, yet," he said dismissively as he turned and walked through the doors, expecting me to follow with the guards.

I glared after him, before reluctantly following.

Right as I was about to go through the door, I notice that one of my guards was Mark. He gave me a sympathetic look and I allowed my scowl to disappear for him.

I couldn't exactly call him my friend - he was still technically one of my captors, but it was nice to have him with me. At least I knew there'd be one decent person in there.

Chapter 10

"Now," Wescott said, after I was seated. "Make sure you do not cross that line." He pointed to the faint blue line on the floor. I was sitting in the center of a wide circle drawn onto the floor, which was, apparently, my prison for this thing.

I'd been informed that there was some sort of laser that would trigger what Wescott had threatened me with in the car. It wouldn't affect anyone else, of course, just me. So people could come to me. I just couldn't go anywhere.

I crossed my arms and scowled at him. Silly me, I thought I might actually be relatively free while in this room.

"I cannot be responsible for what happens to you, should you fail to heed my warning on this." He started to turn away, but stopped and looked back at me.

"And at least pretend to look pleasant," he said before he walked away.

I contemplated giving him the finger, but I held back. He wouldn't see it anyway.

The night progressed and people started arriving. They were all dressed in outrageously expensive clothes, but unlike me, they looked completely comfortable in them. Like they were accustomed to wearing thousand-dollar outfits every day.

It was disgusting that these people had so much money, to be able afford those clothes and things like this, while there were people starving in the world.

I sat, bored out of my mind for about an hour, while people ambled around, watching me with obvious curiosity and fascination. They all seemed hesitant to actually approach me though. For which I was thankful. I had no desire to meet any of these shallow, callous people.

"How long is this thing supposed to take?" I asked Mark, who was standing a little ways back and to my right. The other three guards were hanging back a little further. They were spaced around me, close enough to get to me in a few seconds, but not so close that I came off as threatening or fragile.

"Another two hours," he said.

"Ugh!" I let my head fall back in exasperation. "Do you think it would look too bad if I took a nap?" I asked looking at him, upside down.

He half smiled. "Wescott probably wouldn't appreciate it. People might think you were narcoleptic."

I gave him a small smile before I sighed and sat up again. "Maybe I should have asked for an ipod or something."

A few seconds later, a small blue ipod fell in my lap. I looked up to see Mark retreating back to his spot.

He turned around and met my curious and surprised expression.

He shrugged and seemed embarrassed. "Things get boring sometimes. Just don't tell Wescott I had it so

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handy."

"Thanks." I smiled again before I popped the earpieces in and started exploring his music.

He had a lot of stuff on there that surprised me. There was some of the more popular stuff - even some Britney Spears and Lady Gaga. And trust me, I'd be teasing him for that later.

But there was a lot of the less well-known, indie stuff on there. A lot that I recognized.

It was really too bad that I'd met Mark where I had and that he was part of this. I think I could have really liked him as more than just a friend, otherwise.

The next hour was almost bearable, thanks to Mark, but I was getting bored again. The music was nice, but I'd tired of the few games on the ipod about twenty minutes ago.

I was just about to say something to Mark, when some middle-aged man, reeking of alcohol, joined me on the couch and threw his arm around me.

"So, you're the finished product, eh?" he slurred, clutching me way too close to him.

I struggled to distance myself from him, but he held me securely.

My first instinct was to free myself by hitting him, but I remembered Wescott's warning.

I guessed that becoming violent with this drunk moron would definitely count as me 'becoming unpleasant'.

I looked for him, knowing he didn't want people quite this close to me, but he wasn't paying attention. He was talking to some other excessively rich people.

I had a feeling that any action of mine would be noticed though. And he wouldn't stop for an explanation as to why I suddenly became violent.

"I wonder, were I to make an extra donation, if I could get an early trial," he said, giving me a sleazy look that left no doubt in my mind what he had in mind for his own investment.

I pushed at him and had to really force myself not to do something to make what he was implying, a physical impossibility for him.

"Sir, you need to step away," Mark said, suddenly standing over me and sounding more authoritative than I'd ever heard.

The man looked up, noticing Mark and the other two guards that had joined him.

He watched them, for a few seconds, seeming slow and unfocused before he let me go and leaned away.

"Just getting an idea of what to expect," he tried.

"There's no touching, sir," Mark said. From his tone, he guessed the same thing I had about this man's plans for his investment, and he didn't like them. The 'sir' sounded forced and was laced with disdain.

He seemed not to notice, though. He laughed and pushed himself off the couch before staggering off into the

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crowd.

I glared after him, my hatred for Wescott somehow managing to grow even stronger. Weren't there enough sick perverts doing enough detestable things without Wescott enabling them further?

"Sorry," Mark said. "I should have been paying closer attention.

I shrugged, feeling awkward. It wasn't me that deserved the apology for that. It was whatever poor girl wound up with that man. Or men like him. At least I knew that wasn't my future.

If only there was a way to shut this whole thing down. No one should have to be subjected to a life like that.

Chapter 11

"I thought I wasn't going to be allowed to eat," I said, sarcastically after I was escorted back to my room and found a new tray of food, waiting on the table.

"I'm feeling benevolent at the moment," Wescott answered from behind me. "And you played your part very well tonight."

I sat down and rolled my eyes. As if I'd had a choice on how else to 'play my part'.

"Everyone was quite impressed with you," he said, taking the seat opposite me.

"No one even talked to me," I said, uncovering the tray and starting on the macaroni and cheese.

I wasn't counting the one sicko who groped me. Other than him, no one even approached me. Not that I was complaining.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "They found out plenty about you and were quite impressed. And, of course, being able to see you was key. Most were very eager to donate more money and get started right away."

I looked up at him, curiously, wondering how they found out so much about me. There had been a lot of people and I know Wescott didn't have time to talk to all of them, in depth. There hadn't been any kind of announcement or anything. And I wasn't thrilled that what I'd hoped to avoid - having more money thrown at Wescott - was actually accomplished through my compliance. But I suppose it might have happened either way.

"They were able to look at your file," he said, answering my thoughts.

"My file?"

"It contains basically everything about you," he said. "Your development as a child, your grades, your accomplishments. Pretty much everything they might want to know about the potential child I would be able to give them."

I watched him, irritated. I'd never been terribly private with those things before, but I didn't like how on display I'd been tonight.

"But you had some questions, I believe," Wescott changed the subject.

I nodded and stabbed forcefully at my food.

"I think you were wondering why I didn't arrange for you to be let go after a while, correct?"

I popped my fork in my mouth and watched him, waiting.

"I've actually answered this for you already," he said. "You just haven't connected what I said to what it actually means for you."

I tried to remember what he said to me that might give me a clue as to what his plans for me would be. I couldn't think of anything. He'd said a lot of things I hadn't been interested in paying attention to. And

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whenever I asked him an actual question, he had always been pretty vague.

"I told you that I intend to test absolutely everything about you," he said. "My clients want to know exactly what to expect. They want to know everything - development, personality, intellect, health. Anything that might be abnormal or improved. They want to know what it would mean in the future - obtaining a child in this way."

I just waited, uneasy for whatever he was getting at.

"Fertility, Abi," he said finally.

And there it was. The reason he would need me indefinitely. He wanted my child.

I swallowed the food in my mouth that now tasted of cardboard, and stared at the table in horror and shock. I hadn't really decided if I wanted children before. It never seemed practical, for me, since I didn't have anyone to have them with. But once I'd been brought here, I'd completely ruled it out, even as a possibility.

Wescott waited quietly as I tried to wrap my mind around what this all meant. I tried several times to formulate an intelligent question to ask, but I couldn't even think of where to start.

"We'll be trying different things," he said after a few minutes. "The average in vitro as well as the way you were created. We're all curious to see if repeating the process, starting with you, would bring about better results. But we'll also need to do things the old fashioned way. To see if you would pass along your...uniqueness, or if you would produce children who were more average. And there are various things having to do with that. How easily you would conceive, if you would at all. The occurrence of any complications, the number before it becomes unwise to continue. Just about every scenario and possibility imaginable."

I looked up at him completely disgusted. Was there no limit to his ambition? Nothing that was too low for him?

"You know I'll never consent to that," I said. Not even for my mother. She wouldn't want me to anyway.

He sighed. "Yes, I know. Fortunately, your consent isn't required."

"So you're just planning on having me raped, then?" I asked. I don't know why it should surprise me that he was willing to resort to that. Didn't he advocate murder, kidnapping, and essentially human trafficking, when it suited him? Why not rape, too?

"I suppose," he said, not seeming the least bit concerned. "Should you choose to look at it that way."

"What other way is there to look at it?" I asked, torn between being more revolted or more outraged.

"Well, technically, I own you," he said. "So, the only person's consent, that matters, is mine."

I guess I could add slavery to that list.

I stared at the table again, extraordinarily grateful that I had a plan to escape. I hadn't realized just how horrific my life in this place was supposed to be.

It wasn't supposed to be just one time, either. Who knew how long it would take for me to get pregnant?

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Wescott wasn't even sure I would. And he said 'children'. He wanted more than one. He wanted as many as I would physically be able to have.

I'd demonstrated how willing I was to go along with him for someone I loved. How much worse would it be if he had one or more of my children? Obviously, I didn't know what it felt like to be a mother yet, but I had no doubt that I would love my child. He'd be able to control me forever and any child of mine, in his custody, would have a life more detestable than I could even imagine at this point. At least I'd grown up, normally.

And if he had that, I wouldn't be able to leave. Even without all his security. I'd never be able to abandon a child of mine, to a life like this, alone.

"However, that won't be for a few weeks yet," he said.

"Why?" I looked up. Not that I wanted to hurry that along. Wescott wouldn't change his plans for me anyway. But there must be something else he had planned, if he was waiting a few weeks.

"I want you recovered from your surgery, first," he said.

I reminded myself, none of this was going to become a reality for me. It couldn't. I forced myself to keep him talking.

"What surgery?"

"One of my conditions to allow you to leave as an infant, was that we would be able to trace you," he said. "So that, even if we lost sight of you, we'd be able to find you again."

I watched him, warily.

"That's not a birthmark on your leg, it's a scar."

There was a small mark on my right calf. I'd always assumed it was a birthmark, like he said.

"From?" I asked, feeling like it was getting harder to breathe.

"From the tracking device I implanted there," he said.

A tracking device? I had a tracking device? How was I ever supposed to escape if he could trace me? That feeling of helplessness and depression were threatening to overtake me again.

Being here had been bad enough before I knew what Wescott had planned for me. How was I supposed to stay now? I'd rather be dead than be part of what he wanted.

But then something else occurred to me and I looked at him curiously. "Why the surgery, then?"

"Twenty-seven years ago, our technology wasn't quite as advanced as it is today," he said. "Right now, you are only traceable within one hundred feet. Which isn't really a problem. I don't foresee a situation that will require us to be able to trace you at all. But I like things to be more secure than necessary. You will be receiving a more accurate chip. One that will be able to pin point your precise location."

One hundred feet? That was it? It was better than nothing, I supposed. But still, it wasn't great.

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But if I was ever going to have any hope of escaping, it would have to be before he could switch it.

"When?" I asked, wanting to know how long I would have.

"It is scheduled for Wednesday," he said, standing up. "I think that's enough for tonight."

I nodded, feeling dazed. Boy, was it. I didn't think I'd be able to process knowing much more tonight. So much for waiting till the end of the week. I needed to get out of here as soon as possible. But for that I might still need a little help getting up into the vent.

"I want a radio," I blurted out as Wescott was heading for the door.

He turned to look at me, curiously.

"For when I'm in the shower," I said, not caring how strange this sounded. He'd think I was in shock anyway. And he wouldn't be wrong.

"And I want a table to put it on," I added.

He watched me, suspiciously for a few seconds, before he said, "Alright. Anything else?"

I thought for a second. No doubt, it would be pitch black in that vent.

"A flashlight," I said.

"A flashlight?" he repeated.

I nodded.

"Why?" he asked, sounding suspicious again.

I'd have to wait a day or two, at least to do anything. I had a feeling he'd be watching me, at first.

"In case the power goes out," I said, sharply. "I don't want to get stuck in here in the dark."

He just watched me, clearly trying to figure out what I really wanted.

"Oh, come on," I taunted. "Am I going to bust my way out of here with a flashlight? What do you care what I want with it?"

He shrugged. "True. Alright, then. A radio and table for the bathroom, and a flashlight. Anything else?"

I thought for a second. It would be helpful if I could get a few other supplies like food, water, and a jacket, but that would ensure that he would be paying super close attention to me for too long.

"I'll let you know," I said icily.

"Very well," he turned to leave again. "Get some sleep," he said over his shoulder, before he disappeared through the doorway.

After the door closed behind him, I sat there staring into space, thinking.

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No wonder he hadn't wanted to tell me anything before now. Had I known everything he had in store for me, there was no way I would have ever cooperated with him on anything, and he needed my results. If I'd known everything and thought there was no way out, I really would have tried to commit suicide. I was having a hard enough time fighting that depression and apathy for life, even with my plan to escape.

And to think, I'd thought, even if I'd stayed here, a life like the one I might have with that creep from earlier, wasn't something I'd have to worry about.

No, for me, it would be a million times worse.

Wescott said, he was planning on doing that surgery on Wednesday, and it was Sunday, now. I'd probably get the things I asked for, tomorrow, but I wouldn't be able to put my plan into action so soon.

I knew he'd be watching me, trying to figure out why I'd suddenly asked for the things I had. I'd never wanted anything from him before.

I could use tomorrow night as a distraction. I'd just think of some stupid use for the flashlight, so he wouldn't be suspicious.

But Tuesday was it. If I didn't get out then, I never would. And there was no way I was staying here to be used as breeding stock.

I'd rather be dead.

Chapter 12

I was running.

Or, I was trying to run. My legs were sluggish and I stumbled every few steps. But I had to keep going. They were right behind me!

It got harder to see as I ran deeper into the dark forest. I glanced down and was able to just barely make out the tangle of leaves and branches around my feet. Maybe that was why I kept tripping. But why wouldn't my legs work right? Had they managed to drug me with something, before? Every time I took a step, my legs felt heavy and awkward. I tried to raise them higher to make it easier to move, but it wasn't working right.

I cast an anxious look over my shoulder and saw the burly man, still chasing me.

I quickly turned my attention back in front of me, but before I could focus, I slammed into something solid as a brick wall.

I realized it was a person, when I felt hands gripping my arms, both to steady and stop me.

"No!" I screamed. "I won't go back!" I flailed around wildly, trying to free myself, unable to think of anything else to do.

I struggled uselessly against the unyielding grasp as the other man caught up and took hold of me too.

A few seconds later, another figure appeared in my vision. As he got closer, I saw that it was Wescott, holding a syringe.

I fought with all my might against the two men holding me, but they managed to completely immobilize me as Wescott stuck my arm with the needle.

"NO!" I screamed again.

I sat up in the dark room, panting and sweating with the blanket twisted around me, tightly.

It took a minute to convince myself that it was only a dream. It felt so real!

I was still in bed. I hadn't even attempted to escape yet.

And then I mentally kicked myself for falling asleep. Tonight was the night I had to get away. I couldn't afford to be sleeping!

But I guess I'd been so tired, I couldn't help dozing off.

The previous two nights, I'd managed to fall into a restless sleep. And just like tonight, I woke up, terrified from some awful nightmare.

At least this one wasn't as horrendous as the last few. Those had been about what was supposed to happen to me, if I couldn't escape.

I hadn't even been able to close my eyes after that, so I'd gone to take a long bath until I could calm down.

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As I was sitting in the tub, the second night in a row, I realized that I must have been in here for over an hour, the night before and no one even checked on me.

So, either they weren't paying attention or they didn't care that I stayed in the bathroom for so long. After all, I did sleep a little. And it's not like I was supposed to be running anymore laps.

When I realized that, I made sure I stayed in the bathroom for at least two hours. It was hard to be sure since the only clock I had access to was in the bedroom. But I knew it had been close to that.

If things continued the same way tonight, I should have plenty of time to at least get out of the building before anyone suspected that I wasn't in the bathroom any longer.

After that...well, I wasn't sure about afterward, but I'd always been pretty good at thinking on my feet. Besides, I couldn't afford to worry about that yet. If I had any hope of getting out of here, I had to go now.

Glancing at the clock, I noticed that it was barely after one in the morning. So at least I hadn't been out very long.

I unwrapped the blanket from around myself and threw my legs over the side of the bed. Clutching my flashlight in my hand, I made my way to the bathroom and hoped that either they weren't watching me closely, or that the picture on the camera, at night, wasn't very clear. Otherwise they might wonder why I'd suddenly grown so padded around the middle.

I guessed that I would have to climb down from wherever the vent let out, so I'd tied the top sheet from my bedding around my waist, to bring with me.

I'd also, snuck an extra pair of clothes into the bathroom when I was getting changed into my pajamas and made sure to leave the ones I had on, on the floor next to my shoes. I was bound to get pretty dirty while I was up there, and attracting any kind of attention, once I was out of here, wasn't something I wanted to do, so I was doubling up on my clothes for this.

I closed the door and wished, more than ever, that it locked. I stood there for a minute, wondering if I ought to wait a little bit to see if they'd start checking on me, tonight. If they caught me in the middle of this, it would all be for nothing and I'd be stuck. Forever. I wouldn't get another shot like this.

I waited, trying to stay calm and hearing nothing but my own pulse in my ears.

You have to do this now! I ordered myself before took a deep breath and went over to change my clothes.

After I was dressed, I listened again.

Nothing.

But the silence might be bad for me, too. If there wasn't some noise, they might hear what I was doing.

Remembering that the last two nights, the water had been running, I turned the faucet on. It didn't sound nearly loud enough to me, but I supposed it would have to do.

I went over to the toilet and took the lid off the tank in back, to retrieve my little tool.

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Gross, I know, but at least it had been an effective hiding spot.

Once I had the tool in hand, I put the radio, I'd requested, on the floor, and grabbed the table from underneath - the very sturdy and well-made table, thanks to Wescott's apparent inability to have anything inexpensive in this place.

I positioned the table, under the vent, carefully climbed onto it, and smiled when I had to hunch over because I was too tall. I would be able to get up into the vent with hardly any real effort.

Careful not to let any of the screws fall, I loosened the vent and placed it quietly on the sink before setting the screws down on top of it and pocketing the tiny tool that served as my screwdriver.

I really wished there was some way that I could put everything back, so they'd have no idea how I got out, but I guessed that wasn't possible if I actually wanted to leave.

After I had my hands free of everything but my tiny flashlight, I stood up and peeked into the vent.

Shining the light down the dark tunnel didn't tell me much, but at least it didn't seem like the opening got any smaller.

I was about to pull myself up when it occurred to me that I didn't know if I'd cried out while I was asleep. What if they heard me say I wasn't going back? Would they guess what I was up to even though they didn't think it was possible? What if they were waiting for me as soon as I got outside?

I took another deep breath and shook my head.

No, if they suspected anything, they'd have come in here already. It had to have been fifteen minutes, since I got out of bed.

I put the flashlight between my teeth to free up my hands, and couldn't help smiling again. Wescott thought he was being so smart, giving me a lightweight, tiny flashlight that was literally only good for giving off light, as opposed to one that could be used as a weapon. This little one was absolutely perfect for my purpose.

Standing on the table, I was high enough to get good grip and hoist myself up into the ceiling, easily. I was grateful that it was sturdy, rather than that cheap paneling stuff that some ceilings were made out of.

I started crawling down the vent, careful to keep my shoes in the air, as much as possible, so they wouldn't make noise and alert anyone that I was up here.

Even with the light, I couldn't see more than maybe a foot in front of me. Twice, I nearly smacked into the wall of the vent, because I didn't notice that the direction had changed.

It was so hard not to rush as I turned the fourth corner. I felt like I'd been up here for at least ten minutes, weaving my way through the maze. And if I'd been in the bathroom for almost twenty, that was a half hour already.

How long would it take them to realize I wasn't there and come after me? An hour? Two, maybe?

What if it took me another twenty minutes just to get out of the building? I might only have about a ten minute head start before they came looking for me. It wouldn't be enough!

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Stop it! I scolded myself. It couldn't take that long, and they'd have to first figure out how I got out of the room and then where I got out of the building.

I'd have time to at least get to the highway or something.

I tried not to think about how easily they might find me on the highway if I didn't manage to hitchhike or something.

After another minute of crawling, I turned a corner and nearly squealed with delight. I could see moonlight!

I crawled over to the opening, noticing that there was a cover I was going to have to figure out how to open.

There were no screws in this grate, like the one in the bathroom had. I got closer and peeked outside, the best I could. It looked like it was on a hinge. Maybe if I kicked it on the opposite side, it would swing open.

But what if someone heard the noise?

I pressed my face against the grate to assess the ground, below.

I didn't see anyone, from up here. Of course, they just might not be in my line of vision...

But no, it looked like this was the side of the building. Somewhere they might put the garbage. It doubted it was really a hot spot for guard duty.

I suppose this was the best I could expect. I didn't know where any other openings would be or how long it would take me to get to them. And at least this one was in a potentially deserted area.

I wriggled around, grateful that I wasn't claustrophobic, and positioned my feet in the right spot.

Please don't let it be locked from the outside, I begged as I gave it a light kick. It moved a little, but didn't open.

I kicked it a little harder and felt it give way a tiny bit. I smiled, realizing that it really wasn't locked. I just had to work on it a little at a time.

Very grateful for the rubber on my shoes, muting the sound of impact, I kicked it again and again until I felt like it was just about there.

Squirming back around, I tried it with my hands and only had to put a little pressure on it before it swung open.

I tried not to get too excited as I peeked out of the now-clear opening. I wasn't there yet.

I was right. There wasn't anyone in this area. But there was also a corner, uncomfortably close, for my taste. Someone could easily come around it and I'd have no idea until they appeared.

Oh well. I'd come this far. At least they wouldn't be expecting me either and I'd have the advantage.

I was right about the height, too. The building was only one story, but it was a fancy building and the vent was up pretty high. The sheet might get me almost half-way down, though. I could jump from there.

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I began tying the sheet to the hinge of the grate, keeping an eye out for any patrolling guards.

Once I tightened the sheet enough, I took one last look around the still silent ground below.

Satisfied that this was the best situation I could hope for, I clung to the grate as I got my legs out of the vent. Transferring my grip to the sheet, I shimmied down the building, very thankful that I'd spent so much time, working out my arms.

When I reached the end of the sheet, I was still higher than I'd like to be, but it was still much better than having no sheet at all.

I took a deep breath, before I jumped the rest of the way, allowing myself to roll when I hit the ground so I wouldn't break anything.

Standing up, I brushed myself off and was just about to jump in the bushes, to the left, while I figured out my next move, when someone, all in black, came around the corner, making me freeze up.

Chapter 13

It only took me a second to realize it was Mark. He abruptly stopped when he saw me and his eyes went wide before he glanced around nervously. He looked back at me and we stared at each other for a few seconds.

Instinctively, I was ready to knock out anyone, at the moment, but I didn't want to hurt Mark. He was my friend.

No, I reminded myself. He wasn't my friend. He might be the most decent person here, but he was still one of them.

He blinked at me for a second looking shocked, and I couldn't bring myself to hurt him the way I would anyone else.

But it was either that or go back, and going back wasn't an option.

I balled my hand into a fist, ready to do it, but still not really wanting to.

Mark reached into his pocket and I realized that my deliberation might have just cost me everything. I cursed myself as I got ready to swing.

But then I stopped when I saw that what he pulled out of his pocket wasn't a little black remote. It was a little black wallet.

I watched him curiously as he opened the wallet and took out the money from inside it.

"Here," he said, shoving the money in my open hand.

I looked down at the bills in my hand in shock and he shoved the wallet at me.

"Take it!" he whispered urgently.

I opened my other hand, not understanding what he was doing and too surprised to do anything else.

"Now throw the wallet in the bushes," he ordered.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Just do it!" he said.

Still clueless about why, I did what he said.

"Here," he said, shoving his keys at me. "Mine's the black truck, all the way on the end. 34S"

"What-" I tried.

"Whatever you do, don't rush," he interrupted me. "Walk to the truck and then drive the speed limit. If you rush, you'll only attract attention."

I nodded, still feeling lost.

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He looked at me assessingly for a second before he started taking off his jacket.

"They'll spot you in a second, like that," he said, handing it over. "Put this on, keep the hood up and your head down."

I put the jacket on and the hood up like he said.

"Follow the road out of the lot and then turn left at the highway," he said. "You're gonna drive about a mile before you reach Bentley Road. Turn right and you should get to the train station in about twenty minutes. Ditch the truck, get on the train, and head for New York. Don't try to drive all the way there," he said. "As soon as they figure out you took my truck, they'll find you in a few minutes. I'm pretty sure they can trace it."

"Mark, what-" I tried again.

"Stay in populated areas and keep moving." He didn't let me talk. "They can trace you, but if you stay in a crowd..."

I nodded. "One hundred feet."

He made a face. "It's not great, but it's something. Once you get there, change everything you can. Change your hair, your clothes, everything. Change your face, if you can."

"Why are you doing this?" I managed to ask.

"Because I didn't sell my conscience," he said, reminding me of the first thing I accused him of.

I smiled.

"Because, maybe I can do something good after everything I've done to help get you here."

"You didn't know," I said. "I don't blame you."

He nodded. "But I did it anyway."

He looked at the money in my hand. "I'm sorry that's not more..." He stopped and thought before looking at his hand.

"Here, take this." He took off the big gold Princeton ring and shoved it in my hand. "You should get at least six hundred for that, and there's a fifty in the glove compartment for emergencies."

"You saved my life." I smiled.

"Not yet," he said, glancing around nervously before he looked back at me.

"Now, you're gonna have to knock me out and-"

"I can't do that!" How could I hurt him now?

"If you don't, they'll kill me for letting you go," he said.

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I looked down. He was right. Wescott wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone helping me.

"After you knock me out, drag me into the bushes and make sure I'm not visible unless they're really looking."

I nodded and looked up at him.

"Actually," he said, "Give me a black eye first."

"I don't-"

"Do it!" he ordered. "Just don't break-"

Whatever he was going to say was cut off when I punched his eye.

"Sorry!" I said, feeling terrible.

"My nose," he finished and gingerly touched his eye, blinking and making faces. "That ought to do it," He smiled. "If anyone ever tells me I hit like a girl, I'll take that as a compliment."

"Sorry," I said again.

"Trust me, I've had worse," he said, meeting my eyes. "Now, do this quick. I don't know how much time you'll have before they figure out you're gone and someone will be patrolling this area soon."

"What were you doing here?" I asked. If someone else would be patrolling, then he hadn't been.

"I was on my way home. It's just dumb luck that I forgot something and had to come back." He grinned. "So I was totally unprepared for your attack. No remote or anything." He tisked in mock shame.

I smiled.

He looked serious again. "Ok, do it." He closed his eyes, waiting for whatever I was going to do to knock him out.

I was about to hit him, but I stopped, wanting to give him something else first. Closing the space between us, I reached up and kissed him softly.

His eyes opened and he looked down at me. "What was that for?"

"Everything," I said. "For helping me, for being a friend before, and for what we might have been able to have if things were different."

He smiled. "Glad that's not one sided, at least."

I gave him a sad smile and he closed his eyes again.

Knowing I was running out of time, I punched him in the jaw, hard and he slumped to the ground, unconscious.

I dragged him out of sight, like he said to, before I headed toward the parking lot, keeping my head down and looking for spot 34S.

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There were a few people in the distance, but none of them paid much attention to me as I found Mark's truck and got inside.

I smiled, feeling a surge of adrenaline rise up inside of me. I was really doing it! Thanks to Mark, I was going to get away!

I started the truck, feeling giddy, and headed out, following the road like he said. It was a good thing he reminded me not to rush. My excitement of being free would have totally overruled my common sense, and I'd be flying, probably leaving skid marks behind.

I was very glad for the darkness, as most people here would know my face and, unlike Mark, they wouldn't hesitate to sound the alarm.

Still I pulled the hood lower over my forehead and kept my head down as much as I could while I passed the people coming to and from their cars.

I glanced in the mirror, before I turned the corner, to see if anyone suspected anything. After all, it wouldn't be difficult to spot something wrong if they were paying attention and knew this was Mark's truck. Even with the darkness hiding my face, he was a lot bigger than me.

I grinned when I noticed that no one was even looking at the truck. Everything seemed quiet and normal.

Pulling out of the lot, I again had to fight the urge to gun it. The little clock on the dashboard said it was almost two in the morning and there wasn't any traffic. If there was a cop patrolling around here, he'd be sure to catch the only car, speeding down the road and I couldn't afford to get stopped.

Aside from wasting time, I didn't have a license and was supposed to be dead.

I forced myself to keep the speed limit, as I followed Mark's directions, and drove to the train station, all the while, glancing anxiously in my mirror.

After parking the truck, I quickly ditched Mark's jacket and took off the dirty outer layer of my clothes before I grabbed the extra money from the glove compartment and jogged to the train platform.

Another train was scheduled to arrive in ten minutes. The last train, in fact, for the night.

Talk about cutting it close!

I bought my ticket and counted the money that was left as I waited impatiently for the train, all the while, throwing nervous glances toward the parking lot. I felt so exposed, waiting out in the open. I would have preferred to hide behind something until I could get on the train, but there was nothing close by. I couldn't blend in, either. I wasn't completely alone, but the ten or so people milling around, hardly qualified as a 'crowd'.

Had they figured out I was gone yet? If they hadn't, they would be soon, I knew. Not knowing what to expect, was killing me. If I knew whether they figured it out or not yet, I could prepare, at least mentally. This standing and waiting was absolutely horrible.

The ten minutes, waiting for the train felt like an hour, but finally it chugged up to the station and stopped, letting the passengers out.

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I quickly boarded the train along with the other people, waiting on the platform, as the voice over the speaker instructed.

I wound up sitting in the back of the last car, willing the conductor to hurry up and start moving.

It seemed to take forever, though, and I couldn't sit still. I felt like a sitting duck. What on earth could be taking so long? Everyone who'd got off the train, was long gone by now, and the people still traveling, were all seated.

I wished I had a watch. The last time I'd seen a clock, had been while buying my ticket. I didn't know exactly how much time had passed, waiting for the train to arrive and then sitting and waiting in the seat, and I was uncomfortable not knowing. I felt like I had less control, somehow.

Just as I was contemplating asking the girl across the aisle what time it was, the conductor announced that the doors would close in one minute.

I sat back and finally allowed myself to relax a tiny bit. One minute, that was it. I made it this far. Now I just had to get through the next minute.

Before I could relax too much, the sound of screeching tires, from the parking lot, got my attention. It had been extremely loud, to have been heard so easily over the noise of the train and instinctively I knew I'd run out of time.

They'd found me.

Chapter 14

I tensed and looked out the window, seeing the white van that was now sitting quite noticeably in the middle of the parking lot. It was just like the one I was pulled into before.

My hands gripped the seat beneath me as two men jumped out of the van and headed straight for Mark's truck. I guess he'd been right - they could trace it.

The two men yanked open each of the doors of the truck and briefly looked inside.

Looking back at the van, I saw Wescott standing outside it, staring right at me and looking furious.

I couldn't hear what, but he said something to the guards, making one of them start running toward the train.

For a second I wondered why both of them didn't start running, but then I realized, Wescott wanted to keep this as inconspicuous as possible. One guy running toward an almost departed train would just look like a guy trying to catch a train. Any more than that might look like an attack or something.

I glanced back, nervously, at the open train door and then at the guard who was heading straight for it.

I couldn't get caught now! Not after I'd made it so far!

But how could I get away? I couldn't get off the train. If I did, they'd be sure to catch me within a few seconds. All they would have to do is use that remote and then catch up to me.

The train was my only hope. And I didn't think they'd be quite as forceful in front of all these people. They wouldn't want it to look like I was being kidnapped. But would that stop them from using the remote and just saying I had a seizure or something?

Maybe they wouldn't use it if it would be dangerous. Like if I was standing just inside the door of the train and could easily fall out and be hurt or killed.

I jumped up to stand in just the right spot, hoping that my assumption was right. If it was, and the guard reached me before the door closed, I could knock him away, hopefully giving the door enough time to close.

"Come on. Come on," I muttered anxiously as he got closer.

He jumped over the bushes that separated the train platform from the parking lot and the doors, mercifully, started to close.

But would it be fast enough? What if they had an automatic sensor to make them open if someone stuck their hand between them? It might take even longer. Long enough for Wescott, who was making his way over more slowly, time to get through one of the other doors.

"Close. Close. Close. Close." I repeated, as I tried to help the door with my hands.

I held my breath as the guard closed the distance between us, just in time to have the door shut in his face.

I exhaled in relief as I stared at him, with wide eyes, through the window.

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He dropped my gaze after a second and moved toward the back of the train.

I looked back anxiously to see what he was doing, but there was only a tiny window, straight back, and I couldn't see anything. I guessed, though, that he was trying to grab onto the train. I held my breath again as I waited for some indication of either his success or failure.

It took an agonizingly long time to feel the first sign of movement. But finally the train picked up speed and as it moved away, I could see the guard still standing on the platform, looking after the train.

I felt a smile spread across my face as I realized that I'd made it. For whatever reason, the guard couldn't get on.

I looked out the other window, just in time to see a very angry and, for once, totally helpless Wescott standing on the platform.

Feeling unbelievably happy and more than a little smug, I gave him a huge grin and waved as the train took me further out of his reach.

After he disappeared completely from my vision, I stood at the door for another minute, allowing it to sink in. I'd really done it. I managed to get away. All I had to do now was blend in, once I got to New York. I'd only visited the city once or twice, but I knew it was busy enough, all the time, to give me some cover.

I went to take my seat again, still feeling dazed as I handed my ticket to the man in uniform, who'd made his way down the aisle.

He punched a small hole in my ticket and handed it back, looking bored and tired. I smiled brightly at him as I took the ticket and shoved it in my pocket with the remainder of my money.

He blinked in confusion at my unusual cheeriness before he smiled back, hesitantly, and moved on.

I crossed my arms and propped my feet up on the seat in front of me, allowing myself to really relax for the first time in a very long time.

I could still hardly believe I'd actually done it. I'd planned on escaping and apparently, it had been a good plan, but I think it was always in the back of my mind that they would catch me. That, somehow, Wescott would just know, the way he seemed to know everything else, and stop me.

But he hadn't had a clue and now, the train was taking me far away from him.

The smile, that had been etched across my face since the train door shut in the guard's face, faded as I realized something about trains.

They made scheduled stops. And it wouldn't be difficult for Wescott to figure out where and when those stops would be.

How many times would we stop before we reached Penn Station? I'd barely gotten away, back there. How would I manage a miraculous escape more than once?

Remembering what Mark said, I knew I needed to disguise myself somehow. I might have a shot if they didn't recognize me right away. Or, better yet, at all.

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But how? I had nothing but what I was wearing and the money and ring that Mark had given me. And there wasn't exactly a store on the train, to even buy different clothes.

I looked at the girl, across the aisle, getting an idea.

"Excuse me," I said, leaning over.

She turned to look at me, curiosity and distrust in her wide green eyes.

"Can I..." I faltered as the suspicion in her expression, deepened.

"I mean, would you mind if I bought your hat?" I tried, glancing at the nondescript, black hat on her head. It wasn't much in the way of disguises, but maybe it would be enough to at least give me a shot at blending in.

"My hat?" She repeated, still clearly suspicious.

My cheeks flushed slightly. How weird and creepy was I being, right now?

"Yeah," I said. "I just, um...I sort of need to hide." There. She should understand that. She seemed pretty interested in being invisible, herself.

She looked at me, for a few seconds, assessing.

"That guy your ex?" she asked.

"What?"

"The guy from the station," she said. "Is he an old boyfriend or something?"

"Oh..." I hadn't thought about the fact that other people would have seen that.

"No, he's just..." I looked down, wondering what to tell her. 'He's one of the guards for the loony scientist that wants to lock me up and do horrible things to me for the rest of my life'? Yeah, she'd believe that...She'd think I was lying or crazy. Or both.

"Stalker?" she asked.

I looked up. Now that was believable.

"Yeah, sort of," I said. "I just really need to get away, ya know?"

She nodded, looking as if she understood, all too well, the need to get away.

"What did he do?" she asked.

I looked down again. The question was, what didn't he do? Or, what wouldn't he do?

"Everything," I said, quietly.

She snorted in disdain. "Men are such scumbags."

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I looked up again. "Yeah." But not all, I corrected her in my head. Mark wasn't. I didn't think contradicting her would go over real well, though.

"And you think he'll be waiting for you at the train station?" she asked.

I nodded. "How many stops before Penn Station?"

"Just one," she said. "But it'd be stupid for him to waste time going there. It's kind of out of the way and there's no guarantee he'll catch the train. He'll probably just go straight to the final stop. If he's smart, anyway."

Wescott was nothing, if not smart. And he wouldn't want to replay that scene from the station and risk missing me at the final destination. She was right, he'd head straight for New York.

"You think he'll be able to get there before the train?" she asked, curious.

"I'm sure of it," I said. If not Wescott personally, then someone working for him. Probably a lot of someones....

She snorted again and shook her head.

"Look," I said, wanting to get back to the important thing. "I can pay you for the hat. How about fifty dollars?"

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. It was an outrageous amount for a hat. Especially one that was clearly not very new.

"Do you think it would be enough?" she asked, doubtfully. "I mean, he knows what you look like, right? And what you were wearing."

Yeah, that was also a big problem. Unfortunately I couldn't help that. The hat would have to be enough.

When I didn't answer right away, she pursed her lips. "How do you feel about make up?"

"Make up?" I asked. I know I probably looked pretty bad, but did she think I cared about that right now?

"Goth make up." she said with a sly grin, pulling a small make up bag from her back pack.

I smiled, feeling hopeful. "Well, I've never tried it."

"Sit here," she said, nodding at the seat facing hers.

I quickly obeyed and she started slathering goop all over my face.

"How does it look?" I asked after she indicated that she was finished. I wished I had a mirror.

She sat back and gave me an evaluating look. "Well, I don't know you all that well, but I'm positive you look nothing like yourself."

I grinned and tried to get an idea from the reflection in the train window.

"He'd have to know you had make up on, to even know to look for you like this," she said. "I don't think he'll

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have any idea."

"Thank you, so much!" I said, looking back at her. "You have no idea how much you've done for me.

She smiled, seeming genuinely pleased. "I'm glad I could help," she said. "I know what it's like."

My smile faded. She couldn't have been more than eighteen, maybe. How awful to have to be so street smart, so young.

Her smile faded too and she tilted her head, appraising me again.

"What?" I asked, self-conscious.

"Your hair..." she said, pursing her lips. "It doesn't really fit the look. And he'll probably be watching for that..."

I shrugged. "I guess it'll have to do. You said he wouldn't recognize me anyway." Besides, if she would sell me her hat, I could still hide it.

"Here," she said, reaching up and taking off her hat and then the short black wig that I'd taken for her real hair. Her actual hair spilled out around her shoulders in long, blond waves.

"You can wear this." She held the wig toward me.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "The hat will work too."

She shrugged before pulling the wig back a little, looking hesitant. "There is still the money, right?"

"Definitely," I said, "But don't you need that?" She was obviously used to disguising herself and the wig seemed to be an important part of that.

"I need money more," she said. "I have a few other wigs, but I'm running low on money and I'd rather not have to..." she trailed off and glanced away. "Get it another way." It wasn't too hard to figure out what other way that might be. The way a lot of desperate girls resort to, if they need money badly enough. "Besides, I think you need it more than me, right now."

"Alright," I said. "Thanks."

She looked back at me and helped me get the wig on straight before sitting back and smiling.

"I don't think you have to worry about being recognized," she said. "Whenever I dress like that, most people look away really quickly. Just try to look bored and annoyed."

I scowled at her, practicing, and she giggled. "Perfect."

I grinned before I dug the money out of my pocket, knowing she was waiting for it.

"Thank you so much," I said, handing it to her.

She gladly took the money, glanced down quickly at it in her hand, and then looked back up at me, surprised.

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"This is too much," she said. "You said fifty."

"I know." I shrugged. "But you really helped me out."

"But the wig isn't worth this much," she said, looking a little guilty. "I actually stole it."

I smiled. "That's ok," I said. "It's worth alot more to me."

I'd given her one hundred dollars, which really was alot for a wig that she'd stolen in the first place. To me, though, that wig represented a real shot at freedom and was worth much much more than what I'd given her. And she'd really done alot more than I originally asked for.

Besides, I hated to think of her wandering around the city with no money. No matter how street smart she was, she'd be ridiculously easy prey for any number of lowlifes. One hundred dollars wasn't enough to live on for very long, but maybe it was enough for her to be able to get started.

And anyway, one hundred dollars wasn't going to make a big difference to me right now. If I got caught, it would be completely useless, and I'd rather she have it. If I managed to get away, I still had another thirty dollars and Mark's ring to pawn. So, I'd be fine for a little while.

"Thank you," she said quietly, seeming dazed and looking down at the money again.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Lily."

"That's pretty," I said.

She half-smiled. "What's yours?"

"Sam." It felt good to be able to get my name back. I'd grown to absolutely despise the name Abi.

"I'm glad I met you, Sam," she said. "I guess we sort of saved each other."

"Yeah," I agreed, before I got another idea. "Hey, would you maybe, wanna stick together?" Wescott would be looking for me alone and, probably, so would whoever Lily was running from. Besides, she seemed to know alot about surviving on her own.

That wary look returned to her face. "I don't think so," she said. "I'm kind of a loner, ya know?"

"Sure," I nodded. "It was just an idea..." I couldn't blame her for being guarded. She probably had very good reason to be.

"If I wasn't, though," she looked apologetic. "I wouldn't mind it being you. You're the nicest person I've met in a long time."

Before I could think of what to say to that, an announcement came over the speaker, letting us know that we were approaching the next station.

"You should probably go to a different car," Lily said.

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I looked at her, questioning. Did I freak her out that much by asking that?

"He'll probably start looking for you on this car, since he saw you here," she added.

"Right," I nodded and berated myself, in my head for not thinking of something so obvious, on my own. If I was going to have any hope of surviving, I was going to have to start thinking of these things.

"Thanks for all your help," I said, standing up, ready to move. I didn't think they'd be waiting at this station, but better to be safe and go now.

"You too," she smiled and I turned to walk to the front of the car.

"Sam?" she called, before I got too far away.

"Yeah?" I stopped and looked back at her.

"Don't trust anyone," she said, making me look at her curiously.

"I mean, not really," she said. "Most people...they look out for themselves, you know? If they can get something out of it, they won't hesitate to turn on you."

I nodded, wondering what she'd had to go through to become so distrustful. She was probably right, though. It would be wise to keep my guard up the way she did. Trusting the wrong person, even once, could ruin everything.

Chapter 15

I had to force myself to stay calm as the train reached Penn Station.

I was now sitting in the first train car, near the exit, and was ready to bolt as soon as the door was opened. I managed to catch a pretty clear glimpse of myself in the window at one point, and Lily had done a good job of disguising me, but I still felt totally exposed. Like Wescott would somehow know what to look for.

I had to keep reminding myself that there was no possible way he could know, though. All he knew was that I was on the train, dressed in the clothes that I was. But they were just black yoga pants and a black shirt made of the same material. I'd made sure to pick clothes that were indistinct, so I'd be able to blend, and with the goth make up, no one would be paying attention to the fact that I was all in black.

Still, I couldn't get out of my head that, somehow, he'd spot me.

I fidgeted nervously as I waited to be let off the train. The fact that I couldn't see much of the station, outside the window, wasn't helping, either. There were a lot of people in the way, and I honestly didn't know if I was grateful or not that I didn't recognize any of them.

I wasn't looking forward to seeing any of Wescott's guards, but I knew they were there and I'd rather see them before they saw me.

After an eternity, the doors opened and I had to force myself to let a few people out before me and walk at a normal pace as I got off the train. Even if I didn't look anything like myself, a girl, running off the train, like she was on fire, was bound to send up a red flag.

I made my way through the crowd, trying not to make eye contact, but still watching for any guards.

As I pushed my way through a group of noisy teenagers, I noticed a man, standing, inconspicuous but watchful, by a big pole. I didn't recognize him, but the little black remote in his hand, gave him away as someone I needed to avoid.

When he looked at me, I quickly dropped my eyes and went in the other direction, making my way over to the stairs.

I took it as a really good sign when a minute passed without anyone grabbing me. The disguise must be doing its job. I was completely unrecognizable and it was worth every bit of that hundred dollars that I'd given Lily. More, even.

I walked a little further, now watching people's hands, rather than their faces, and realized they were everywhere.

I'd known Wescott would have some guards watching out for me, but I hadn't realized just how many he would have. I must have passed at least ten more in the few minutes after noticing that first one. I only covered a small area and couldn't even imagine how many more were spread around the station.

I needed to get out of here now. I wasn't sure if the train was empty by now, and no doubt they'd be searching it when it was.

When they didn't find me, and realized they hadn't seen me exit the train, they'd probably realize that I'd

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disguised myself, somehow. And then, knowing it was the only way to identify me, they'd use the remote and wait to see who reacted. My disguise wouldn't be any use if they did that.

There were still plenty of people around, but at this time of night, it wasn't nearly as crowded enough for the guards to miss me if that happened.

I glanced down over the ledge, at the train and could tell that it was empty. I saw a few people, dressed all in black - more guards - getting on board, searching for me, like I knew they would be.

But I still had a seemingly-endless walk to get to an exit. I'd never make it before they became aware that they needed to find me with the remote.

Looking ahead, I spotted another two guards, standing along my escape route.

I stopped, needing to think of something else. There were some restaurants and little travel shops around.

That wouldn't work. There were too many people.

The bathroom might be an option if the line wasn't out the door...

I looked around frantically, knowing I was running out of time, and my eyes landed on a tiny door that I guessed was a janitor's closet. It was barely visible passed the fake plants and the people, and it was painted to look like the wall. I'd only noticed it in the first place because someone had just closed it, on their way out.

It was perfect. At least, if no one was inside, it would be perfect.

Even if there was someone there, I could explain any odd behavior. The important thing was, there wouldn't be any guards in there. And they wouldn't see or hear me when I reacted to the remote.

I quickly made my way over to the door, careful not to run and raise any suspicion. I paused at the pole, a few feet away from the door and looked around to see if anyone was paying attention to me.

Feeling satisfied that I'd gone unnoticed and sure I was almost out of time, I quickly walked the remainder of the way to the door and slipped inside.

I barely had time to close the door before the debilitating pain, started in my head, making me crumple to the floor.

Guess I'd been right.

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The bursts of pain, came in erratic waves. Like too many people were hitting the buttons on those stupid remotes and not synchronizing their efforts.

Sometimes it was just a quick spurt, as if someone just tapped it to call me out, rather than cause me actual pain. Other times, it went on for a few minutes. Possibly, someone was holding the button down, but I thought it was more likely that it was just lots of little hits, overlapping.

I'd managed to crawl a little further into the closet amid all the head-splitting agony, but I hadn't gotten very far in the eternity it took for my head to finally clear.



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As soon as I had the chance and was able to think straight again, I scrambled as far into the closet as possible. I wound up sitting on an upside down bucket, out of direct view of the door.

Knowing I wasn't anywhere near safe yet, I huddled into the corner and braced myself for more torture.

I waited tensely for a few minutes, while nothing happened. I was just about to allow myself to relax, thinking it might be over, when it hit again.

Even though it didn't do any good, I clamped my hands over my ears and, not wanting to give myself away if someone happened to look in here, I forced myself to stay quiet.

It didn't get any less painful, but it seemed that the more I was exposed to it, the easier it was to take. I was getting, somewhat, used to it.

When it finally stopped again, I cautiously uncovered my ears and opened my eyes. I was covered in sweat and shaking from the effort of staying quiet through that.

Feeling nauseous, I put my head between my knees as I tried to calm my ragged breathing.

"You ok?"

I jumped and shot up off my bucket, sure I'd been caught.

And then, I immediately lost my balance and fell against the wall.

"Whoa!" The dark-skinned man said, as he reached out and grabbed hold of my arms. I was immensely grateful to see that he was wearing a janitor's uniform and not all black.

"I think I should call someone to help you," he said, as he helped me sit back down on the bucket.

"No!" I said, panicking and still having trouble breathing right.

He looked surprised and stepped back, releasing me.

"Alright..." he said, holding up his hands as if I might be mentally unstable.

Well that certainly wouldn't help anything. I took a few deep breaths and then tried again, calmer.

"I mean, thank you, but no," I said. "I'm fine, really."

He looked at me skeptically. "You didn't seem fine a few seconds ago."

"I..." Of course I hadn't. I wracked my brain trying to think of what to say.

He just watched me, apparently still trying to decide if I was crazy.

"I get seizures," I said, remembering the excuse I thought Wescott might use.

He still didn't seem convinced. Of course not. Who hides in a closet to have seizures?

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"And...I'm hiding from someone."

He raised his eyebrows. I was, clearly, not helping my case any.

"An ex-boyfriend," I added, mentally thanking Lily for that idea. "He's a real stalker," I went on. "And he'd spot me right away if he saw me like that. So I came in here when I felt it coming..."

His face softened, but he still seemed worried.

"This man must be dangerous," he said and I thought I detected a foreign accent. "For you to hide like this." I could tell he was still thinking of trying to help me by calling someone.

"No," I lied and tried to look like I thought it was no big deal. "He's just...really clingy and doesn't know when to leave me alone. But I'm fine, really. I don't need you to call anyone."

He still didn't look convinced, but said, "alright."

I mentally sighed in relief.

"Here," he said, handing me a white cloth.

I looked at him curiously.

"You must have hit your head," he said. "You're bleeding."

I automatically touched my fingers to my forehead and winced as I felt a tender spot. Pulling my hand away revealed that, sure enough, I was bleeding.

Great.

"Thanks," I said, reaching for the cloth.

I dabbed at my head, while he exchanged some of the chemicals on his cart with ones from the wall. All the while, he watched me curiously.

"You're new to the city, aren't you?" he asked, pouring clear liquid from one bottle to another.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, checking the cloth.

"You don't have that look yet."

"Look?" I asked, meeting his eyes.

"Like you think I might try and mug you," he said with a small smile.

I watched him warily, berating myself again for being so unguarded. Sure this guy seemed ok, but I didn't know him. We were alone in a closet, at the moment, and I was prone to having more 'seizures', any second. How did I know he wouldn't try to rob me? How would I make it, if he did?

"That's the one," he chuckled and started loading different supplies onto his cart.

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I wasn't sure if I should relax a little, seeing as he thought it was funny, or still be on guard because he was talking about mugging, at all.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me. "I'm not going to," he assured me.

Keeping him my main focus, I absentmindedly dabbed at my head and winced when I applied a bit too much force.

He watched me for a few more seconds, obviously guessing that I didn't trust him.

"If I'd wanted to, I had a very good opportunity before," he said, raising an eyebrow and going back to his supplies.

Well, that was true. I relaxed a little and took another look at the rag. At least the cut on my head didn't seem too bad. It already stopped bleeding.

"You sure, I can't call someone for you?" he asked, seeming to have finished with his task.

"No, I'm fine." I said. Who could I ask him to call?

"At least let me help you get to a cab," he pushed.

I opened my mouth to refuse again, but stopped. A cab was exactly what I needed. Unfortunately, I had no idea how to get to it, even with his help. It would only take a second for them to spot me, reacting to one of those remotes again. Help, from this guy, or not, they'd catch me within a few seconds.

"Come on," he tried. "You can't stay here all night, can you?"

Probably not, no. And then what? What if there were guards stationed here for weeks, pressing those buttons every few hours or something? The sooner I got away from here, the better.

"If you're still worried about being seen," he said. "I can sneak you out in my cart."

I raised my eyebrows and looked at the cart skeptically. It was certainly big enough, but it was also a garbage cart.

Then again, I was pretty desperate...

"You want me to hide in the garbage?" I asked, even though I knew that was probably the smartest and easiest way out of here.

"You got a better idea?" he asked, a little annoyed. I couldn't blame him for that, though, he was going out of his way to help me.

"No," I shook my head. "But..."

"It's a clean bag," he said. "You won't have to actually touch anything."

"Ok," I said, giving in and standing. "Thanks."

"Besides, I don't think your disguise will be very effective anymore," he said, offering me a hand to help me

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into the cart.

"My...?" I'd forgotten all about my new look. "How do you know this is a disguise?"

"You mean besides the fact that you forgot all about it until I reminded you?" he smiled.

Oh, yeah...

He shrugged. "I can just tell."

I grabbed his hand and hoisted myself into the cart.

"And like I said, I don't think it'll be effective anymore," he said. "You did a pretty good job smearing that stuff all over, when you had your seizures." The tone in his voice, told me he knew everything I'd told him was a big fat lie.

"And you didn't make it any better when you had that rag on your head," he went on. "Looks pretty gruesome, actually."

I grimaced. So much for my disguise. At least I still had the wig.

"You might want to try to wipe that junk off your face before you scare someone," he laughed and sprayed the cloth that was still in my hand, with water.

I smiled and began scrubbing my face with the now wet rag. As long as I would be hiding in the cart and getting right into a cab, my face shouldn't need disguising, for now. And if he was telling the truth, the mess on my face would only serve to call attention to me anyway.

After he assured me that I looked human again, I crouched down in the cart and he closed the lid over me. I had to fight the new sensation of claustrophobia. I'd never been afraid of being trapped in small spaces before. But I guess, given what I'd just escaped from, I was lucky not to be hysterical. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about being trapped in a cart and at the mercy of a complete stranger.

Survival was all that mattered right now. I know Lily warned me not to trust anyone, and I wasn't really. I mean, this man had no way of knowing who was after me, even if he wasn't taking me to a cab, like he said. As long as I got away from the guard-infested train station, I'd be able to take care of myself, just fine.

It was a long, bumpy, and thoroughly uncomfortable ride, but, thankfully, it was also 'seizure' free. I wasn't sure if that was really a good thing, or not, though.

Wouldn't it be better if they still thought I was hiding in the station somewhere, when I was actually outside it? But then, if they were still using their remotes to look for me, how would I manage to make it into the cab? I had no idea what kind of range those things had and if some decent person saw me convulsing or whatever for no apparent reason, wouldn't they call an ambulance?

I just had to hope my good luck held out for a little bit longer, so I could get away. I was so close to real freedom, I could practically taste it. With every second that I spent in the cart, presumably going to meet a cab, I felt my adrenalin and excitement building.

Finally, the cart stopped moving, and I waited anxiously for the lid to be lifted, feeling as if I might bust out of my skin.

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It wasn't long before the man's face appeared in the now wide open space, above me.

"Here we are. Thank you for choosing Zamir's shuttle service," he joked. "I hope your accommodations were comfortable.

I smiled, enormously relieved. "Very," I lied. "I'll be sure to recommend you to all my friends."

He chuckled and offered me a hand again.

My answering laugh died in my throat, as I emerged from the cart and noticed that we were nowhere near any cabs, but down a dark, quiet alley where the dumpsters were located.

Noticing my sudden mood change, he rushed to explain. "I thought it might look strange for me to pull a person from my cart on the busy street. More privacy here," he said. "But if you head that way," he pointed toward the busy street at the end of the alley. "And turn left, at the corner, you'll find the cab station."

I felt terrible for misjudging him again. There was nothing untrustworthy about this man. He was just a kind person, trying to help out a desperate stranger.

"Thank you," I said. "You have no idea how much you've helped me."

He pursed his lips. "I have an idea..." he said, vaguely. "And you should still let me call someone for you."

I bit my lip and shook my head.

"Alright," he said. "Then, I wish you luck. And I hope you get away from whoever it is."

"Thanks," I said before I turned and left him to head for the cab station.

## Chapter 16

"Where to?" The bored-sounding driver asked after I was comfortably seated in the back of the cab. Thankfully, I hadn't been noticed in my trek from the alley to the cab station. I hadn't even seen any guards milling around out here yet.

But now that the driver asked, I had no idea where to tell him to take me. I'd only visited the city a few times. And each time, I'd had a very specific destination, like Broadway. I didn't think that was going to cut it, now, though. I couldn't just hang out there, could I? Were they even open at this hour?

After a minute, the driver turned around and peered at me, impatience evident in his heavy sigh. I tried to remember street names, but I couldn't think of any. Besides, I wouldn't have a reference point for them either, if I did know names. I wouldn't know how far away they were or if they'd be crowded right now. And those were both pretty vital things to know. I had to get far enough away from the train station, but try not go too far and alert them to any specific direction. And, of course, it was mandatory that I stay in crowded places.

All I could think of were the names of the burros, but I seriously doubted that was specific enough for a cab driver. And there were still those other problems to think about.

He threw his arm across the back of the bench seat and drummed his fingers loudly on the ancient looking leather. I ignored him and glanced out the window, trying to think of where to go.

When I looked outside, I finally spotted a guard. He didn't look like the others I'd seen. This guy was in a suit - a nice one - and he looked like he could be an accountant. He was carrying a briefcase, which is probably why he seemed like an accountant to me. Well, that along with the glasses and dorky haircut. But he was holding that unmistakable remote in his hand, marking him as someone to get away from.

Thankfully, it didn't appear as if he'd seen me yet. He was busy searching the crowd, but I knew he'd probably throw a glance at the cabs pretty soon. He wasn't that far away.

"Just drive!" I quickly looked back at the driver and brought my hand up, to shield my face. I suddenly didn't care where he drove, as long as it was away from here. I could just stop him when I found a nice crowded area to blend into.

He continued to look annoyed and didn't move right away.

"Go!" I demanded.

Throwing me a dirty look, he turned around and started driving.

I peeked back over my shoulder, after a few seconds, but wasn't able to see the guard any longer. He'd been swallowed up in all the activity of the city.

Well, I thought smiling, this is the city that never sleeps, after all.

I let out a breath, turned around, and finally started to relax for real. I knew they'd still be after me, but it was going to be like finding the needle in the haystack. Especially once I changed my clothes.

"You want to let me know where I'm taking you?" The driver sounded as if he couldn't wait to be rid of me.

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I rolled my eyes. "Just take me somewhere crowded," I said, starting to form a plan. "Somewhere I can shop and preferably near a pawn shop."

"I don't know how much is open at four in the morning," he grumbled.

"Well then somewhere I can shop in a few hours, when they open," I said, irritably. I was not a bad passenger. Would it kill him to be even a little bit pleasant?

He drove for a few more minutes before pulling the cab over.

"There you go," he nodded out the window. "Pawn shop's on the corner."

I looked around, noting several small shops in addition to the pawn shop he mentioned. It wasn't very crowded, but there were still people around. I guessed that in a few hours the sidewalks would be packed.

Satisfied, I dug the money out from my pocket, before I glanced at the meter.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked in disbelief, seeing the outrageous total displayed. "It was a five minute drive!"

"And you took your time, making up your mind and wasting my gas," he threw back.

I scowled, gave him a twenty dollar bill, and held my hand out, waiting for the change.

Fifteen dollars for a ten-block cab ride. Ridiculous! It was a good thing I still had the ring. Just getting to this point, had almost completely drained me of the cash that Mark had given me. I only had about fifteen dollars left now.

"Thanks," I grumbled, rolling my eyes when he handed me my four dollars and change.

I got out of the car, but before I could close the door, I swear I heard him cuss me out, under his breath.

Welcome to New York, I thought cynically as I slammed the door harder than necessary. I wished that it was customary to tip cab drivers just so I could snub him for his attitude. Jerk.

After checking the sign on the pawn shop window, I realized that I had no way to keep track of time.

I turned around, feeling a little lost. It was going to be a few hours until the shop opened at eight, and just like before, I wasn't comfortable not knowing the exact time.

Glancing around, I knew that probably every shop that might be useful to me, would most likely keep those security bars locked in front of their doors until around the same time as the pawn shop.

What was I supposed to do for a few hours? I couldn't just sit here on the sidewalk. Even without the ick factor of sitting on a city sidewalk, it was much too public. Crowded or not, I wouldn't be that difficult to spot if I were just sitting out in the open. I was already feeling too exposed, standing here.

I'd seen at least fifteen guards while I was still at the train station. Which was probably only a small fraction of how many there actually were, and I wasn't dumb enough to believe that they'd stay put. They were probably already spreading throughout the city, looking for me.

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And sure, maybe it would be really difficult to find me, but maybe it wouldn't be either. The odds of me remaining hidden wouldn't increase if I just sat here, waiting for the wrong person to happen by.

I began walking, not having any idea where I was heading. As I walked, I realized something else. I wouldn't be able to just keep moving indefinitely. Adrenalin had been coursing through me since I climbed up into that air vent. Now that I felt relatively safe, I could tell by how heavy my eyelids were becoming, that I was most definitely crashing.

I hadn't gotten all that much sleep to begin with, but after the excitement and terror of escaping, my body was starting to really feel the effects. My legs felt a little heavier with every step and I knew I wouldn't be able to keep walking even until the shops opened.

And then, what was I supposed to do? My fatigue was already becoming a major issue. What about in another four or five hours? What about tomorrow? And after that?

Suddenly, surviving in the city didn't seem quite so easy. I was eventually going to have to rest. I was going to have to eat and bathe and do all the normal things people needed to do. How was I supposed to do any of that if I couldn't stay in one place for very long?

There were enough pizza places and hot dog stands around, so that I'd be able to grab something quick, often enough. But how long could I live off of that junk? Not to mention, that wasn't really breakfast food. And at this hour, running on almost no sleep, it just sounded disgusting.

Still, that was only one of my problems. How was I supposed to sleep? Anywhere I'd be able to go would be public and therefore not an option. I could get a hotel room I supposed, but it would be expensive and I know I didn't have anywhere near enough cash for that yet.

The only other place with potential would be a shelter, not that I'd know where to find one. I also had a feeling that would be exactly where they would start looking for me.

So, what was I supposed to do? If I didn't figure something out pretty soon, I was going to wind up collapsing on the street. If that happened, I may as well go find one of those guards and turn myself in.

Think, Sam, I scolded myself, trying to force away the fog that was starting to cloud my brain. There had to be somewhere I could go. People survived on these streets all the time. Of course, none of them were being hunted like I was...

Well, maybe anyway. There had to be a few people who desperately wanted to hide from the world, right? So where would they go?

Maybe, like I had just a little bit ago, they hid wherever they could, like in janitor's closets. Of course, I didn't stay hidden in there very long. It would have to be better than that.

I walked for a little longer, realizing that the cold was going to be a problem as well. I wasn't sure of the exact date, but I guessed it was around the end of September right now, and even though it wasn't freezing yet, it was chilly. It wouldn't be getting any warmer as the days progressed either.

I paused at the mouth of the alley I was passing, getting an idea when I noticed the just barely visible row of doors and windows.

Casting a guilty look around to make sure no one saw me, I quickly slipped into the darkness of the alley,



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keeping close to the wall.

As I got deeper down the alley, I retrieved my tiny flashlight from my pocket and peered into the darkened windows. It was hard to get a good idea of what I was looking at, having only a tiny beam of light to work with, but as best I could tell, they were small shops like the ones on the street where the cab driver brought me. It was sort of hard to tell since all I seemed to be looking at was back rooms. But some had boxes with different logos printed on them.

I passed the first three windows, not seeing anything helpful. The rooms I could see were tiny and had doorways leading out to what I assumed was the slightly larger store. Being so small, I doubted there would be many places to stay unnoticed.

The fourth window seemed to have some potential. It looked like a restaurant of some sort. There was a counter...but no. I shook my head, realizing that was a bad idea. As soon as someone opened the shop they'd head right for the counter and spot someone who was hiding there.

I was about to move on to the next window, when I noticed a smaller window by my feet. Throwing a quick look over my shoulder, I knelt down to see what was on the other side of the window.

I could barely see a thing though. The light was mostly reflecting back in my face, since the window was so dirty. Besides that, there didn't seem to be much to look at on the other side of the filthy glass.

It did seem to be a better option, though. At least it didn't seem to be as open as the other rooms I'd peeked into. And anyway I could check out what was down there better, once I was in.

But how was I supposed to get inside? I'd never picked a lock in my life. I certainly never broke in through a window. I didn't even see a lock to pick.

I looked closer around the frame of the window, trying to see if there was anything I could work with. I supposed I could just break the window. But I didn't particularly want to. I really didn't want to vandalize someone else's property if I could help it.

But I guess this was an emergency. I couldn't stay where I was for very much longer and I had no where else to go. And with as tired as I was, I wasn't sure how far I would even be able to go.

Vowing to only break one pane of glass, I momentarily leaned on the frame, preparing to actually do it. Too bad my flashlight was plastic. I'd have to kick it.

Standing up, I took a few practice swings with my foot, wanting to do as little damage as possible. Just as I was about to break the glass, I stopped completely, realizing something I should have sooner. If I'd been more alert, I would have paid more attention to the fact that when I leaned into the window, it moved!

I dropped to my knees again before I tried the window one more time. Sure enough, when I pushed on it, it wiggled enough to let me know that it wasn't even locked. All I had to do was figure out how to get it open.

Of course, I had nothing to work with. I assessed the ground, searching for anything useful, but found nothing.

After a few minutes of wondering what to do, I remembered the dumpster that was roughly ten feet away, and felt stupid for not thinking of it immediately. Sleep deprivation really was not something I could work with. How was I supposed to survive like this? I'd never felt so weak and vulnerable before. At least never due to my own shortcomings. I didn't like it. I was used to being capable and resourceful. And awake.

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Well, there was one more reason to hate Wescott, I guess.

Aggravated with myself, I darted over to the dumpster and lifted the lid.

"Eww." I muttered, getting a nauseating whiff so potent that I flinched away. I didn't even want to imagine all the disgusting things I might have to touch in there.

I mentally added another reason to my list of why I despised Wescott and sucked in a lungful of fresh air, before I ventured closer to inspect the contents of the garbage. Of course the darkness was not an asset for this, and my tiny beam of light was almost completely swallowed up, making it difficult to tell what anything really was. Forget about visually spotting anything to help open the window. If I was going to find anything, I was going to have to dig.

Maybe I should just break the glass. If I did, maybe they'd get better security. I'd really be helping them. I'd get them to protect themselves from real criminals. Who left windows unlocked in this city at night? Wasn't that practically inviting someone to break in?

I looked back longingly at the window, trying to reason with myself. It was totally logical, unfortunately, it was also a crime. I let out the breath I was holding, irritated with my conscience. I would break the window if I really had to, if it meant survival. But I couldn't do it if I had another option.

I groaned looking back at the dumpster. I didn't even know if I would be able to wash my hands after this. Maybe if I opened the lid further, I could see a little better.

Gasping in another deep breath, I threw the lid open all the way to decipher anything useful. After a few seconds of searching, I saw something close to the side. It was thin and sticking up like a candle in a really disgusting birthday cake.

More than happy to not have to touch anything else, I grasped the mystery object and yanked it out.

It felt like some type of plastic, but I had no idea what it was. Even if I could see it better, I'm not sure I would know. Whatever it was, it was thin enough to fit into the crack between the window and the frame, and long enough for me to try to maneuver it open. It was perfect. Even if it did have a glob of something I most definitely did not want to identify smeared on the end, pulled from the refuse.

Careful not to touch any more of the stick than necessary, I went back to the window and stuck the clean end in the crack, trying to pry it open.

It took a few tries. It was a heavy window and the stick wasn't that strong, but after a couple of minutes, I had it open just enough to get my fingers in.

Happy to be free of the unknown object, I tossed it to the ground, pulled the window open the rest of the way, and stuck my head inside.

The flashlight helped with the extreme darkness, but not that much. I was able to make out some things though. There were shelves on the walls with what looked like a lot of boxes and clutter, as well as some bigger boxes and shapes I couldn't identify scattered around the room. Maybe it was some sort of storage room?

Satisfied that it was definitely my best option right now, I shimmied through the window that was, luckily, a

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little bigger than I was.

Of course, if I'd been more awake, I might have given a second thought to what would be directly under the window. But not having done that, I stumbled awkwardly from the table I hadn't expected to be there, and thudded to the concrete floor, accompanied by plenty of clanging and crashing caused by my less-than-graceful entrance.

I stayed completely still, praying that no one heard that. But after a few seconds, I remembered that the window above this had been a dark and empty restaurant, so most likely there wasn't anyone around to hear.

Pushing myself up, I retrieved my flashlight from the spot it rolled to when I crashed to the floor, and tried to get a better look around.

Walking closer to the clutter around the room, it seemed like it was all supplies for the restaurant upstairs.

Good. Maybe whoever ran things didn't come down here all the time. I might actually have a shot at staying hidden for a little while.

I went deeper in and discovered a crevice in the wall. It wasn't exactly out of sight, but it wasn't directly in front of the door either.

I opened the few boxes on the floor in the small space and discovered they were filled with some kind of folded cloth. Probably table cloths or napkins or something. Well, at least it wasn't anything that might attract rodents or bugs. And it wouldn't be anything I'd have to feel bad about crushing.

Thinking about the kind of vermin that might be down here, I shined the light along the wall and groaned when I saw the spider web up in the corner.

I despised spiders.

But at least that was all I spotted. The rest of the room seemed relatively clean for a basement.

Grabbing the broom I'd seen behind the door, I destroyed the web and brushed off the wall as best I could before dropping the broom against the wall and wedging myself on top of the boxes.

Normally, I was pretty particular about how I slept. I couldn't have noise or light and I had to be in a bed. I was never able to sleep on a couch or anything else. But at the moment, nothing mattered but that I felt safe and was actually able to rest. I could practically feel my body shutting down.

I hoped that by leaving the flashlight on, I would discourage that spider or any friends he might have from coming near me.

Resting my head against the wall, I yawned and closed my eyes, promptly falling asleep.

## Chapter 17

"Get out!"

It wasn't so much the severe voice that woke me, as it was being poked in the arm with hundreds of tiny needles. If I hadn't been wedged in the small space, I probably would have crashed to the floor, trying to get away. Instead, I pressed myself against the wall and defensively held up my hands, my mind crazed with the possibility that everything I thought had happened last night was only some sort of hopeful dream.

When I could focus enough to understand what was happening, I remembered, with great relief, where I was, still free still of Wescott and huddled in a random basement in New York City.

Sunlight streamed in the tiny window as the ample woman jabbed me once more with the broom that I'd used to clear away the spider web before falling asleep.

"Out!" she cried in a thick Chinese accent. "This no hotel!"

I instinctively batted the broom away, wondering how she expected me to get out while she blocked my exit.

Seeming outraged that I would actually move to defend myself, she swatted more vigorously.

"Out!" she cried again. "Shen!"

Tired of being prodded with the nasty broom, and figuring I should get moving before finding out whether shen was a some kind of curse word or if she was calling for back up, I grabbed the broom mid-poke and shoved the woman out of the way before slipping through the still open door.

I flew up the wooden stairs as the woman shouted behind me, too slow to be any kind of threat. Reaching the top of the steps, I rounded the small corner and nearly collided with a stunned looking Asian man who I assumed was Shen.

Not wanting to explain or hang around for the woman to catch up, I pushed passed him, running through the building and out the front door.

I didn't slow down until I was sure that I was totally indistinguishable in the massive crowd that now occupied the street.

A little winded from my early morning sprint, I stopped to assess everything, moving off to the side when I received a few angry comments about being in the way.

From what I could tell, I wasn't anywhere near where the cab driver let me off last night, but at least there seemed to be plenty of shops on this street. And even though I didn't see one, a pawn shop couldn't be that hard to find in this city.

Thinking of the pawn shop made me suddenly paranoid about my few possessions. What if I dropped something on my little adventure this morning?

I frantically patted my pockets, breathing easier when I still felt the ring and money, tucked away. The flashlight, though, seemed to be lost. Oh well. I suppose it served it's purpose.

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I headed for the nearest shop to figure out where I needed to go, ignoring the growing hollow feeling in my stomach. As Mark emphasized, changing my appearance was my first priority. I could eat later.

"Where's the nearest pawn shop?" I asked once I had the girl's attention from behind the counter.

She stared at me for a few seconds, making evident her annoyance at the fact that I was apparently not here to buy anything.

"Two blocks over, on the corner," she nodded toward the street. Clearly finished giving me her attention, she examined hot pink nails that were long enough to make me wonder how it was possible for her to work a cash register.

"Thanks," I mumbled turning for the door.

"Those real?" The girl's voice stopped me before I could leave.

"Is what real?" I looked back surprised. The only thing that might make sense for that question, I wasn't well-endowed enough for.

"Your eyes." She smirked, understanding what I had assumed she meant. "Are you wearing contacts or something?"

And that was another problem about living in the city. I could only change so many things about myself and my unique eye color wasn't one of them. At least, not without a lot of money, which I didn't have and had no way of getting.

"No, they're real." I felt disappointed rather than a little happy like I used to. My eyes had always been the one thing about my appearance that were anything but average. It made me feel a little special when I could tell people they were my own color. Now I just felt like there was one more thing to worry about, and one more thing that made the goal of staying invisible seem harder and harder.

"How much for the sun glasses?" I asked, noticing the display on the counter.

"Ten bucks." She seemed confused about my train of thought, but pleased that I might be spending money after all.

Walking back, I grabbed a pair, not caring what they looked like, and handed her the money before leaving the shop.

I sighed as I put on my new glasses. That just about depleted all the money I had, but at least I was about to go get more.

I worried though. If I used up as much money as I did just to get to this point, how long could the money from the ring last? I hadn't even eaten yet.

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I wasn't sure if I was more relieved or paranoid once I had the money from the ring in my hands. It was all twenties, and I hadn't realize it would be such a large wad of cash. On the other hand, now that I had it I could change my appearance, as was so desperately needed.

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I realized on my walk to the pawn shop, that my hair had almost completely come loose and it was pretty obvious that I was wearing a wig. Which defeated the purpose of wearing it. I didn't have a mirror to check, but I knew it looked pretty bad, so I'd taken it off until I could find a place to fix it.

My relief and paranoia aside, I was irritated with the salesman in the pawn shop more than anything else. I'm not sure how accurate Mark's assessment of the ring was, but I knew that the six hundred he estimated was much closer to the actual value than the four fifty I'd received for it. And the salesman was well aware that I knew it. Unfortunately, he could also tell I was desperate for money.

I didn't have the luxury of holding out for another buyer and risk being seen the way I was, by the wrong person. I'd spent too long walking around like this already. But if I'd thought survival was going to be difficult before when I'd been counting on that six hundred dollars, it seemed almost impossible now.

How long could my money possibly last, living here? Two weeks? Three? I might be able to stretch it out for a month if all I had to worry about was food and clothes. But what about when I needed to sleep? The price of a hotel in the city, for just a night or two, would completely wipe out everything I had and then some. Then what?

Sleep was definitely an issue. In a little while I'd be having the same problem as last night. Anywhere possible would be too public, which made it not an option. And I couldn't break into a new place every night. Finding that last place had been a lot of dumb luck, and even that only got me about three hours. Besides, I couldn't risk someone calling the police on me.

After thinking through everything, I settled on my irritation because the alternative was fear. I despised that helpless, uncertain feeling. It was much more appealing to focus on my negative feelings toward the salesman, than it was to think about what was going to happen to me in a few days.

At least trying to disguise myself would be a distraction for a little while, I thought as I pushed open the door of the first promising clothing store I found.

Chapter 18

I felt a little more secure once I was wearing my new outfit. It consisted of jeans, a dark, long sleeved shirt, and a Yankees cap, which helped me look like most of the other people flooding the streets. The prices in the store hadn't been too bad, so there were a few other outfits stuffed inside the new bag, slung across my shoulder.

Aside from being able to blend in better, it felt good to wear jeans again. Apparently Wescott found them unnecessary, and I didn't realize I missed them so much.

It was a stupid thing to miss, I admit, but I suppose it's the little things that you never realize mean so much to you, until they're gone. And thinking about them reminded me of my mom. She had always nagged me about wearing something other than jeans and dressing up so men might notice me once in a while. That of course, always led to the I-want-grandchildren-one-day speech, which never ceased to put me in a bad mood. Now, however, this line of thinking set my mind on a worry spiral.

With everything that was going on, I wasn't able to think about my mom very much. And now that I could focus on her, I was terrified of what Wescott might have done because of me.

I didn't have any choice, though, right? I had to get out of there.

But what if it cost my mother her life?

I lost track of how many people I knocked into as I wandered around in a daze, debating in my mind. I kept telling myself that Wescott was entirely logical and there was no logical reason to do anything to my mother when I wasn't there to feel the effects. I should only have to worry if I was caught.

But I couldn't forget that he was also a cold-blooded murderer when it served his purpose, and that he'd been extremely angry when I escaped. Even the most logical person will do something irrational, out of spite sometimes.

Before long, I found myself staring at a pay phone, wanting nothing more than to call home.

I couldn't do that, though. My mom had to continue thinking I was dead, for both our sakes. But the temptation was overwhelming. I'd never missed my mother like this before. And now I had the opportunity to call her and tell her everything. To tell her that I loved her.

But with all the surveillance, which was probably increased now, Wescott would undoubtedly know if I contacted my mother, and if he hadn't come after her already, he'd be sure to then. Even if it wasn't right away, my mom would be worried sick and who knows what she would try to do? She couldn't possibly realize the kind of man she'd be dealing with.

If, by some miracle, Wescott didn't do anything to her because of me, there was no doubt in my mind that he'd do it just to keep her quiet.

My shoulders sagged as I came to the conclusion that there really was no option. I could never contact my mother again. She had to remain completely in the dark.

I suppose it was for the best, given the situation. Better she thought I was dead than to know I was some deranged science experiment, destined to stay invisible or be a guinea pig for the rest of my life.

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But then something else occurred to me - I wouldn't actually have to talk. Maybe I could just see if she answered the phone. To make sure she was alright. So, at least, I wouldn't have to wonder.

Not wanting to give it any more thought, I reached for the phone. As I dialed, I finally understood the sentiment of just wanting to hear someone's voice. I always thought it was stupid and irrational before.

I waited tensely as the phone rang four times, and then my mom was on the other end, saying hello.

Instinctively, I almost answered but managed to catch myself, just in time.

I hated Wescott for this, most of all. He took the one person I loved in the world, from me. My throat felt tight and my eyes stung with tears.

"Hello?" My mom tried again and I had cover my mouth with my hand to muffle the sound of the whimper that escaped.

"Is someone there?" she asked after a brief pause. I knew that she heard me, but I doubted if she could tell what exactly she was hearing.

She waited another minute and said hello again. I briefly closed my eyes to ward off the tears and almost felt like laughing. My mom was one of those people who would keep telemarketers on the phone for an hour, getting to know all about them. She always waited to hear the click of the phone from whoever she happened to be talking to, so as not to accidentally hang up on them. And I was sure, right now, she was debating whether to keep trying or to just write it off as an accidental dial or a bad connection. My mom could wait forever if she thought there was a person on the other end of the line who needed someone to talk to.

And selfishly, I wasn't ready to let her go yet if I could help it. I purposely let her hear just enough to know there was someone there, to keep her trying. A gasp here, a snuffle there. I kept it up for several minutes as my mom tried to coax me into speaking.

As much as I would have loved to stay there forever, I couldn't. I had to move again. Even with my new look, I still felt far too vulnerable staying in one spot so long. Besides, I'd accomplished what I wanted to. I knew my mother was still alive.

Hating to do it, I disconnected the call before the operator could ask for more money.

"I love you, Mom," I whispered into the dead receiver in my hand, feeling the sobs threatening once again.

Quickly leaving the phone, I melted into the hub of the crowd, knowing that the activity would help quell my tears.

I walked a few blocks and managed to stabilize my emotions just before feeling a dull irritation behind my eyes. I'd experienced headaches before, but they were rare. Which I was now realizing was probably supposed to be one of the things they improved about me. But I always found it hard to relate when some people seemed to get headaches so much. And forget about migraines. Who would have guessed that I was the weirdo?

Too bad Wescott couldn't use his abilities to do something really useful like eradicating headaches for the world, rather than being my waking nightmare.

Insubstantially Me

Sighing, I forgot about that fantasy. It didn't really matter, I guess. Rare as headaches were for me, I knew one was coming. It must be all the stress getting to me. I shook my head, unconcerned, and kept moving with the flow of people up the street. It would go away in soon enough.

In another minute, the headache intensified and I knew I wouldn't be able to completely ignore it the way I thought. When rubbing my temples only succeeded in having the irritation turn into pain, I moved out of the way of traffic, to give it more attention. Leaning against the building, I removed my sun glasses to rub my eyes and thought about how different this was. I'd never had more than a mild headache before. Usually the discomfort was easy enough to forget about, and I certainly never had to take pills for it. But I guess that was about to change.

Just as I decided to look for a place to buy aspirin, the pressure in my head grew a little stronger, making me realize that pain medication wouldn't help. It would be completely useless, in fact, because, even for a normal person, this wasn't a regular headache. The familiar ringing in my ears and slightly swimming vision I was starting to experience, told me that this was a considerably less intense version of the pain Wescott's remote induced.

At least, for right now it was less intense. Which probably meant that I was out of range for the full effectiveness. But given the rate at which the pain was increasing, I knew the distance between me and whoever was pressing the button was shrinking. And it was much too quickly.

I wasn't naive enough to think that it was just dumb luck on their part. Somehow, they knew where I was. Or they had a pretty good estimation, and no matter how packed the street was, it wouldn't be hard for them to zero in on the only person lying on the ground, having convulsions.

My first instinct was to run, but I had no idea which direction to go. It would take much too long to figure out if I was heading in the wrong direction, by which time I'd probably be crumpled on the sidewalk.

Running wasn't an option. I needed somewhere to hide.

Shoving aside the building pain in my head and blurred vision, I focused on my surroundings. Business were everywhere, but nothing looked very optimistic. All banks, restaurants, and novelty stores.

In another second, my eyes landed on a semi-small clothing store on the opposite side of the street. Taking my life in my hands, I dashed into the road, having to use every ounce of my special skills to not get hit by one of the flying cars in my impaired state. Even so, a cab driver had to jam on his brakes, narrowly missing me as I flitted to the safety of the sidewalk.

I ignored the angry shouts as I ran in the direction of the store, finding it more difficult to focus through the pain in my head.

Once inside the posh little shop, I forced myself to slow to a normal pace. I grabbed a few dresses that I normally wouldn't be caught dead in and headed for the fitting rooms in the back.

To my dismay, I learned that there weren't actual doors on them, only curtains. What genius ever thought that up? Did anyone ever actually feel secure, undressing behind a curtain in public? There were a lot of sick people out there.

I guess it was better than nothing though. If I couldn't have the privacy a locked door would have offered, at least I would be concealed. I would just have to hope it was enough.

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It helped that there was a sales girl manning the fitting rooms too.

Knowing what to anticipate and that I didn't have much time, I squished as far back as the small space allowed, curled into a ball on the floor, buried my face in the pile of clothes from the rack, and waited.

I didn't have to wait long.

Chapter 19

The pain in my head built to an almost unbearable level and my muscles cramped with the effort to keep completely still and quiet. I was terrified to even breathe and risk drawing attention to myself.

As the skull-splitting pressure continued to grow, I was grateful for one thing - that it wasn't the sudden, unexpected torture as before. Having it happen gradually like this, allowed me to prepare and keep myself in check. It was still unbelievably painful - more so, in fact, since I had more time to anticipate it. But I was able to cope with it better this way. And I was stubborn enough to keep fighting. I just tried to ignore the feeling that I was about to black out.

It felt like years until the pain started easing away, during which I started wishing rather than dreading that I'd pass out. I was vulnerable either way, but if I were unconscious I could get a reprieve from the agony.

I relaxed as the feeling diminished considerably, and was very grateful that I didn't have time to eat, this morning. I would have never been able to hold anything in my stomach. Even if the clothes were something I'd want, I could never afford to pay for them. It was bad enough that I was sweating all over the place.

Wanting to spare the clothes further contamination, I tossed them away, barely finding the strength to do it. And no wonder after that! But now even thinking of standing and waltzing out of here seemed like a fantasy. Not as if I felt safe to do that anyway, but I was mentally and physically exhausted.

I suppose this was as good a hiding place as any for a while. It was at least somewhat private, and I wouldn't have to worry about being chased out with a broom. I just hoped that sales girl wasn't observant enough to start wondering if I stayed here a little longer than the average customer. But why would she? There was no time limit and there were several rooms.

After a few minutes I felt strong enough to push off the floor and crawl onto the bench above me. If I did get caught by an overattentive sales girl, I didn't want to look like a mental patient.

Unfortunately that little bit of effort drained me again. And why shouldn't it? Even with that nap this morning, I was still basically running on fumes. And the adrenaline I used up just now, intensified the feeling of exhaustion by about ten. My head, arms, legs - my whole body felt heavy.

I'll just stay here a while, I told myself, leaning against the wall and yawning. I wasn't going anywhere at the moment anyway.

Just a little while, I thought again, closing my eyes. I'll just rest for a few minutes.

~~~~~

A loud noise jolted me awake and I tensely popped up, not knowing where I was or what to expect.

I relaxed when looking around for a few seconds allowed me to remember I was still alone in the fitting room.

Stretching to peer over the curtain, I realized it was almost dark outside. So much for resting for a few minutes. It had been hours. The stiffness in my neck attested to that fact.

How stupid I was! Anything could have happened while I was unconscious. Thankfully nothing had. How had no one come to check on me in so long?

## Insubstantially Me

I peeked my face around the curtain to asses things. There was a different girl, guarding the mouth of the fitting rooms now. She barely glanced at the people coming to try clothes on, but I noticed she scrutinized everyone leaving.

Thinking about it now, I suppose the first girl had been the same way. They probably didn't care how long you took in here, so long as you didn't steal anything.

Well, that explained why I'd gone undisturbed for so long, but watching the fair-skinned, red head on duty, alerted me to something else. There was a man trying to get passed her, and she apparently wasn't thrilled about the idea.

"I wanna leave! I want my ice cream!" a child in the next room shrieked and began to cry, briefly drawing my attention. I realized she'd been carrying on for a while and must be what woke me.

I looked back to the man trying to enter the women's only fitting room, feeling like I recognized him.

"I'm sorry sir." The sales girl was clearly losing patience. "You'll have to wait for your wife over there." She gestured to the right.

"But I just need to see her for a second," he tried with a forced and fairly creepy smile. "I have an appointment I need to make and she could be in there for hours."

Everything seemed off about this guy. His expression, his posture, his body language, not to mention the fact that he was trying to get back here at all. Weren't cell phones invented for this reason? He didn't even need it right now. I could hear him clearly and I'm sure his wife probably could too.

He shifted slightly, revealing what was in his hand, and I nearly fell backwards, realizing why I recognized him.

He was the man I saw from the cab window, last night. The dorky, accountant one. Strangely it was the briefcase he carried, inscribed with the initials J.P. that made it click in my brain. He wasn't looking for his wife. He was looking for me! And he wasn't going to keep up with the irritating lost husband routine for much longer.

How did he find me?

More importantly, how was I going to get away? He was blocking the exit and not likely to move until he discovered me.

I paced the tiny room, trying to think but still feeling slightly foggy from sleeping so long and uncomfortably.

Come on, Sam, I scolded myself. You're smarter than this!

He's blocking an exit, I corrected the thought from before, but maybe not the only exit!

Careful not to reveal too much of myself, I peeked through the curtain again and his eyes flicked to my face, making me freeze.

Apparently not recognizing me, he turned his attention back to the girl, and I let out a grateful breath before realizing that other women were poking their heads out of their rooms as well, trying to see what the

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commotion was.

Feeling a little more bold, I leaned out a little further and almost cried out when my eyes landed on the red exit sign to my left.

It wasn't ideal. I would have to walk across the now enormous-looking gap, allowing myself to be seen, to get there. Also, it was an emergency exit and if the sign on the door was to be believed, an alarm would sound as soon as it was opened.

If he was smart enough to have tracked me here, he was definitely smart enough to understand what happened if the alarm suddenly went off. I may as well just start screaming 'here I am' and let him come get me.

As I was watching the door, wondering what to do, the woman in the room beside the exit, threw the curtain aside and glared disdainfully at the man still trying to gain access, as she walked to the clothes rack to deposit her rejected items.

Getting an idea, I ducked back behind the curtain and quickly switched my hat for the black wig that was stuffed in my bag.

It was my best shot. He wouldn't be looking for short, black hair.

Grabbing the dresses, I forced myself to leave the temporary safety of the curtain and walk at a normal pace to the clothes rack just as the other woman had.

I didn't dare lift my head to look but I felt the man's eyes burning into me the entire time.

I took it as a very good sign when I made it to the other end of the small hallway without being grabbed, shouted at, or forced to succumb to the remote that I was positive he had in his other hand.

I wonder why he wasn't using it though. Maybe Wescott lied after all, and too much exposure was damaging.

Well, that was a pleasant thought, I thought sarcastically. But I wasn't going to question the rare good luck that it wasn't an issue right now. I risked a glance over my shoulder and was glad to see that he was just barely out of sight. Which was perfect.

I quickly pushed the door open before jumping into the room the woman vacated a minute before. Drawing the curtain, I held my breath and waited a few seconds before I was surprised to learn that nothing happened. No alarm sounded when I threw the door open.

I smiled in disbelief. I might actually be able to make it out of here undetected.

Unsure if my hurried movements would have drawn attention, I cautiously took another look.

On the up side, no one seemed to have noticed what I just did, including the man. But he had also advanced by several inches, clearly ready to push passed the sales girl who was now blocking his path and calling for someone to help her. I had maybe five seconds to get out that door.

Taking what was sure to be my last opportunity, I flew out of the fitting room and through the emergency exit, only stopping to help push the door closed again before I began sprinting down the long alley, praying that no one was following.

## Chapter 20

I stuck to alleys and side streets, turning corners at random, not stopping until my legs burned and I was gasping for breath. All the while, I tried to figure out how that man was able to pinpoint my location so accurately. Obviously he had a pretty good idea I was tucked away in one of those fitting rooms, but I couldn't imagine how he knew. They could only trace me within one hundred feet, and while that wasn't anywhere near a wide enough area for my peace of mind, it wasn't that precise either. The odds of him zeroing in on me so closely, given the crowded area and the fact that I was hidden, had to be a million to one. And he seemed pretty sure I was there. I doubt he'd have been locked in a confrontation with that sales girl otherwise.

So how had he done it? Not knowing wasn't just aggravating, it was dangerous. How could I avoid them, if I didn't know what not to do? And what hope did I have of keeping my freedom if I couldn't even stay hidden while I was concealed?

Somehow over the next several hours, I stayed in the clear. I was on edge and compulsively checking over my shoulder, but I hadn't seen that man again or anyone else to worry about.

And I felt a little better when I was finally able to eat something. Since my spot in the 24-hour diner allowed me a nice clear view out the front window as well as access to a nearby back exit if needed, I could relax somewhat and draw out cups of coffee through the early morning hours.

When sunrise came, morning light flooded the restaurant and I stopped feeling so secure and more like a sitting duck, easily spotted by anyone strolling along. So I decided it was time to move.

I had this awful premonition of the way my life would be if I managed to survive like this forever. I would constantly be on the move, always checking over my shoulder, and living on the hope that I'd be able to find somewhere safe to sleep. At best, it was a pretty terrible way to have to live.

I almost felt as if I were putting off the inevitable of getting sucked back into that twisted laboratory for the rest of my life. Eventually I was going to run out of money and I couldn't think of a single way to earn an income. Not even a sporadic one. And once my money was gone, how long until I became too weak with starvation to run?

There were ways to make money, living as a vagabond, of course, but nothing I was going to be able to do. Even if I were willing to sink to prostitution, it wouldn't be feasible. And anyway, if I was going to do that, I may as well go back to Wescott.

Stealing wasn't an option either. At least, not anything that would be guaranteed. Plus that would most likely be inviting police attention.

All in all, things seemed pretty hopeless. But not wanting to dwell on it anymore since that wasn't helping, I pushed it from my mind.

Throughout the day, I wound up passing all the popular tourist sights and getting a good feel for the city. I decided that Times Square was probably my best bet at night for a while. No matter the time of day, it was always bustling with thousands of people and there were plenty of stores open all night long.

At one point I found myself standing outside a Sovereign bank. I'd been a patron there before the world assumed me dead, and I couldn't help wondering if there was some way to access my account.

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I had no idea how long it would take for an account to be closed after a person died, but if there was a chance that mine was still open, I had a few thousand dollars in there that would give me a much better chance at surviving. A prolonged chance at least.

Unfortunately, Wescott deprived me of my ATM card along with my driver's license and everything else that might be helpful.

But then, maybe they wouldn't even ask for identification. Sometimes bank tellers were lazy and only asked for the account number. And of course, I had that memorized.

Resolving to give it a shot, I pushed through the glass door and approached the first bored-looking teller, hoping she wasn't too anal about the rules.

"Can I help you?" The middle-aged woman with a bad dye job looked up when I reached the counter.

"I need to make a withdrawal." I took one of the red slips from the stack and quickly filled it out before handing it back to the woman.

"Identification?" She asked, glancing at the small paper.

"Well, I don't actually have any." I tried.

"Feel free to come back when you have it," she said dismissively, laying the paper on the counter for me.

"I can't." I quickly put a story together. "You see, I'm visiting the city and my purse was stolen."

The woman watched me skeptically and I mentally kicked myself for not picking the naive-looking girl, smacking her gum, three windows down.

"Isn't there someone you can call?" She didn't seem very sympathetic to my fabricated dilemma.

"They got my cell phone too." I attempted to look pitiful. "Numbers and all. I know you normally need ID, but I'm stranded. Can't you just take my social security number?"

She watched me skeptically, and was obviously not going to be easily persuaded.

"Please, just pull up the account," I tried. "You can ask me any of the security information you want. I just really need my money."

She pursed her lips, silently deliberating, and I worried she might say no just to be difficult. But after a minute she gave in. I waited nervously while she clicked away on the keyboard, and noted the deepening suspicion in her expression when she examined the screen.

"It says here that you're deceased." She raised an eyebrow.

I couldn't keep from muttering a curse, which didn't help my case. The woman grew visibly more suspicious and I glanced away, quickly trying come up with something to explain why the computer would think I was dead.

"My ex must have done that." Boy this imaginary former boyfriend of mine was a real jerk.

## Insubstantially Me

"We shared the account, and he must have done it to get back at me." I rolled my eyes for effect. "But obviously I'm alive and well. Isn't there something you can do?"

I don't know if she bought it or not, but it didn't matter. I could tell by the look she gave me that she either couldn't help me or she wouldn't.

"I'm afraid not," she said. "You can speak with the bank manager if you'd like, but the account's been cleared out already."

My shoulders slumped. All that for nothing. And I really could have used that money.

"Alright, thanks." I muttered, turning to leave. I wondered if Wescott had done it to cut me off or if my mom took care of it because she believed I was dead.

I suppose I wasn't any worse off than before, but I had started to make plans for that money. I could hold out for a while yet, but even more pertinent than the food issue was shelter. Soon I'd be in desperate need of sleep again, and I wasn't inclined to allow myself to get to the point where I might pass out again like I had in that fitting room. That extra money might have gotten me a few decent nights sleep in a hotel.

I headed down the block and came to St. Paul's Chapel. I never made up my mind about religion. My parents always thought it was important enough, but I just hadn't decided. Although considering the way my life was turning out, I probably should give it some serious thought.

But religion aside, I appreciated the historical aspect of this place. It was the oldest public building in the city, still in use. And it was where George Washington had attended.

Not having much else to do at the moment, and more than willing to get off the street, I decided to go exploring.

It was beautiful and ornate, the way I would have expected, but the only features that held my attention once inside, were the wide open balconies that no one seemed allowed access to.

The stairs were easy enough to locate, but actually making it passed the roped off area unnoticed was going to be a feat. However if I managed to do it, this might just be the perfect place for me to hide out. Public, but still private enough. And what was safer than a church that locked it's doors at night? I was just grateful that I had the foresight to buy bottled water and granola bars along with some basic toiletries including baby wipes in lieu of an actual shower.

"Can I help you with something, my child? You seem troubled."

I'd been sitting in the back for quite a while, zoned out and didn't notice the priest approach. His voice was soft and unthreatening, but I was so on-edge, he startled me anyway.

"No, I..." It was a reflex to deny it and try to brush him off. But how did you lie to a priest in church? For a minute, I couldn't think of what to say.

He must have seen something in my expression because he sat down in the spot next to me, giving me a piercing look.

I tried not to let my discomfort show as he continued to watch me.



## Insubstantially Me

"This is a beautiful building," I spit out, hoping that he would stop looking at me like that. It felt as if he could see what I was planning.

"That it is," he agreed. "You know, most people think that's all it is. A nice historical building. Interesting but out of date. But it's always been a place to assist those in need. A place for the weary to find rest."

I swallowed hard, sure he could read my mind.

Seeming to be finished, he stood and gave me a kind smile. I found myself half smiling, and for a second, I wanted to tell him...well, not the truth, but I was tempted to ask for help anyway.

I kept my mouth shut, though. There was no easy fix to my situation, and what I had in mind was probably illegal. No matter how nice and willing to help he might seem, I had a hard time imagining that this man would break the law.

He began moving away, but stopped after a few steps, turning back slightly.

"The doors will be locked for the evening in about five minutes," he said. "Be sure you're not on the wrong side when they are."

I was sure I wasn't imagining the twinkle I saw in his eye as he left me sitting there, speechless. He knew! He knew what I was planning and he wasn't going to kick me out.

I smiled, almost unable to believe it, as I watched the priest walk out of the auditorium, leaving that roped off area completely unguarded.

Not intending to waste the opportunity, I jogged to the steps and climbed over the rope, as soon as the room was clear of the few people who had been milling around. I took the creaking stairs quickly and ducked down behind the small wall, satisfied that I was completely hidden from view.

I risked a peek over the edge of the wall just in time to see the same priest reenter the auditorium and walk briskly down the aisle to lock the gate outside and then the front door. As he strode back the way he'd come, I noticed that he visually swept the room without once glancing upward.

"I don't see anyone, Father Aaron," he called as he reached the doorway once again. I grinned at his carefully chosen words. Rather than lie by saying no one was here, he deliberately didn't look where he guessed I'd be.

The door closed behind him and I waited a few minutes to move, just in case. When I was satisfied that no one was going to be coming back to check, I stood up and looked around.

It was obviously not built for comfort up here. Certainly not for sleeping. Everything was hard wood except for the small patch of carpet toward the wall.

I sighed, going over to get as comfortable as possible, thankful that my bag could double as a pillow. I'd have to get some kind of blanket later. But if I was able to keep this up, I guessed it wouldn't be an issue for a while. Despite the coolness of the temperature outside, it was stuffy up here.

Searching the area, I spied a small window toward the front of the building and a door that I assumed to be a side exit toward the rear.

I went to prop open the window while it was still light enough to see and returned to my place on the floor.

## Insubstantially Me

Before, the city sounds floating through the window would have undoubtedly kept me awake. But getting by on such little decent sleep was leaving me completely exhausted, so noise didn't seem to be problematic any longer. At this point, a marching band surrounding me, wouldn't even bother me.

And the prospect of actually getting to lie down in a safe place to sleep, felt like Heaven. Even if it was on the floor.

## Chapter 21

I sat up quickly, momentarily confused about where I was. It seemed I was getting used to that feeling because I wasn't terrified this time.

In a few seconds I was able to recall falling asleep on the balcony floor and I looked around, yawning. Everything was dark and quiet, and I vaguely wondered what woke me since it was obviously still the middle of the night.

Not caring to think about it too much, I lay back down, already feeling myself ease back into oblivion.

Before I could drift off, a noise got my attention. It wasn't terribly loud, just out of place. And the crash of metal sounded very nearby. Right outside building, if I had to guess.

I sat up again, more alert. I had no idea what the noise was, but it must have been the reason I woke up in the first place. Surprises were never something I looked forward to, but now I understood just how bad they could be. Wanting to investigate, I quickly crept over to the window to look out.

The view from the balcony window didn't offer much information. It was a narrow opening and was at an odd angle. Even so, the wall outside protruded from the building, blocking any hope I had of seeing what might be causing the commotion.

But going off assumption, I guessed that the clanging metal I'd heard had come from the gate surrounding the building. Was someone trying to break in? Who even did that? Wasn't breaking into a church the tenth deadly sin or something?

I strained to listen and a deep voice reach my ears, barely louder than the late-night city sounds.

"Maybe she isn't here," the man said. "If they lock up at night, they probably check the building too."

I gripped the window ledge as my pulse sped up. Someone was trying to break in alright. To get to me. How did they find me? Again!

"She's here," another one answered confidently.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Camera showed her coming here and not leaving."

I was on camera? How?

"There's a back exit," the other one said. "Coulda gone out that way."

"There's a camera on that door too. She's here."

I was getting that trapped feeling again. I managed to evade them for an entire day, but somehow they tracked me down again. Which told me they could do it over and over. There were cameras all over the city. But how did Wescott know which ones to check? How would he even have access to them? And how did he know it was me when he shouldn't have any idea what I was wearing?

## Insubstantially Me

What was I supposed to do now? I didn't think the locks were so secure that these men couldn't get passed them. And then it would only be a matter of time before they found me. Running might be an option, but I would never outrun them while they were armed with remotes.

"Well, we can't break in. Boss said we gotta be discrete," the other one said to my great relief.

"That's okay. She's not going anywhere. She's locked in and probably sound asleep. We'll come back when the building opens. Grab her then."

The voices faded away and I couldn't believe my luck. They were actually leaving? Why did being discrete matter?

Deciding I really didn't care, I made my way back to the makeshift bed and checked that my few possessions were secure in my bag.

So much for a safe place to sleep, I thought, throwing the bag over my shoulder. But at least I actually felt rested this time. It was still fairly early when the doors were locked, so I was estimating that I'd gotten five or six hours of sleep.

Once I stood up, I had to worry about actually leaving. Automatically, I went for the door to my left, since obviously either of the main exits were out. I just prayed there would be no camera on this door.

I was glad that there was only a simple lock to get passed on this door, so I wouldn't have to break anything to get out. Hopefully the priest or whoever would think to check it later.

Ready to fly, I opened the door but had to stop short when I almost ran into the railing that surrounded the landing outside.

This wasn't an exit. It was a balcony. Just great.

I looked down, uneasy with the height. I was on the second floor and didn't have a sheet to get me even part of the way down this time.

I wasn't sure how soon those men would return, or if they'd even gone very far, and I had no idea how long it would be until the doors were opened for the day, so I couldn't waste time searching for another exit. Besides, there was no guarantee I'd actually get through the locks on a different door. And just because I didn't see any cameras in here, didn't mean they weren't anywhere else. There were plenty of other places in the building, including a gift shop, where it wouldn't be that outrageous to find one.

So either I risked being trapped too long as well as being spotted and hunted again, or I took my chances with the balcony.

Groaning, I secured my bag across my shoulder, knowing this was my only choice. I had to jump.

I took another look down, hoping to find anything able to be used for support, but there was nothing. Just a straight fall to the ground.

I suppose I could be grateful that it was grass and not concrete, though.

Still, once I made it down there, assuming I didn't kill myself, I still had to make it passed the fence. It wasn't any easily climbed chain link fence either. It was solid iron bars with no convenient footholds.

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"Worry about it later," I muttered, throwing one leg over the railing and then the other.

I sat there for a good five minutes, clinging to the edge and thinking about how much this was probably going to hurt. I wasn't afraid of heights per se, but I wasn't a huge fan of them either.

Briefly closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. "Stop being a baby, Sam."

I pushed off, allowing gravity to take over, and for a few terrifying seconds was caught in free fall, plummeting to the ground. This was why I didn't like heights, I suddenly remembered. It was the total lack of control that I couldn't stand.

Despite keeping my knees bent and allowing myself to drop and roll as soon as my feet touched down, I still landed wrong thanks to the bag I carried, hindering my movement.

I almost made a full rotation, but was forced to stop with my left leg twisted beneath me, and it absorbed the momentum. I didn't feel anything snap, but the pain radiating through my ankle told me that I probably earned a pretty bad sprain.

Clumsily getting to my feet, I gritted my teeth against the ache and momentarily reached for the wall to steady myself.

Well this certainly wasn't going to make things easier. Perhaps jumping wasn't the best choice after all. But I guess it was too late for that now.

I hobbled to the gate, wondering how I would ever make it over the bars that came up to my shoulders. If I hadn't sprained my ankle, it would still be difficult to climb over.

After a minute of scanning the area, I noticed what I assumed to be some type of generator set just inside the fence. It was small enough for me to get on top of easily, and large enough to act as a step to the other side. It was perfect but I hesitated not comfortable with its proximity to the back entrance of the church. Remembering my ankle, I realized that I didn't have any other option. Even the thought of hopping the fence with assistance had me cringing, knowing how much the landing would hurt. Besides, better they saw me escaping on camera than to find me here in a few hours. I could always find somewhere to blend in and hopefully be lost on surveillance.

Unsure of how long it would take for me to be noticed once making myself visible on camera, I couldn't afford to waste time. Ignoring the pain in my ankle, I hurried over to the box and hopped on top of it, depending greatly on my upper body strength.

I stood up and positioned my good foot on the high iron bar, wobbling uneasily as I attempted to get my other foot in place. The process was taking much too long, thanks to my injury, but I didn't dare rush. I was already nervous about one wrong move sending me sprawling and really damaging my ankle. However the sharp prongs at the top of the fence added extra incentive to be overly careful.

My caution got me as far as standing up straight before a sudden gust of wind slammed into me, taking whatever balance I had right along with it. I flailed my arms trying to stay upright, but knowing it was a losing battle, I decided to jump while I still had a modicum of control.

In the split second it took to hit the ground, I was torn between wanting to baby my bad foot and wanting to land on both feet, in hopes of sparing my only good side the risk. One injured leg might be manageable, but

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two would make me completely helpless.

Of course, my indecisiveness cost me any kind of control, causing me to touch the ground with both feet before slamming onto my side. Which hurt a heck of alot more on concrete than the grass would have.

I felt myself go crimson with the effort to stay quiet as pain shot through my left leg as well as the arm I landed on.

Only taking a moment to recoup, I forced my body off the ground and began limping down the sidestreet, absently rubbing my sore right arm. My original intent had been to head toward Times Square, but that was a few miles away. A simple goal with two good feet, but injured as I was, it would take much too long. Particularly in light of the fact that people would be after me as soon as they got a glimpse of my less than graceful escape on that camera.

My only hope was to come across some helpful alternative and soon.

## Chapter 22

I allowed myself to limp along for a few blocks, moving as quickly as possible. But after receiving a few unsavory looks from men I passed who left little doubt in my mind what they were thinking, I opted for moving more slowly and appearing less weak. Normally, I would laugh at the thought of a couple random creeps trying anything, but at the moment, I was somewhat vulnerable. If not for my injury, for the probability that I was being hunted and couldn't afford to waste time fighting anyone off.

Not wanting to make myself too easy to follow, I turned corners arbitrarily, still keeping Times Square as my objective. Or at least, that was my intent. I didn't know the city that well yet and every time I made a new turn, I had a bad feeling that it was in the wrong direction. But having no choice, I pushed on, hoping to get on the right track soon.

Just as I was about to turn another corner, I heard a car stop short somewhere behind me. Unable to help myself, I threw a brief glance back before disappearing around the corner, and caught a glimpse of that same man with the briefcase, stepping out of a sleek black car at the other end of the block.

I couldn't be sure that he'd seen me, or even that he'd know it was me if he had, since I pulled on my red hoodie once I was a few blocks from the church. But I also wasn't about to take chances waiting around to find out. Besides, it didn't bode well if he'd gotten this close to me so soon.

I checked that my hood was secure before forsaking my previous plan to hide my limp, and instead began hobble running down the thankfully somewhat crowded sidewalk. But within a few seconds, I knew this wasn't going to work. My leg was already screaming with pain, and I barely covered half a block. I was also certain the man would be coming around the corner any second.

Not able to think of anything better, I quickly ducked behind the group of military guys standing in a circle, talking and laughing boisterously.

The man I huddled behind was huge, easily concealing me as I peeked through the spaces between his group of friends to watch for my pursuer.

I only had to wait seconds before the man that I was starting to despise, rounded the corner, searching expectantly. Obviously he'd seen me and I couldn't help wonder why he was neglecting his remote. Strategically, it seemed like a no brainer for him. But I wasn't complaining.

He hurried down the street, looking passed the place I was hidden, and I maneuvered my way around the circle of men in uniform as he walked by, in case he happened to turn back. Thankfully, he seemed to be working alone so I didn't have to worry about hiding from anyone else.

Again, I couldn't help but wonder why that was. Nothing about this man made sense and it was starting to frustrate me. He was apparently very good at finding me, but based on the way he was working, choosing not to use some obvious advantages, I couldn't figure out how that was possible.

He hurried to the end of the block and paused at the corner to figure out where to go next. I held my breath, waiting for him to disappear in one direction or the other.

"I'm not harboring a fugitive, am I?"

I gasped, startled by the unexpected voice so nearby, thinking I'd been wrong about the man working alone.

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But in another second, I realized it came from in front of me, not behind.

I looked up to see a pair of hazel eyes, watching me with interest. The guy I was huddled behind was half-turned and peering at me over his shoulder, no doubt waiting for an explanation as to why I was using him as a shield.

Straightening and careful to keep an eye on, while staying out of view of the man who hadn't yet picked a direction, I stared back at the person who spoke to me, with wide eyes.

"I..." I tried, but couldn't think of what to say that wouldn't sound crazy. I was too focused on how close I'd been to being caught and how close I still was, to give this man my full attention.

"Um..." Think, Sam, think. I could use the stalker excuse, but that wouldn't explain why I was limping or why he was so openly pursuing me. Or why I most likely looked like such a mess. At least, not without making it sound bad enough for him to want to call the police or something.

Nothing else plausible was coming to me and my hesitation was making this man look at me strangely. Which made me realize that he had a teasing gleam in his eye before.

Nice going, genius. Way to blend. Just answer the question!

I forced a smile and shook my head while stealing another glance at the corner. "No."

He gave me an easy smile but looked pretty curious now. Clearly he was waiting for that explanation, which of course was my own stupid fault for acting so suspicious in the first place.

My instinct was to mumble something and sneak back the other way - I didn't have to explain anything to this guy. But I couldn't forget about the car that might still be waiting around the corner or the possibility of that man turning around and seeing me. For the moment, at least, I was stuck.

"David," one of his friends said scoldingly, getting both our attention.

"Stop hounding the lady," the shorter of the five said. "She's obviously flustered by my shocking good looks." He winked at me.

I couldn't keep the small but genuine smile from my face. He vaguely resembled Mario Lopez, so it was easy to tell where his confidence was coming from, but it was also apparent that it was an act. Mostly anyway.

"Man, your looks are shocking, alright," said the huge one I'd originally hidden behind. "But it aint because they're good!"

The other guys guffawed while the shorter one raised his chin, seeming unfazed. "Don't be hatin cuz you're jealous."

I took another anxious peek down the block just as the man disappeared around the corner, allowing me a moment to relax and watch the banter going on in front of me.

"Jealous of what, Tiny Tim?" the bigger one answered.

"I haven't had any complaints about my size," he said. "At least I'm not a mammoth."



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"Well, you-"

"Hey, how about we go eat now!" the man with dark waves, to my right interrupted. "I'm still starving and that table's finally free." He glanced at me, his expression apologetic but still amused. "They can go at it for a while." He looked back at the group, "Like two old ladies."

The others laughed again, voicing their agreement on eating and David turned to me. "Care to join us?" He gestured to the pizza place we were standing outside of.

"Oh, no," I said. "Thank you." I was already planning on heading to the alley across the street. I couldn't just hang around the exact spot that man lost sight of me, for more than a few minutes. That was practically asking to be found.

"Come on," he pushed. "Moose lost a bet, so the bill's on him, and it'll be more fun for the rest of us to add an extra person."

I was about to decline again, but I couldn't help asking, "Moose?"

David nodded to the large man now walking through the door of the restaurant, followed by the others. "As in, big as a."

Of course. I smiled and shook my head. "No I really can't, I-"

"Besides what if your friend comes back?" he asked, wiping the smile from my face. That was a good point. What would I do if he came back? Standing still or running away, he seemed to be able to find me. And right now I was in no condition to run anywhere anyway.

I threw another nervous look toward the corner. When I met David's gaze again, he was watching me strangely.

"What are the odds you'll find another ruggedly handsome group of guys to hide behind?" He was still joking, but there was a definite suspicion in his eyes now, and I honestly wasn't sure if it was in my favor or not.

But he was right. My odds were probably better if I stuck with them for a little while. Blending was much easier when you had a group to blend into. Besides, that man would be expecting me to be alone and on the move. Not sitting and eating with a big group.

"You're not one of those cruel women who likes to see men beg, are you?"

I couldn't help giving him another smile, which he interpreted as a victory. He gestured to the door and said, "After you."

Sighing, I gave in and went inside. The alternative wasn't a good one and the smells wafting from the open restaurant door were making my stomach growl. And if I could save a little money on a meal, it was all that much better for me.

"Hey! It's our little fugitive friend!" The dark-haired man said when I stopped at the large table where the group was getting settled. The others acknowledged my presence with good-natured comments and friendly smiles. Their easy comradery was a welcome change from the sort of solidarity I'd been forced into recently.

"You have a name, little fugitive?" David asked, standing beside me. I wasn't accustomed to being called

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little, but to these guys, I was pretty small. Compared with Moose, I was positively petite.

"Sa-" I reflexively began before thinking better of it. "Sarah," I finished with quick check out the window, hoping they wouldn't think too deeply into my hesitation. An alias was undoubtedly best for me. No sense leaving any kind of a trail.

"Well, Sa-Sarah," David teased, that suspicion apparently not going anywhere. "That's Moose, Peter, Jason, and Alex."

It was interesting to see each of their personalities show in their responses when David said their names. Moose gave me a big goofy grin, and his ultra white teeth practically shone in contrast with his dark skin. Peter, the dark-haired one who spoke to me before, gave a small wave. Jason, apparently the quiet one of the group, only bobbed his blonde head in congenial acknowledgement. And Alex, the shorter, overconfident one winked again.

"And I'm David," he finished.

"Hi." I smiled, sliding into the seat beside Alex on the bench of the round table.

David sat next to me before scooting over to make room for Jason, and that claustrophobic feeling hit again. I was almost directly in the middle of the booth and wouldn't be able to jump out with ease if I needed to. But then, if I needed to, it probably wouldn't do me any good to go anywhere. At least I had a clear view through the front window of the pizza place. And we were in the corner of the restaurant, so I wouldn't be seen easily from outside.

Not wanting to make myself stand out, I pushed the red hood from my head as the waitress came over to take the order.

## Chapter 23

I was amazed by how quickly I felt comfortable with these guys. I still compulsively glanced out the window, but I talked and laughed freely with them, which was a something of a new experience for me. I always shied away from groups like this before, finding them juvenile, obnoxious, and more often than not awkward. But I suppose captivity, fugitivism, and forced isolation will work wonders for a person's social skills, spontaneity, and tolerance. I even found myself participating when Alex flirted with me. Something he didn't appear capable of not doing.

I used to feel that flirting was mindless and sometimes revolting, but right now, it was fun. And just like the rest of my interaction with this group, it made me feel like a person again. To these guys I wasn't Sam, the genius who never fit in anywhere. I wasn't Abi, the freaky or pitied lab rat. And I wasn't some nameless runaway, trying desperately to be invisible. I was Sarah, the mysterious, witty stranger who effortlessly made friends and astonished them with my ability to polish off pizza like a man.

I was on my fourth slice and that was pushing it for me, especially since the slices were huge. But I only did it to see their faces. When I took my second piece, I got raised eyebrows from David and Alex. I guess the girls they were used to, ate like birds. When I'd taken my third, the others started paying attention and betting on if I would throw up. So just for fun, I lifted the fourth slice to my mouth and took a big bite, wanting to laugh when Jason's jaw dropped.

"I'm gonna have to man up and eat another one," Moose announced. "It's pathetic if I can't beat this little girl."

I had just swallowed and was about to retort with a bet that I could down a fifth, when I caught an unwelcome glimpse of a growingly familiar accountant type, out the window.

I'm not sure if the guys heard my unladylike comment as I dropped the pizza and slid under the table, hoping that man hadn't looked inside the restaurant before I was out of view.

I tried not to think of what I was going to say to everyone to explain my behavior, or the kind of bacteria that was probably living on the floor. At the moment nothing mattered but making sure I wasn't noticed.

"I think you insulted her," Peter joked, making the others laugh.

I twisted and looked up to see that David wasn't laughing along with the others. He was watching me intensely.

My eyes widened and I jumped when I heard the bell that signaled someone coming into the restaurant. Had he seen me?

"Please don't say anything," I whispered. What would I do if I'd misjudged this man? I allowed myself to do exactly what Lily advised me not to and now I was completely at this stranger's mercy.

David watched me for another few seconds before looking in the direction of the door. I breathed a little easier noting the scowl that crossed his face. He was siding with me.

He nonchalantly slid over so that it wouldn't appear as if a person were missing from the bench and I took the opportunity to curl in a ball, ducking partially under his long legs.

I rested my head on my knees, just able to see a little of the area between our table and the register, from my

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vantage point between everyone's feet. Thankfully, they were all taking the hint and didn't mention me again. Instead they carried on as if I didn't exist.

Even hidden as I was, my pulse sped with every tap of the shoes that brought him closer, and my heart seemed to stop altogether when the expensive-looking shoes came into view, halting not ten feet away.

You don't know it's him for sure, I tried telling myself. It could be anyone. Don't panic.

But then a familiar black briefcase with J.P. inscribed on it, landed quietly next to the shoes, and I allowed myself to panic.

It was almost impossible to breathe the few everlasting moments until those shoes pointed toward the counter and away from me.

I strained to listen passed the conversation and laughter above me and heard the man order a coffee. Fitting with his persona of nerdy accountant, there was an unpleasant, nasal quality to his voice.

My logical side insisted that I was going to be fine. He wouldn't be ordering coffee if he knew I was here. He'd be seeking me out just like before.

But the paranoid side that was triggered that day Wescott had me pulled into the van, kept my heart racing with the possibility that he knew, or at least suspected that I was here. He did seem to be inexplicably good at finding me, after all.

The more I thought of it, the more that paranoid part was making sense. Supposing he did know where I was, the guys hiding me were wild cards. Even an ounce of chivalry could compel them to defend me, and clearly they had much more than that. And quite honestly this man was no match for even one of the young and fit military guys, let alone five. He wouldn't have the leverage over them that he had with me.

But they wouldn't stay here indefinitely, and they didn't understand the situation. All it would take would be for this man to wait them out and then come for me once they'd gone.

Please leave, my mind chanted over and over as my eyes bore a hole in those shoes.

After a few minutes that seemed far longer, I heard the exchange that told me he had his coffee and was free to leave.

By some miracle he began moving away. So maybe he really was oblivious. But in another second, I nearly had a heart attack when he suddenly stopped and turned toward the table.

I heard the guys go quiet. No doubt they were staring him down.

"Do you have the time?"

"Just after one." Alex sounded serious for the first time tonight. And if I wasn't mistaken, a little hostile.

I assumed that the man nodded or gave some other acknowledgement because he didn't linger after that. He strode out of sight and I heard the sound of his retreat to the door, where the bell indicated his departure.

It took a minute for me to move even an inch. What if he was only pretending to go?

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I felt David slide away, leaving my space at the table open once again, and I looked up, meeting his gaze and still not at all sure about emerging from my hiding spot.

"Coast is clear," he said, seeming strange. I knew that suspicion was still there in spades, but there was something more to it now that I couldn't read.

"How do you know?" I still kept my voice down, just in case.

"He got into a car. Drove off. I assume they aren't going to circle the block."

He was probably right. If he'd known I was here, he never would have allowed me a reprieve to slip away. And I guess I couldn't stay down here forever.

But now what to say to these guys? They did me a huge favor and were going to be looking for an explanation. Particularly David.

No way out of the situation, I pushed myself off the floor and back onto the seat, where I proceeded to avoid eye contact since I couldn't think of that explanation. The truth wasn't an option, so that left me obligated to come up with another plausible story. Which, just as before, wasn't exactly a simple task.

"Please tell me that's not your ex," Alex said, effectively getting my attention.

"Him?" I was sure the shock and revulsion was clear on my face. "No."

"Good. You could do much better." He grinned. "Heck, I could do better."

"Givin' yourself an awful lot of credit aren't you?" Moose piped up, making Alex scowl for a minute before he looked thoughtful.

"I'm not sure if I should be offended or not," he laughed and the other guys joined in. I nervously did too, glad that they were back to their jovial selves and not seeming likely to ask me too many questions.

After an anxious peek out the window, I decided to stick with more comfortable topics by picking up where I left off with the pizza. At least until I discovered that my plate was now empty.

I looked up, perplexed before I spotted David, looking amused and slightly guilty.

"I thought it'd be best to eliminate the evidence." He grinned before shoving the last bite of my slice in his mouth.

"You were just afraid I'd outdo you," I accused, forcing that same aloof attitude and staying on a safe subject while throwing yet another glance to the window.

I could see that David didn't miss my obvious avoidance, but he played along anyway.

"You never would have finished this one. You'd explode first," he said and the other guys heartily agreed.

"Too bad there's no more, or I'd prove it," I bragged, more than happy that I wouldn't be able to try. I really did feel close to exploding. Of course I wasn't about to admit that.

"In fact, I could have gone for another." I crossed my arms and raised my chin.

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David held my gaze for a minute before giving up the pretense of being serious and grinning. He had one of those contagious smiles that people couldn't help but return and I was no exception.

"Sarah," Alex said.

I momentarily forgot that was supposed to be me, only remembering when he lifted my hand from the table. Still, I responded a second late.

"I have a favor to ask." He looked uncharacteristically somber, so I watched him seriously, sparing another look outside.

"I have to go here in a minute," he said. "I ship out in a few hours and I'll be out to sea for months. We're headed for hostile territory and you might be the very last woman I ever see alive. Could you grant me a kiss before I go?" He started leaning in, sure that no girl could resist that.

I tried very hard to keep a straight face and answered before he could get too close.

"You mean they're so short on naval officers, they're pulling ones from the Army? That can't be good." When I was a kid, I went through a phase where I was obsessed with the military. While the other girls my age were dressing like princesses, I was in camouflage. That obsession is the only reason I was able to identify the differences in the Army and Navy officer uniforms that most people wouldn't have noticed.

Alex was most definitely not Navy. He grinned guiltily as the other guys howled with laughter.

"How many girls have you used that on anyway?" I raised an eyebrow.

"A few," he admitted sheepishly.

"Try a few dozen," Moose corrected, making the guys laugh louder.

I tisked mockingly. "Are you even going anywhere?"

"I have a train to catch soon," he tried with a hopeful gleam in his eye.

I just watched him, fighting a smile and shook my head.

"Ah well." He raised my hand to his lips briefly. "I guess that'll have to do."

"You're right, it will," I laughed.

"I do have to be going though," he said, triggering an unexpected feeling of regret that only multiplied as the other guys agreed and started getting up.

It was irrational, of course. I couldn't expect them to stay, but after this little taste of semi-normalcy, it was going to be much harder to tough it out alone again.

Moose paid the bill and one by one, the guys said goodbye, all bound for the train or some other form of transportation.

After a minute, only David remained. I turned to him, a little surprised he hadn't moved to get up yet.

## Insubstantially Me

"Don't you have a train to catch too?" I tried not to sound too pathetically sad.

"No, actually, my apartment's only a few blocks away," he said. "Although I guess I should be going. It's getting late."

I expected him to leave then, but he didn't. He just sat there, watching me with that look of suspicion in his eyes.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"What about you?" he said. "Where are you headed?"

"Oh, I'll be going home too." I tried not to cringe at how noticeably I choked on the word 'home'.

David didn't miss it. He just watched me some more.

"What?" My slip ups were making me self-conscious.

"You don't have anywhere to go, do you?"

"Of course, I do." I forced a smile. "I just said-"

"Yeah, I heard what you said." He was apparently finished playing dumb. "I also happen to know you're lying."

"Why do you think that?" I asked cautiously.

"You mean, how did I figure you out?" He laughed. "I hate to break it to you, but you're not that mysterious. Sarah," he added with a sarcastic tone.

I watched the table for a few seconds, before I decided to see what he thought. I wasn't really worried, since he couldn't possibly know very many specifics, but I wondered at his theories.

"Well, why don't you enlighten me then."

He shifted, so that he was facing me a little more, seeming to take that as a challenge.

"For starters, I know that guy who was in here not too long ago is after you."

I couldn't keep my eyes from flitting to the window and David raised his eyebrow.

"And I know it must be pretty serious because he's got you scared to even tell complete strangers your real name."

I looked away, not liking how that sounded. And I really didn't like that it was the truth.

"Which really makes me wonder because you seem smart and capable of handling yourself."

"I know that if you had anywhere to go, there's no way you would have stayed in such a public place where you could be found so easily. In fact, you probably wouldn't have been on the street to begin with."

## Insubstantially Me

"I know that guy wasn't a cop, so I doubt it's anything to do with the law, but you're not going to the police anyway. Probably because they couldn't help. How am I doing?"

Perceptive, that's what David was. I struggled to fit him into a category like I had with the others. Moose was the goof ball, Alex was the flirt, Jason was the shy one, and Peter was the mediator. David had a mix of different characteristics. Sometimes goofy and flirty. Subdued and content to let the others have the attention some of the time, but not shy about stealing the spotlight at other times. But now I knew where he fit best. David was the smart one. The one who didn't miss much.

I wasn't sure what to say, but I knew trying to deny any of it was pointless. So I just looked at him, wondering what he was getting at.

"Look, I don't know what this is about," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "But why don't you...come with me?" He cringed and laughed nervously. "Wow, that just sounded terrible. I don't usually ask girls back to my apartment."

I thought he was sweet, but I also didn't trust him anywhere near enough for that. "David, you don't know anything about me."

His eyebrows shot up, making me smile. "I mean as a person," I clarified. "I could be a thief or a psychopath or something."

He grinned. "Well, if you're a thief, you're a pretty crummy one because you didn't bother mine or anyone else's wallet all night. And I'm sure it's not because you don't need money."

Observant, I confirmed. He'd have no way to know about the other guy's wallets unless he was paying close attention.

"Well, maybe I'm a psycho then."

"You're not," he said simply, his smile disappearing.

"How do you know?"

"I've seen psychopaths," he said. "Lots of them. Murderers and terrorists. Kinda part of my job. You're not like them."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because not one of them had the kind of fear in their eyes that you do. That's something unique to the victims."

I stared at the table, hating that I felt so afraid. I hated that he could see it, even more.

"Come with me," he tried again and I met his eyes, not even trying to hide my emotions any longer.

"I can't." As tempting as his offer was, I couldn't trust him. I couldn't trust anyone.

"Sooner or later you're going to have to trust someone." He read my mind. "Or that guy's gonna catch up to you. And you could do alot worse than me. Besides, that ankle's not going to help you out any."



## Insubstantially Me

He was quiet for a minute, waiting for my answer. I only shook my head stubbornly, keeping my eyes on the table.

"Well, I guess I can't force you." He sighed. "And I really should be going."

I looked at him, somehow more sad to see him go than the others.

"Good luck," he said sincerely before he slid out of the booth and headed for the door.

As I watched him move away, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was letting my lifeline slip away. He was right about everything. That man nearly caught me three times already, and I'd only been in the city for a few days. How long until he found me again? Plus, every time he seemed to get a little closer to actually catching me. What if next time was it? My bad ankle was only going to slow me down.

He was probably right about me having to trust someone eventually too. I already had to trust quite a few people, and David had already proven himself in that area.

What about when I needed to sleep again? The safest place I found so far, wasn't safe at all. And what about other things like bathing? Baby wipes could only cut it for so long...

I took a deep breath, hoping I wasn't throwing my life away with what I was about to do.

"David."

## Chapter 24

I took in the small living room as David locked the door behind me. It was surprisingly tidy for a man living alone. The furnishings were simple but tasteful with few decorations of any kind. The floor was hardwood with a little area rug between the flatscreen television and the cozy looking dark blue couch. A bookshelf sat between the curtained windows, cluttered with what looked like old textbooks, comic books, and a few novels. There was a phone on the lone end table, an outdated desktop computer on a simple table in the corner, and a chest of some kind to my left against the wall.

I wondered if David didn't care to have much else or if he was just rarely home to acquire it.

"Living room," he said from beside me. "The kitchen and bathroom are that way." He pointed down the hallway to the left. "Bedroom, and that's a closet." He indicated the two doors to the right.

"I know it's not much but..."

"No, it's great," I said sincerely. "Thank you. You really don't have to do this."

I still wasn't sure I'd made the right decision. I only met David about an hour ago and I struggled with trusting him. So long as I was conscious, I wasn't very concerned. Even taking into account my bum ankle and the fact that David probably outweighed me by a good fifty pounds of muscle, I was confident I could take care of myself, should the need arise. It was the idea of allowing myself to go to sleep that bothered me.

I wanted to trust him. He seemed like a really decent person and a big part of me was sure he never would have made such an offer if he wasn't. Still, Wescott had effectively gifted me with security issues and I wondered if I would ever feel safe again.

But I suppose, this was the best situation I could hope for. David might wind up turning on me. Not that he would know who to go to. But the probability of being found was much greater otherwise. It was pretty much a given, just leaving the question of when it would happen. Which didn't give me much of a choice.

I'd taken as much precaution as possible when leaving the pizza place to ensure that no camera would be able to identify me if the wrong people were watching. I asked David to wait while I went to the bathroom to change into an outfit I hadn't yet worn and donned my Yankees cap again, tucking my hair up under it. I did my best to hide my limp as we walked the streets, even allowing David to slip an arm around my waist to steady me. I wasn't wild about the contact, carrying those trust issues. But strategically, David's chivalry was too much to pass up since anyone seeing us together, on camera or otherwise, wouldn't notice me traveling that way. To their knowledge I was totally alone, and not close enough to anyone to be walking so intimately.

David even helped set the stage for us appearing as actual friends when he started needling me for picking the wrong baseball team. In his opinion, the Mets were far superior to the Yankees. He about had an apoplexy when I told him I was actually a White Sox fan.

I was having so much fun debating him on which city's team was obviously better, deriving the most pleasure by purposely failing to see his brilliant logic solely to frustrate him, that I almost forgot to be paranoid about actually being out on the street.

I only realized how relaxed I'd been once David pulled me toward his apartment building, ending our short walk.

## Insubstantially Me

"Don't start that." He gave me a mildly exasperated look. "I don't say things I don't mean. And I don't do the whole polite reassurance thing well."

"Well, what if I still turn out to be a serial killer or something?" I said, unable to help myself. "Wouldn't you feel silly."

David smirked, no doubt making the same judgement about me that guys had my entire life - that I was an average sized girl and therefore a weakling by comparison. "I think I can handle myself."

"Oh, you think so, huh?" I grinned picturing the outcome if we ever got the chance to spar.

He gave me an evaluating look. "Well, maybe..." he said thoughtfully. "You can eat a shockingly large amount of food for someone your size. It's conceivable that you might surprise me."

That was the first time in my life that I didn't have to prove myself to someone in David's position, to make him acknowledge anything but what he assumed to be obvious. Despite the extremely slim chance that I wasn't actually bluffing, he opted to consider me to be capable. Or at least possibly not a pushover. Either way, it was a first.

"But I think I'm safe from your potential neurosis. I'll be sure to lock up the kitchen knives."

A small giggle slipped out and I promptly felt my cheeks warm. I did not giggle like some mindless cheerleader.

I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "So, how does this work?" I took a few steps and put my hand on the couch.

"You just got home from deployment, right? Do you have to pay a holding fee to your landlord or something?"

"Actually, my brother owns the building," he said. "So he lets me stay even when I'm gone a year or more. Which is why it's so small. I didn't want him wasting one of the good apartments on me when I wouldn't be here half the time. But he's great. He'll usually shut off the water and stuff while I'm gone and then get it all ready again before I come home."

"That's nice," I said. "I don't have any siblings." I had no idea why I threw that little bit of information out there. But hearing about his relationship with his brother triggered a small amount of jealousy for me.

Fitting with what I knew about David, he followed my train of thought easily. We stood awkwardly for a few seconds before he took off his jacket, stashed it in the closet, and then stowed the small duffle bag he'd been carrying.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm beat," he said. "I'll just need a minute in my room and then you can have it."

"Don't be stupid," I said, before he could get through the door. "I can't take your room."

"Of course you can." He shrugged before disappearing into the room, apparently planning to ignore my protest.

Clearly David didn't know how stubborn I could be. I discarded my bag and went to sit on the couch,

## Insubstantially Me

intending to stay put. He had already done far more than I ever would have expected or thought to ask for. I wasn't about to take his bed from him as well.

I had my back to him so I didn't know what all the shuffling was that I was hearing, but after a few minutes, he came to join me on the couch. He was bare foot and wearing a t-shirt and cotton pants, looking infinitely more comfortable than he had in his uniform.

I had to admit, he was much more attractive too. Like any red-blooded American girl, a good looking man in uniform earned my feminine appreciation. But the thick material of the uniform didn't do justice to the lean muscles that were quite prominently on display now that he wore short sleeves. They were also easily detectable where the shirt actually covered him across his chest, since the material wasn't all that thick. Add that on top of his Paul Walker type looks, and he was quite the distraction.

My mind went blank for a second and I blinked at him, trying to recall what it was that I'd been set on doing.

He did an awful job of hiding his amusement. That is, if he was even trying. Thankfully, he didn't comment.

"It's all yours." He jerked his chin in the direction of his bedroom.

Oh yeah! Get a grip, Sam.

"I'm not kicking you out of your bed," I said stubbornly.

He gave me an obnoxiously cocky grin. "Why? Would you prefer to share?"

I looked at him flatly. "I'm not stealing your room," I clarified. "I'll sleep on the couch."

"I don't think so," he laughed. "My mother would come beat me for even thinking about allowing that. She wouldn't care about the hour either."

"Well, I won't tell if you won't," I said sarcastically. "I'm not-"

"It's really not a big deal," he interrupted me. "I've been sleeping on the ground for a good portion of the last year. And this is a right comfy couch." He loudly patted the cushion.

"Well good." I sat back and crossed my arms. "I'll be just fine then."

He exhaled loudly and gave me that same semi irritated look as before.

"Yeah, you'll be just fine," he agreed, suddenly serious. "And wide awake, wondering if I'm going to come get you or something."

I dropped my eyes, unable to argue. I almost forgot about his ability to read me so well.

"I know you don't trust me yet," he said. "I'd worry if you did so soon. But there's a nice sturdy lock on that door, and a fire escape out the window. Even though you don't actually need them, I'm positive you'll be much more comfortable in there."

I looked at him again, really hoping he was as perfect as he seemed. He even guessed that to truly be able to relax, I'd need an alternate escape route readily available.

## Insubstantially Me

"Aren't you worried about yourself at all?" I wondered. "What if I snoop through your stuff? Make off with your valuables out the window?"

"Well, if you find any valuables in there, be sure to let me know, would you?"

I smiled.

"And as far as privacy goes," he said. "The army pretty much beats that out of you. I couldn't care less if you look through my things. Heck, I wouldn't even have clothes on right now. But I thought you'd be more comfortable if I did." He paused before grinning slyly. "However now I'm wondering if that was the right assumption."

I rolled my eyes exaggeratedly, hoping I didn't create a big-headed monster with my momentary befuddlement.

"See you in the morning?" He tried again, seeming unsure if I was going to put up a fight again.

"Alright." I gave in and pushed off the couch. "Thanks."

"No problem." He grabbed the blanket that was thrown over the back of the couch.

"Oh, and there's an ice pack in the freezer if you want to put it on your ankle," he said when I was almost to the door, bag in hand.

"Good idea," I agreed, quickly switching course. I couldn't see it under my pants, but I was sure my ankle must have at least doubled in size by now, and it was throbbing relentlessly.

It was a short trek to the kitchen, and I didn't waste any time stopping to examine the ambiance. But at a glance, it seemed to reflect the state of the living room - tidy with all practical items and almost no personal ones. Almost like walking into the model apartment for prospective renters.

Grabbing the ice pack, I hobbled back to the bedroom, wanting to get out of the way quickly. David had probably been up since dawn and must be exhausted by now.

"Night." He stopped me before I could get out of sight.

I smiled seeing him peeking over the top of the couch, looking like an imp.

"Night," I answered, shutting the door and flipping the lock. He was right, of course. I felt a million times better with a locked door protecting me, even though I was starting to believe that he was also right about me not needing it.

Just for a little extra piece of mind, I went to check on that fire escape. It was right out the window, just like he said.

Satisfied, I set my bag down next to the bed and looked around. David had the courtesy to leave the light on, so I didn't have to fumble around searching for it.

His bedroom showed a little more personality than the rest of the apartment did, with a couple of framed pictures on the dresser along with deodorant and some other personal items. There were a few posters on the wall, one of which was a scene from Star Trek. That plus the little Enterprise model on the dresser made me

## Insubstantially Me

smile. David was a Trekkie. Maybe he wasn't super obsessive, but it would still be fun to tease him.

I yawned and sat down on the bed, surprised by how tired I still was. I only woke up a few hours ago, but I suppose it wasn't such great sleep in the first place. Even if it was the best I'd gotten since before I escaped. I also expended quite a bit of energy since then.

First things first, though. Time to check out my ankle.

Kicking off my shoes, I put my feet up on the bed and rolled up the left leg of my pants. Just as I thought, my ankle was grossly enlarged. There was also a haphazard pinkish purple line, running down my foot. Looking at it, I couldn't believe it wasn't broken. But I could still move it, even if it was pretty painful. Another mile or so and it probably would have been broken for sure. David really had saved me.

But I couldn't help but wonder how long he had in mind for me to stay here. One night? Two? He had no way of understanding the situation, of course, but I was going to be in the same position for quite a while. Another few days on the street and I'd be just as desperate again, but I couldn't very well move in. Besides how safe could I be here after more than a few days with that man after me? How long until he figured out I wasn't on the street any longer and narrowed the search down to this building?

Try as I might, I couldn't successfully push those thoughts from my mind, although the pain in my ankle served as a nice distraction for a while.

## Chapter 25

When I awoke, I was disoriented, which was usual of late. But the unusual thing was that my muscles were sore from having slept so well for so long undisturbed. I didn't remember dreaming and I'm pretty sure I didn't move at all. I couldn't believe how much better I felt.

I threw the covers aside and stood up, only remembering my injury when intense pain shot up my leg.

Well, I mostly felt better anyway. I looked down and cringed at how much worse my ankle looked than it had last night. It was a sick dark purple color and the swelling hadn't gone down any despite using the ice pack which now sat on the bed in a warm, soggy heap.

Nothing I could do for it now, I guess. At least it was getting a chance to heal.

After freshening up with the baby wipes, I changed into my one remaining clean shirt and the pair of jeans at the bottom of my bag, not even bothering with shoes. I'd never get anything on my bloated left foot. Of course, I was all out of clean socks, so it was more appealing to go bare foot anyway. Thankfully I had a few pairs of underwear from the cheap pack I bought, but soon those would be all used too. Which introduced a new problem. A more normal one. I needed to do laundry. And it needed to be soon or I was going to start smelling like the homeless vagabond I was.

I noticed a small washer and dryer in the hall last night, but I didn't want to ask David for yet another favor. Especially if he only had one or two nights in mind for me to stay.

There was always the laundromat, I guess, but that would be another expense I couldn't afford. And it would be another place I would have to constantly be watching over my shoulder.

One day at a time, I reminded myself.

I combed through my greasy hair with my fingers on the way to the door and recognized yet another problem. I needed an actual shower. I suppose I would have to suck it up and ask David for something else. I could always find a laundromat, but a place to take a shower was another matter. And if there was any way I could actually get clean, I was taking it.

I grabbed the thawed ice pack to deposit in the freezer and opened the door as quietly as possible, in case David was still asleep. But when I crept over to the couch to check, it was vacant.

Venturing down the hall, I stopped and smiled, hearing the sound of the shower running through the bathroom door. It was a reassuringly normal sound, lending to the normal feel of the morning that I sorely missed for too long. Normal was safe.

I continued on until I was standing in the middle of the small kitchen. I had hoped to get in the bathroom for a few minutes, but since I was going to have to wait anyway, I could make myself useful by getting breakfast on the table. I didn't think David required any buttering up, but it would be a nice thank you. A significantly inadequate thank you, of course, but it was a start. As a bonus, David might start thinking that I was actually good to keep around rather than just seeing me as a desperate charity case.

I wasn't at all partial to cooking, but I could be a good chef when I attempted it. That is, if I actually had something to work with. I wondered how much would be available since David probably didn't get a chance to go to the grocery store.

## Insubstantially Me

When I looked in the fridge I was relieved to see eggs, bacon, milk, as well as a plethora of other fresh items. Groceries must be one of the things that David's brother took care of for him.

I set to work, sticking to the basic scrambled eggs with bacon and toast. If I knew David a little better, I might have been a bit more adventurous with the salsa, but I didn't want to assume.

"Sarah."

I turned more from hearing David's voice than from actually responding to the name. I really had to start thinking of myself as a Sarah. Even if David knew that was a load of crap.

"What?" I was a little alarmed by the serious look on his face and by the way he peeked around the corner, only showing his head and one shoulder.

"I just wanted to warn you that I was coming into the kitchen now," he said making me stare at him in confusion.

"I didn't want you burning yourself or anything once you got a look at me." He grinned, apparently very proud of his morning humor. "Sometimes I don't know my own strength."

"You're hysterical," I said dryly, turning my attention back to the frying pan, annoyed that I might have actually succumbed to that kind of distraction if I'd caught sight of him unannounced. There was no point in denying it. The boy looked good. Especially with the freshly grown scruffiness on his face and his dark hair, still damp from the shower.

I tried to ignore him as he leaned against the counter beside me, with his arms crossed and still wearing that irritating smirk.

After a minute of pretending that I didn't notice him watching me, I gave up and focused on him after flipping the bacon.

"Like you didn't already know you were mildly attractive." I was satisfied at the surprised look that briefly crossed his face from my estimation of his looks.

"Ouch." He laughed. "If that's the kind of reaction you give someone who's only mildly attractive..."

"Well, I was really sleep deprived." I sighed. "And I hurt my ankle pretty badly. I was probably slightly delirious."

He smiled for a second, looking like he was about to say something back, but then glanced down at my foot. He turned instantly serious and muttered a curse.

"That looks really bad," he said. "You shouldn't be standing on it."

"I'll be fine," I reassured him. "It's just a sprain. Besides, I'm almost done here."

"Maybe you should see a doctor," he tried.

"That's not an option." My tone didn't leave any room for argument.



## Insubstantially Me

David let it go, not seeming convinced, but knowing better than to push. He went to the fridge and started poking around.

"What are you doing?" I asked, a little miffed. Couldn't he see I was cooking for him too? I made more than enough for both of us.

"I was going to make myself something to eat," he said nonchalantly.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"I thought that was just your first course." He smirked.

I pursed my lips and attempted to keep a straight face, not wanting to encourage him.

He caught my smile anyway and grinned bigger.

"Oh, sit down."

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"I knew asking you here was a good idea," David said between mouthfuls. "I hate cooking. If you keep this up, I'm gonna save a lot of money on take-out."

"Why do you have so much food if you don't cook?" I was glad that I could be useful and that he apparently really liked my cooking, but why have so many fresh vegetables and other things you had to actually put effort in to make meals?

"That would be the work of my sister-in-law," he said. "She always fills the fridge with healthy stuff, hoping I'll start eating better. Usually it works for about a day until I can stock up on instant everything."

I smiled. That would be something my mother would do too. She'd never leave me alone for an extended period of time without first filling the house with organic everything and microwavable nothing. During those times, I would mostly survive off the junk from my little mini fridge, or like David, I made good use of the wonderful and convenient bliss that was take-out.

"Well, as long as I'm here, I don't mind taking care of the cooking," I offered, leading up to the most pressing question on my mind.

"You've got a deal," he happily agreed, shoving another forkful in his mouth.

I waited, hoping he might say more on the subject, but he seemed oblivious.

"About that," I said feeling awkward. "How long..." I paused, hating having to ask for help.

"What exactly did you have in mind for this?"

"Are you asking if I'm going to kick you out tomorrow?" It was encouraging that he still seemed to have that teasing demeanor. Like the idea was funny to him.

"I guess so."

He appeared a little more serious and gave me an evaluating look.

Insubstantially Me

"I don't suppose you'd be inclined to share a little more of your situation with me, would you?"

I watched him, hoping that wouldn't be a deal breaker.

He sighed. "Okay, well, can I ask why not?"

"You wouldn't believe me." I almost didn't believe me.

"Try me." He looked determined and I glanced away, not ready for that.

"No, I'm not going to kick you out," he said after a minute of silence. "Because I don't think your situation is going away that quickly. Why don't we play it by ear for a while, and see what happens when your foot is better."

I gave him a small, grateful smile. How many people would be so gracious in this type of situation?

"Can I ask something though?"

I watched him cautiously. "You can ask..."

"What does that guy want with you? Why are you so afraid of him?"

I chewed on my lip, knowing that he deserved some kind of explanation.

"It's not him, really..." I started. How could I explain without actually explaining?

"I mean, I can't let him find me either, but there's someone else who scares me more. Someone he works for. And he's...." I struggled to think of how to describe Wescott.

"He's beyond my worst nightmare." There, that was a pretty accurate summary. Wescott was everything I never knew I had to be afraid of - being controlled, imprisoned, exploited, and someone I couldn't even try to fight against. Wescott represented my total helplessness in the very worst of situations.

David looked grim at my description, and who could blame him? But I wanted to explain more, not sure what he would take that to mean.

"Everything you said last night is true," I admitted. "It's got nothing to do with the law. I haven't done anything to earn this, but there's not a thing anyone can do to help. He's too powerful. I didn't even realize how powerful until last night." The fact that he was able to catch me on camera was unbelievable and frightening. And for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how he did it when he shouldn't even have access to them. Let alone how he managed to find me on the right ones.

I still couldn't tell what David was thinking, but I thought he seemed a little doubtful about me being beyond anyone's help. Of course, he wouldn't accept that easily. He was G.I. Joe, for crying out loud.

"Everyone thinks I'm dead," I said. "If I were to go to the police, or my mother, or anyone, he would find me. And I can't go back there."

"Which is why no doctors," he said, understanding my reluctance earlier.

Insubstantially Me

"Yeah."

He was quiet, no longer shoveling food into his mouth non-stop. Instead, he stared at his plate as he moved the remaining food around absently. I wished he would say something to clue me into his thoughts.

"I want to trust you, David." I felt like he should know that much. "But I can't yet."

He watched me with that pensive look in his eye and nodded. "Okay."

Chapter 26

"You're leaving?"

I turned to see David with his jacket on and keys in hand. Ten different scenarios raced through my head about how he was going to Wescott. Maybe for a reward or maybe it was a freakish coincidence that he worked for him.

"Yeah, I have a family get together. I'm already running late. My mother should start freaking out in about twenty minutes." He smiled.

I breathed a sigh of relief and reminded myself that David was in the army so he couldn't be working for Wescott. Plus, he only returned to the country yesterday.

"By some miracle I managed to convince her to wait until today, since I got in so late last night," he went on. "It's probably only because I was home a few months ago on a short leave. But it's a forty minute drive, so I would have fallen asleep as soon as I got through the door." He gave a short laugh before seeming to realize that I'd been slightly frantic a second ago.

"You're...welcome to come along."

"No." I shook my head and smiled, feeling stupid for suspecting David of treachery. Of course he needed to see his family. "Thanks."

"No really," he tried. "There will be tons of food and my family wouldn't mind at all if you came. There'll be so many people, you'll blend right in."

"I can't." For the millionth time, I cursed that tracking device in my leg. A normal day with his family sounded more than appealing to me, but I was quite literally trapped in this city.

"Okay." He picked up on my tone and didn't push. "I'll probably be gone for most of the day. It won't be easy to escape. They'll probably try to tie me down and keep feeding me till I explode," he joked, attempting to lighten the mood a little, but I heard his silent question, wondering if I'd still be here when he returned.

I forced a smile. "Have fun." I would have commented about how I wasn't planning on going anywhere, but honestly I didn't know. I had no idea how long I'd be safe here, or if I even was now. I hated the thought of having to run. For the sake of my foot, but I also didn't want to think about having to give up the one place I finally managed to feel safe for more than a few hours. If I wasn't safe here, I wouldn't be safe anywhere. And I didn't relish having to sneak out on David after he'd been so great.

He nodded and moved to the door.

"David," I called, making him stop and turn back to me.

"Do you mind if I..." I hated asking for more from him, but a shower really was a must at this point. I'd been trying to work up the humility to ask after our conversation at breakfast, but now it appeared as if I was out of time.

"Please don't start asking me to use every little thing." He didn't give me the chance to finish.

Insubstantially Me

"I think that would drive both of us crazy. Mi casa es su casa. Just do what you need to do."

"Thanks." I smiled, glad that I finally seemed to have a little luck in finding him last night. Now if only it would hold.

He nodded again before disappearing out the door, and I couldn't control the compulsion to make sure the lock was secure.

I turned around, feeling a little strange. I lost track of how long I'd been deprived of actual privacy, and here I was in an apartment, completely alone. For a change, there was no one watching my every move on camera. No one making me obsessively check over my shoulder. Nothing.

Even before Wescott kidnapped me, I was never truly free of surveillance, although I didn't realize it at the time. But now I was. For the first time in my life, no one was watching me. It was a very freeing feeling.

But of course, my paranoia was far from gone, so I rushed to the window just to check.

No nerdy accountant or any other suspicious individuals were in sight.

Was it possible that they really didn't have any clue where I was? I foolishly thought that before. But I spent the entire night here and still, it seemed secure.

If all they had to go from was the hundred foot vicinity the tracking device showed them, I should be in good shape for a while. They would be able to get an idea of where I was, but there was about a block of leniency in my favor, and this particular block housed several tall apartment buildings. It was the perfect hiding spot for someone in my position. They couldn't very well go barging into every door in the area.

Content that I was safe, I skipped off to take that much anticipated shower, for once feeling like I might sing while I was in there.

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"I'm just going to do it," I muttered, grabbing the small pile of clothes from the bed and heading for the washing machine.

I debated for several minutes if I should take the liberty and use the machine or wait for David to come home and ask first. I know he said not to ask for every little thing, but I wasn't sure if this counted as little. Showering, eating, and using the television were all sort of a given, but I couldn't help thinking that doing laundry was pushing it. I mean, maybe after a few days, it'd be expected, but I felt like I was taking advantage of David's kindness and probably using a lot of water for a very small load of clothes.

I never realized how much stuff I had at home. By comparison, I owned nothing now. I had five shirts, counting the one I had on when I escaped and my hoodie, three pairs of pants, some socks, underwear, and that was all. It felt like much more when I had to carry it around everywhere, but now I could see how miniscule my collection was.

That was another issue with the laundry. Having so little to go through, I would have to wash much too frequently for my liking.

I wasn't sure if it was better to just do it and hope David didn't notice, or to wait and hope he wouldn't care that I had to use his machine all the time.

## Insubstantially Me

In the end I couldn't bare the thought of putting on dirty clothes after I just got out of the shower. The clothes I had on right before, were technically clean, but I was dirty when I put them on, so by my estimation they were pretty gross.

Of course, once everything was in the washer, I was left with the problem of being in a towel and having no hope of clean, dry clothes for at least an hour. Probably longer judging by the older machines I was using.

I longingly looked back at the bedroom full of David's perfectly good and very available clothing, biting my lip. That was definitely pushing it. David certainly hadn't meant for me to use his clothes. What if he came back and saw me wearing them?

But then, what if he came back to find me in a towel?

Walking back to the bedroom, I vowed just to take a peek. To see what he had. He did say that he didn't care if I looked through his things, after all.

I hastily closed the first drawer that I pulled open once I saw that it was full of his underwear. I really didn't need that mental image floating around my head. He did enough damage to my cognitive skills, fully clothed.

After cautiously opening the second drawer, I almost smiled seeing the large t-shirts that would fit me like short dresses. They were completely perfect for what I needed. That is, if he wouldn't mind...

Oh, stop being such a girl, I scolded myself, pulling one of the shirts from the drawer. Living in someone's debt was really not my thing. I was too worried about stepping over the line. And David had been wonderful, but he must have a line somewhere. Everyone did. His easy-going nature almost made it harder because I wasn't at all sure of where that line would be. And considering how desperate I was, I couldn't afford to even get close to it.

I would just be sure to get the shirt back in the drawer before David got home. He was supposed to be gone all day, so I should have plenty of time.

I pulled on the shirt and chuckled when I looked down at myself. The shirt had an image of Sauron's tower and the words 'Mordor University'.

Curiosity got the better of me and I started riffling through the drawer to see what else was in there. Aside from a few plain ones, David had shirts from the Matrix, Star Wars, Dr. Who, Tron, a few I couldn't identify, and of course Star Trek.

Apparently David was not only a Trekkie, but a general sci-fi/fantasy geek. I was glad he had a dorky fetish. And not only because I was going to have fun with that information later. It made him seem more normal. Part of me wondered what was wrong with him to be so open and trusting of a complete stranger. That kind of thinking was totally foreign to me, especially now. But I guess that was just who David was - open and trusting.

I smiled as I put the shirts back neatly, already thinking up little quips to use when David got back.

## Chapter 27

I opened my eyes and stared at the television for a few seconds, realizing that I must have fallen asleep since it now showed the news rather than the I Love Lucy reruns I'd been watching.

Feeling another person's presence in the room, my pulse quickened and I sat up partially, leaning on my arm.

I relaxed when I saw that it was David, but the relief only lasted long enough for me to note the look on his face and remember that I'd fallen asleep before I could change out of his shirt.

I was right about the machines taking longer than an hour. The dryer almost didn't even work anymore. It tossed the clothes around without any heat and I had to run it three times for my clothes to even begin to feel dry. After starting the machine for the fourth time, I returned to the couch where I apparently fell asleep. It must have been for a few hours at least, because now it was dark outside.

"I..." I wasn't sure what to say. David didn't look angry exactly, but he didn't seem too pleased either. Nice going, stupid. Screw up the one good thing you've got going for you. Leave it to me to do the one thing to make him angry.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, sitting up. "I had to wash my clothes and I didn't have anything else to wear. I would have waited, but you said not to ask for everything..." I trailed off when David didn't respond. He just kept watching me with that same unreadable expression.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "My stuff should be dry by now. I'll get out of your shirt."

I stood up to go change, but David stopped me.

"No, that's..." He shook his head as if to clear it. "It's fine."

"Okay..." I sat back down awkwardly. He certainly didn't look like it was fine, but I wasn't sure if I should contradict him. He sounded so serious.

The woman on the news provided the only sound in the uncomfortable minute that I avoided eye contact with David, still unsure of what to do.

Grasping for a subject change, I decided to ask about his family. But when I looked at him again, I hesitated, gaining a little insight into his thoughts as he quickly averted his eyes from my very bare legs, his ears turning pink.

I wouldn't deny that I hadn't been much to look at before, dirty and disheveled as I was. But apparently it was a different story now that I was clean, well-rested, and wearing his t-shirt. And the shirt was much too big on me, so it was hanging off one shoulder and had ridden up quite a bit while I slept, barely coming to the top of my thighs.

I fought a smile, more than a little grateful that he wasn't angry. I was also very happy that I could return the teasing he'd been giving me.

"You must be tired," I said with a straight face. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Right." He nodded and sat, shooting me a nervous glance.

## Insubstantially Me

"David?"

"Yeah?" He sounded a little too enthusiastic.

"Could you hand me my drink?" I asked innocently and pointed to the glass in front of him.

I timed it perfectly so that when he turned to me again, ready to hand off the glass, I was very deliberately crossing my legs, drawing his eyes again.

"Thanks." I grinned, taking the glass from his hand. He seemed to be having a little trouble tearing his eyes away for a second and his ears went red again.

"Anything wrong?" I asked, pulling his gaze up to my face. "You look a little flushed."

He pursed his lips seeing my smug smile.

"Just tired, like you said," he grumbled.

"Ah," I said softly, holding back the laughter at his annoyance. Guess he wasn't a fan of the tables being turned.

I took a sip of the water before placing the glass back on the table and fluttering my eyelashes at him.

He laughed and shook his head. "How was your day?" He obviously wanted that subject change now.

"Pretty good," I said. "I had a battle of wills with the dryer and I'm hoping I won."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Thing's a piece of crap. A lot of the time I just hang my stuff up to dry in the bathroom. If I'm really ambitious, I'll go to the laundromat."

"I think I can fix it," I offered. I'd planned on doing it later anyway. Partially as a thank you and partially because I was going to undoubtedly need it again.

"Yeah?" He looked surprised. "Are you a former dryer repair woman?"

I laughed. "Not exactly, but I'm pretty handy with things like that." My mom used to love that. She almost never had to call a repair man for anything. She'd just get me to do it. If I wasn't familiar with a specific machine, all it would take was a little research on the internet.

"Well have at it." He shrugged. "I was just going to replace it. Eventually anyway."

I nodded, glad that I had something to offer since I didn't make anything for dinner.

"Sorry I zonked out," I said. "I would have made dinner."

"No need. I come bearing left-overs." He reached for the two large paper bags on his end of the coffee table.

Once he pointed them out, I realized that must be what was making my stomach grumble. I hadn't eaten since around noon.



## Insubstantially Me

David pulled a ton of food and a small stack of paper plates from the bags before he turned the one bag over, dumping the plastic forks on the table. He grabbed the plates but stopped just before he put one in front of me.

"Maybe we ought to order a pizza too," he said thoughtfully.

"Why?" I looked at him like he was insane. There was enough food for five meals in front of us.

"Well, this would probably last me a while," he said. "But with you...It might not make it for even the one meal."

"Ha ha," I rolled my eyes before swiping the plate from him, trying not to return his contagious grin.

"I hope you like lasagna," he said lightly before sounding more serious. "Hey, what's that?"

"What?" I froze at the change in his tone.

He reached across me and gingerly took hold of my wrist, rotating it to see the dark coloring that was spread in a nasty patch along my arm, disappearing under the sleeve of the shirt. He gently pushed the sleeve up and made a disbelieving sound when he saw that the bruise went all the way to my shoulder.

When he met my eyes, there was no mistaking the horror in them. I looked away, uncomfortable. My arm had been sore ever since I landed on it last night, but I didn't realize it looked so gruesome.

"You weren't exaggerating were you?" David let my arm go.

I just shook my head.

"Did they do that to you?" It wasn't hard to miss the anger in his voice.

I looked at him, grateful for his outrage on my behalf. He really was a decent guy.

"No. I did it when I was running."

David didn't seem to like my answer any better than if I'd said someone else did it.

"It was when I sprained my ankle." I looked away from him, hoping he wouldn't ask me for more specifics. I still wasn't anywhere near ready for that.

He didn't say anything for a minute, only letting out a noisy breath, I assumed to calm himself down.

"I hope you like lasagna," he said again, apparently planning on acting like that little awkward moment never happened. I was only too happy to go along with that plan.

"There's plenty. My mom made me take a whole pan that was left over." He put a big square on the plate in front of me.

"Italians say 'I love you' with food, ya know." He froze just before he could drop the next piece on his own plate, and his ears lit up again as he realized how that sounded.

I understood that he meant that his mother was showing her love by forcing tons of food on him. But given his reaction to seeing me when he came in, and the fact that he was currently serving me food, his statement could

## Insubstantially Me

be taken another way. I bit my lip, trying not to laugh.

"My mother, I mean," he clarified as he set the piece down on his plate. His neck glowed slightly along with his ears, which I thought was kind of adorable.

A laugh bubbled from my lips and David gave me an embarrassed smile before commenting on the news in an attempt to find a more comfortable topic.

## Chapter 28

Over the next week, I became much more comfortable around David. I hadn't given him any more information than before, but I was starting to trust him.

I no longer had a mental panic attack when I figured out he was leaving the apartment for a few hours. Now I actually found the idea of David working for Wescott in any capacity to be laughable. He was much too good a person to do it knowingly, and he wasn't a bit naive the way Mark had been when he got pulled into it.

Besides, after being with him for a week and having absolutely no indication that Wescott even had a clue as to my location, I had enough evidence to easily dismiss the idea that David might betray me.

I didn't even lock the bedroom door at night anymore. I forgot to do it one night and left it open deliberately after that, realizing I felt safer near him.

I still wasn't planning on telling him anything, but it was more than not trusting him. I think I might be able to do that by now, at least to an extent. Now I didn't want to tell him because I didn't want to be that person anymore.

I despised being Abi and the nameless fugitive on the street. And now that I had a taste of something else, I was realizing I didn't even like being Sam that much.

Sam was awkward and lonely. Sam just accepted that life was kind of sucky. She was never truly happy. Wescott aimed at making me near perfect, but no one else was. So I could never relate to other people very well. More than that, I never saw the need to. And now I understood why.

Even with my mother, things were a little different. I would never doubt her love for me, but I could never be sure of how much she loved me for me and how much she loved what I could do. I was always the kid she could brag about. Whatever her friends could say about their kids, my mom could always top it. When some other kid started walking, I'd done it weeks or months ago. When they were putting sentences together, I was reading. If they brought home good grades, my teachers were recommending that I skip to the next grade. I was always at the top of my class and on the President's List or winning scholarships and awards.

I'm not sure what my relationship with my parents would have been like if I hadn't been able to do all of that. If I'd been more average or even below average.

But I liked being Sarah. I liked the person I was when I was with David. I was happy more than I ever remember being before. It was actually normal for me to laugh with him rather than being the serious, cynical person I'd been before. I swapped teasing and actually flirted with him on a regular basis.

Oddly, this whole thing gave me a kind of freedom that I didn't even realize I wanted. Now I had the freedom to become someone else.

I missed my mother and the ability to go outside at will, but for the first time in my life I felt like I fit in somewhere.

With no scholarships or other academic achievements to earn, my intelligence wasn't an issue. It didn't matter how well or how quickly I could accomplish something because no one was keeping score. I also couldn't be totally independent any longer. Initially I thought having to depend on anyone for anything was detestable, but now I think I just never knew how to depend on someone else. Being forced to do that made me realize that it might not be such a bad thing all the time.

At the moment, I was depending on David to have chosen a good movie. After he picked Monty Python and the Holy Grail and National Lampoon's Vacation, both of which were actually pretty good despite my original misgivings, I was starting to trust his judgement. Although, I wasn't all that confident with tonight's choice.

"I can't believe you've never seen Lord of the Rings," David said once again as he joined me on the couch after pushing the disk into the DVD player. That had been his mantra about pretty much every movie he asked me about. I'm not sure why he was so surprised. I admitted quite openly that I was never into these types of movies.

I shrugged but before I could respond, David shot me a mock glare.

"And no wise-cracks," he said, making me grin. I hadn't actually planned on teasing him about his love of all things fantasy this time, but now I sort of wish I'd had something ready. Especially since that was a wide-open invitation.

## Insubstantially Me

"I didn't say a word." I smiled realizing it was a win either way. Now, even when I didn't tease him about it, he expected me to, making anything I actually said doubly effective.

"Uh huh..." He grabbed a handful of popcorn from the big bowl on the coffee table as he skipped through the previews.

"Although," I said, unable to resist. "After I watch it, I will have a much broader range of ammunition. You're really equipping me with more knowledge and just asking for further mockery."

"Just watch the movie." Sighing, he set the remote down and sat back, throwing his arm across the back of the couch. More importantly, a few more inches and his arm would be draped over my shoulders. I don't think he did it purposely. He was just getting comfortable. Still it was more intimate than we normally sat.

Startled, I tensed for a second and glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He looked as though he just realized what he did and wasn't quite sure if he ought to leave his arm there or pull it away.

Focusing on the screen, I bit back a smile. I didn't actually mind the closeness. It was just something new. But I was glad that he felt relaxed enough around me that he didn't worry about every move he made.

"You're not going to make me watch all three of these are you?" I chose to act as though nothing were out of the ordinary. It was a legitimate question though. I knew that these particular movies were about three hours a piece.

"You can't start the trilogy and not finish." David relaxed beside me. "It's practically a sin."

"We'll see..." I gave him a sidelong look. If this turned out to be as much of a guy movie as I anticipated, we would be delving into some serious chick flicks later.

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I looked around the darkened room, puzzled at where I was. It only took a moment for my confusion to turn to horror when I realized I was back in that terrible room and that I could barely move.

My sluggish brain worked to figure out how I got here and how long ago, but in an instant none of that seemed as pressing once I managed to lift my head enough to see the figure standing at the foot of the bed. I instinctively knew that I had been drugged and that this was the realization of the nightmare I tried so hard to avoid.

The man quickly crawled on top of me and I struggled to push him away, but my hands were useless.

"No, please!" I cried, helpless to do anything else.

He acted as though I hadn't spoken and grabbed at me. Indecipherable in the darkness, his face lowered to my neck.

"No! Don't!" I screamed, managing to lift my arms a fraction. "Please!"

"Sarah." He clutched my shoulders pulling back, and I flailed furiously, trying to free myself.

"No!"

"Sarah." As he shook me slightly, I was able to make out David's features. No, not him! It couldn't be him!

"No!" I began crying pitifully, understanding that I had no chance of fighting, and heartbroken thinking of who I would be fighting against if I could.

"Sarah, wake up!"

A firm shake made the horrifying scene fall away and all at once I was back on the couch with the Lord of the Rings playing on the television and David watching my face anxiously as he clutched my arms.

Overwhelmed with relief that the dream wasn't real, I wrapped my arms around David, pressing my face into his chest without thinking. His arms came around me a second later and he held me until my ragged breathing had a chance to normalize.

Suddenly embarrassed, I pushed away from him wiping my damp cheeks with still shaking hands.

"What was it?" I couldn't help jumping a little at his question. I hoped that he might let the whole thing pass as he had with so much of my strange behavior already, but when I met his eyes, I knew that wasn't his plan this time.

"It was..." How did you put that into words? How could I tell him he had the starring role in my nightmare?

I shook my head and tried to appear nonchalant about the whole thing, forcing a strained smile.

"It was nothing. The movie," I lied lamely. "I must have dreamed I was in it..." I gave up trying to remember what happened before I dozed off, when I saw that David wasn't even close to buying it.

Insubstantially Me

"And has the movie given you nightmares practically every night you've been here?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

I glanced away, surprised that he knew about that. After that first blissful, dreamless night, the nightmares had returned and they seemed to be getting a little worse every time. At first it was that I was running from that man with the briefcase, then it had been getting caught. After a few nights it morphed into a glimpse into the future after having been caught. Now apparently I was on the more traumatic dreams. Last night I woke up from a similar dream, unable to get back to sleep for several hours, which is probably why I fell asleep just now.

But maybe I did have these types of dreams before and just didn't remember. It did feel somewhat familiar. Only the element of David appearing seemed new. And apparently I'd been pretty vocal for David to not only hear through the closed door, but to presumably be awoken by me.

"Tell me," he tried.

"I..." I couldn't look at him yet.

"What did they do to you?" He was almost pleading now.

I stared at the wall, not really seeing it, and shook my head.

"I'm not them," he said, making me meet his eyes. "You can trust me."

"I know that." And I did. It wasn't that I didn't want to trust him with the information anymore. Now it was that I didn't want to vocalize it and have it become a reality again.

Most of the time I could pretend that everything was just a bad dream. Safely tucked away in this apartment I could imagine that none of it had happened and that I wasn't still being hunted. I could be carefree for a change, where my biggest worry was if I'd be bored watching David's choice of movie or how long my clothes might take to dry in that darn machine I'd only been able to partially fix. But saying the words David wanted to hear would make all those horrible things come true again. He wouldn't be able to forget once he knew. And how would he see me then? I wasn't even sure how I saw myself. I mean, what was I?

My parents had been Italian and Russian but I wasn't. I wasn't even American. You have to actually be born somewhere to be a citizen and I was never born. I had no heritage at all. Everything I ever thought about myself was borrowed from someone else. I had all the characteristics of being human, but was I really? I wasn't born from humans. And didn't all of Wescott's meddling with my genes make me something different altogether?

"I'm sorry." I couldn't hold his gaze, knowing that he deserved what I wasn't ready to give. "I just..."

He let out a loud breath, clearly frustrated.

"It's okay," he said. "You'll tell me when you're ready, I guess."

I nodded, unable to disagree even though I knew I would probably never be ready.

After a few unbearable minutes of silence, which was only interrupted by the fighting on the movie, I couldn't take it anymore.

"So, I guess I missed some stuff?" I awkwardly gestured at the TV and risked a peek at David.

He gave me a tired smile before nodding. "There's still plenty left to go, not to mention two more movies. I'll fill you in."

I forced a groan but I couldn't make myself appear very inconvenienced by the idea. I was too grateful that he was willing to put up with me.

By this time, we were sitting much closer than we had been at the beginning of the movie. David merely shifted and put his arm around my shoulders. He didn't seem unsure this time.

Not minding a bit, I snuggled into a more comfortable position as he began to divulge the details I slept through.

Chapter 29

"I'm heading out for a while," David said from behind me. After seeing my panic that first time he left me alone, he'd taken to announcing when he was going somewhere. It wasn't necessary any longer but I thought it was a nice consideration.

"Okay." I set my book down on the coffee table and turned around. "Hey, can you pick up some-" The sight of David in his uniform shocked me into stopping short.

"I thought you were on leave." I felt the panic well up inside of me. I understood that he wouldn't be on leave forever, but he was supposed to have a few months, at the very least. What would I do if he was deployed again so soon? My ankle was much better than before, but it wasn't completely healed. Even if it was, I still had no idea where to go.

"Supposed to be." He made a face as he adjusted his cuff before looking up and noting the fear in my eyes.

"They assured me I wasn't going anywhere," he said quickly. "It's just a briefing. Some special situation or something."

"Oh." I relaxed.

"Did you want something?" He reminded me of what I'd been about to ask.

"Just some milk and butter. There's no more." I always felt a little guilty asking him for things. But at least, I reasoned it wasn't just for me. He was using it too. I wouldn't have hesitated giving him the money I had as payment for everything, but my future was so uncertain, I couldn't afford to do that. Especially since he hadn't asked for anything yet.

"Sure." David nodded. "I'll see you later."

Once he left, I read for a while longer, but as had become common in the last few days, I began to feel restless.

I was beyond grateful that I had a safe place to stay, but it was hard to ignore the fact that my sanctuary was also my prison. Without knowing how I was found on those cameras, I couldn't risk doing more than looking out the window. Which I did so often that David didn't even bat an eye anymore when I suddenly stopped whatever I was doing to go peer through the curtains.

Obviously I wouldn't trade my situation for what it had been before, but it didn't escape my notice that I had about the same amount of freedom as I did while under Wescott's watchful eye. The only difference was that I wasn't locked in or guarded around the clock. But I was still basically imprisoned by him. It was just in a slightly different way.

A few hours later, I found myself at the window for the third time today, seated on the small ledge and looking down on the street below. I hadn't experienced much envy in my life, but now watching the clusters of people hurrying about their normal activities, completely unaware of me and my situation, I felt it alright. I almost hated them for their easy existence and probably boring lives. The young mother who already had too many kids, trying to juggle them all along with her groceries. The teenagers who were obviously skipping out on school for the day. The businessmen hurrying by, talking on their phones.

My eyes landed on a familiar army man, making his way down the street, and a small smile replaced the scowl on my face, the irritation and jealousy fading away. Maybe my situation wasn't all bad, I mused. I never would have guessed that a random stranger on the street, with whom I had almost nothing in common, would wind up being the first man I started falling for. But falling, I was. It was almost impossible not to see David that way after everything he's done for me. Specifically over the last few days, when he offered security and comfort from my nightmares without knowing any details.

After falling asleep in the movie the other night, he woke me up a few more times in the middle of the night when I was having some particularly traumatizing dreams.

I knew my feelings weren't one-sided either. For some reason, even as the completely needy and emotional mess that I was turning out to be, David seemed to reciprocate my budding feelings. There was nothing monumental yet. Mostly it was just looks and small comfort things like when he put his arm around me the other night, but it was pretty hard to miss.

Insubstantially Me

Trying to view myself from his perspective, I couldn't really understand it. In his place, I would have found someone like me to be obnoxious and a burden. But maybe he just liked being needed. Which was ironic considering a few months ago, I didn't need anything from anyone.

My perusal out the window left me satisfied that I was still secure, so I decided to get started on some sandwiches for a late lunch while I waited for David to arrive.

Finishing up with the ham, I heard the telltale sounds of the door being closed and locked, and a few minutes later, David stood in the doorway of the kitchen as I topped the sandwiches with slices of bread.

I was about to make some clever remark, but changed my mind when I looked up and saw his serious expression.

"Hey," I said instead, wondering what was wrong. I couldn't identify his mood, other than knowing that something had clearly upset him.

His answering greeting was a clipped hi as he looked at me strangely. He almost seemed angry, but not quite. I could be sure that whatever had upset him had nothing to do with me, since he was fine when he left and because he brought the things I asked for. Whatever it was that they called him in for must have been bad to put that look on his face and my mind immediately jumped to one conclusion.

"You're not leaving?" I asked worried.

"No." Again his answer was short and he seemed nothing like his usual self as he stood there watching me oddly.

I decided to do what he normally did with my weirdness and act as though nothing were wrong. After all, if he wasn't going anywhere and wasn't angry with me, not much else worried me. Besides, he would probably appreciate the distraction the way I always did.

"You know, I beat your score in Mahjong yesterday." I put the lid on the mayonnaise jar and then twisted the bag of bread closed before I glanced at him again.

"You kind of suck."

Apparently my diversion worked. David smiled slightly and let out a heavy sigh.

"Well it's been a few years since I played on this computer. I'll have to give it a shot again. I'm sure I've improved."

Something was still off, but at least he seemed a little more like himself. I was dying to know what was on his mind, but I knew he wasn't allowed to tell me and wouldn't disregard his orders that way. I was obscenely curious though. To my knowledge, things never really bothered David. I would just have to try to keep the atmosphere light and hope this wasn't too serious.

Chapter 30

"Ha!" I threw a superior glance over my shoulder toward David. "Just broke 2,500."

This little Mahjong tournament we were doing turned out to be a nice way to get things back to normal. It took a while for that look to totally abandon David's eyes, but he seemed like his carefree self again. The only difference now was this top secret mission that required him to be gone several hours in the day, and that he became much more paranoid when he left. He made sure to tell me to secure all the locks once he was gone, and he made me promise not to open the door for anyone. Which just made me more curious about what took place at that meeting of his. The only scenario I could imagine was that there was some high terror alert, but that idea didn't completely fit with his behavior and attitude. As long as David seemed more normal though, I figured it couldn't be so bad.

"No way," he said in disbelief, materializing beside me and crouching down.

"You must have..." He stopped when I turned to find his face mere inches from mine. Staring into his eyes, I knew that Mahjong was suddenly the last thing on either of our minds.

After a few seconds, the distance separating us shrunk considerably and I honestly wasn't sure which one of us moved or if both of us had. I probably wouldn't have thought about it at all had David not so abruptly restored the space between us wearing that startled look and focusing on the computer monitor in a glaringly obvious avoidance maneuver.

"You must have cheated." His tone was way off the mark from the playful accusation he was probably going for, but I was just glad that he couldn't see the embarrassment coloring my cheeks since he seemed set on never tearing his eyes away from the screen again.

"Well, why don't you try and figure out how I did it then." I didn't get anywhere near my usual banter tone either, but all I could think about was putting more distance between us. I quickly evacuated the chair and went to the window, anxious avoid this just like we avoided every other awkward situation and act as if nothing happened.

I stared out the window without seeing anything, furious with myself for all the typically feminine feelings that were suddenly impossible to ignore. For the first time in my life, I felt inadequate and I couldn't help wondering what I'd done wrong. Common sense was telling me that it didn't matter. I didn't have to prove myself worthy of David or anyone and that I hadn't done anything wrong. But my wretched mind kept trying to pinpoint something and I couldn't stop berating myself for the clearly wrong assumption that David somehow shared my feelings.

Of course he didn't. Why would he? As far as he knows I'm nothing special. I thought I liked the fact that according to him, I was pretty average, but now I wasn't so sure.

One of the things I liked best about being around David was all the new things I was able to feel - real friendship and genuine acceptance with the possibility to be more. Freedom to be someone totally different and of my own choosing. But this bitter taste of rejection was something I could have lived without. It was making me wonder if the rest of it was worth it. Maybe it was smarter to keep people at a distance the way I had my whole life. No emotional entanglements meant that no one could hurt you.

It was most assuredly best for my situation since I wouldn't be able to stay here forever. Even though I had no earthly clue how, I was going to have to leave David sooner or later. That alone made it wise to keep things light and as uncomplicated as possible with him.

Stuffing down the feelings as best I could, I decided to do an actual assessment out the window before going to hide in the bedroom for a while.

The streetlights provided enough illumination that the descending darkness wasn't much of an issue as I hastily scanned the people scattered down below.

Just as I was about to push away from the window, my eyes landed on a lone figure, standing in the shadowy patch across the street and my breath caught in my throat.

He was inconspicuous and I nearly missed him, just barely spying the small briefcase at his feet. If not for my perfect vision, I probably would have missed it entirely.

Insubstantially Me

My fingers dug into the window ledge as I willed the man to lift his head. Squinting into the near darkness, I saw that it wasn't a cell phone in his hand the way I'd hoped. It was a small, rectangular object I'd seen before. And he looked about ready to press the button.

No, no, no! I propelled myself backwards, knocking the phone book from the end table and sparing a quick glance toward David who instinctively turned at the noise.

He couldn't be allowed to see what was about to happen! Who knows what he would do?

Deciding that explanations could wait, I turned toward the bedroom, but I knew I wouldn't make it in time.

Sure enough, before I could take more than two steps, I crumpled to the floor, trying in vain to block out the assault on my ears.

I was aware of movement and that David was saying something, but I wasn't able to focus on him in the slightest until the awful noise subsided. Surprisingly it didn't take that long for that to happen, but when it did, I knew before I even opened my eyes, this was not going to be good.

David held me up by my arms and I reluctantly met his perplexed, anxious gaze, allowing my hands to fall away from my ears.

He watched me for a minute before seeming to realize that I was going to be as forthcoming as usual.

"What the-"

Before he could finish, it hit again and I hoped I was only imagining screaming from the unexpected second round of torture.

When it stopped again, I opened my eyes trying to think of some plausible excuse to give him, but I was surprised that he was no longer in front of me.

To my complete horror, I saw that he was picking up the phone, no doubt ready to call 911.

"NO!" I launched myself off the floor, ignoring the lingering headache and hastily wobbled across the slightly spinning room.

David paused dialing long enough for me to reach him, but refused to relinquish the phone.

"No, please," I begged. "I'm fine. You can't call anyone!"

"You call that fine?" He shouted, incredulous, trying to pry the phone from my grasp.

"It's not a medical problem!" I feared that he would overpower me and do it anyway. "They can't help! You'll only tell him where I am!"

That made David seem less determined, but he clearly wasn't convinced. "What is it then?"

"It's..." I hesitated, still not willing to share the truth but unable to think of anything that would satisfy him.

"Tell me everything or I'm calling the paramedics."

When I only watched him helplessly and didn't respond, he tore the phone away from me, ready to press the last button.

"Okay!" I cried. "I'll tell you! Just please don't."

He turned the phone off but my relief wasn't as great as it might have been had that suspicious look not returned to his face.

I dropped my eyes, wondering where to start. I was stuck. David finally reached his limit with me and I knew he wouldn't let it go now. He was going to know if I tried to lie. That is, if I could begin to think of a lie that would even make sense.

Making my way back to the window, I peeked outside and learned that my nightmare was still down there. I wasn't sure if I'd prefer it that way or not. At least I didn't have to wonder if he was about to barge through the door. But it didn't bode well that he didn't look lost. On the contrary, he seemed very relaxed and sure he was in the right area. How long until he managed to deduce my precise location?

David came up behind me and I turned to look at him. I was grateful to see that his curiosity was greater than his suspicion at this point.

"I'm not...normal." I decided to just get it out there. Beating around the bush was never my thing anyway. The fact that David didn't even crack a smile at my statement, spoke volumes about how serious he was taking the situation.

I gestured for him to join me on the couch so I could organize my thoughts, in hopes that this wouldn't sound completely insane.

Chapter 31

I'd been unable to meet David's eyes throughout my lengthy explanation and he hadn't spoken, giving me absolutely no indication of how he was reacting to what I said.

"You wanted to know what that was." When I finally glanced at him again, I noted with gratitude that he, at least, didn't seem to think I was psychotic. He looked grim and slightly green.

"That's their way of trying to find me. Because I escaped and I'm too valuable to them to just let me go." Having told him just about everything, I wasn't sure what else to say. I sat back on the couch to give him some time to digest all the information.

As I waited, he continued staring straight ahead, remaining quiet and I was getting nervous. What was he thinking? Did he believe me at all? I never noticed the small wind-up clock on the computer table before, but now its ticking was impossible to ignore in the silence.

"Say something," I pleaded, unable to stand waiting any longer.

"How?" He finally focused on me, but I had no idea what he was asking. How did I escape? How was any of it possible? I just watched him waiting.

"How can they trace you?" he clarified.

I still didn't have any idea what he was thinking, but I wanted to hug him anyway. He believed me! And if I was judging his expression correctly, he was angry on my behalf. I would have smiled, if his question didn't remind me of the danger I was still in.

Pulling my foot up onto the couch, I rolled up the leg of my pants and pointed out the small scar on my calf.

"They put a tracking device here when I was a baby."

David stared at my exposed leg and I found myself holding my breath when he raised his hand to touch the scar. Without knowing the direction of his thoughts, I wasn't sure if I wanted him touching me. But I also didn't want to startle him into a negative reaction, so I held still, waiting.

Before his fingers could make contact, he dropped his hand, seeming to remember himself.

"Is that all?" He met my eyes again.

"All?" Why was I suddenly disappointed?

"The only trace?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I think so." Wasn't that enough? It seemed to be working out well for them, I thought bitterly.

"Can you trust me?" He watched me intensely.

I kinda already did...

"I hope so," I said quietly.

"I have to go." David popped off the couch and I almost had a heart attack on the spot.

"Go?" I shot up after him, frantically. Where could he possibly have to go after hearing all that? Maybe I was reading him all wrong. Maybe he really didn't believe me. Maybe he was going to the police because he thought I was insane.

David quickly shrugged on his jacket and swiped his keys from the hook by the door, looking distracted and determined. He showed no sign of answering me.

"David!" I cried grabbing his arm. "Please!"

I saw understanding come into his eyes when he focused on me again.

"I know this is probably really hard for you, but please trust me," he said. "I have an idea."

"What is it?" I was desperate to know what he was thinking.

"I don't want to say in case it doesn't work. But if it does, it'll really help."

I clung to him, completely torn. What if I was wrong to tell him?

"Have I given you any reason not to trust me?" he asked and I had to shake my head. Because of course, he hadn't. He'd unintentionally done plenty of things to win my trust.

"Then trust me now." He gripped my arms. "I'm going to help you."

Realizing that this was exactly what I agreed to when I told him everything, I forced myself to drop my hold on him.

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He half-smiled. "I should be back in about forty minutes. Don't worry."

"You're not going to the police or something?" I suddenly needed to make sure that wasn't his idea of helping.

"Of course not." His smile grew and, as it usually did, made me feel a little more relaxed.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded in agreement with whatever he was thinking, even though it was driving me crazy not knowing what it was.

David moved to the door but stopped before he could slip outside.

"Don't run." He watched me warily.

I only nodded again, choosing not to mention that I was thinking about doing that very thing. The front door was out since it was in plain view of that man who was probably still outside, but the fire escape was an option.

He stared at me for another minute, not seeming sure so I tried to look more convincing until he finally left me alone, clicking the lock behind him.

When I heard his footsteps retreat down the hall, I couldn't help running to the window to watch him leave. I didn't think he saw who I was looking at before, but I needed to be sure.

Just like I thought he would be, that man was still standing in the same place. It was more difficult to tell with the night fully descended, but he was there.

A minute after I reached the window, I noticed David jog down the steps before he walked casually down the street.

Now all I had to do was wait almost an hour for David to come back, while I knew nothing of what he had planned. Sure, simple. No problem.

David better hurry up or I wasn't going to be able to resist that fire escape.

Chapter 32

What's taking him so long? I wanted to scream as I made my obsessive circuit around the tiny apartment the way I had been for the last excruciatingly long forty-eight minutes.

My compulsive path began at the living room window, checking for David to come back before I moved to the kitchen to peer out of that small window as an extra check. When that failed to produce any new information, I found myself in the bedroom, debating whether or not to just pack up my things and get out through the fire escape before it was too late.

But then I'd remind myself that I had exactly nowhere to go and that if I moved too far in any direction, that man would be on me in a few minutes. Besides, although my ankle was much better, it wasn't going to support any great exertions like running.

And then there was David. I was desperately trying to have faith in him. I had no one else and I really wanted to believe I didn't need anyone else.

Those thoughts would bring me back to the living room, where I'd sit anxiously on the couch for about five minutes before getting up and doing the whole thing again.

As I was coming out of the bedroom for the millionth time, I heard the front door being unlocked. My breath caught because I didn't hear David's keys jingling the way I normally did. I had no idea what he said, but the man on the other side of the door had a deeper voice than David.

There wasn't time to make it back to the bedroom, so I ducked behind the door instead. My best option was going to be to take whoever it was by surprise and then escape.

I held my breath as the knob turned and the door opened.

"You'd better not-"

The man was saying something, but I didn't hesitate. His light brown, slightly graying hair and deeper voice was enough to tell me that it wasn't David. Anyone else had no business coming through this door.

Intending to knock the man out cold, I swung as he advanced through the doorway.

David surprised me by appeared behind the man, and instinctively I tried to hold back. But I had too much momentum and wound up hitting the man with less force than originally intended. He fell against the wall, holding his eye.

"Sarah!" David dropped the box he was carrying to attend to the man I just hit. "What the hell?" He shouted, throwing me an angry look.

"I'm sorry!" I covered my mouth, horrified that I attacked someone that David knew.

"I didn't expect-" Suddenly I wasn't sorry at all and I wanted to throw David's question back in his face. Not to mention another fist.

"What is this?" I crossed my arms. This was David's 'help'? What was this guy, a shrink? He looked like he might fit the role. Or maybe he actually was one of Wescott's men. Just because I didn't see a remote, didn't mean it wasn't there. Probably in his pocket.

David ignored me and helped the man to his feet, kicking the door shut behind him. I stood back, watching for any sign of foul play.

"You so owe me for this." The man threw a stern glance at David. "How am I supposed to explain a black eye to Michelle?"

I scowled at the two of them. He was lucky not to be unconscious. I hadn't decided whether I'd be making him that way or not yet.

He turned to me after a minute of tending to his eye. "And you must be our emergency. That's one heck of a right hook you've got there." He sounded friendly, but I wasn't comforted.

"Sarah, this is Tim," David said. "My brother." He seemed to think that would explain his actions perfectly.

All it explained to me was that David ran to someone else and told him about me. Whether this man worked for Wescott or not, it was just plain stupid. I had a hope that David would believe me because he knew me.

Anyone else was going to think I was crazy or dangerous, or both.

"I can't believe you did this," I hissed. "I trusted you."

"He's a doctor."

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"I don't care who he is!" I shouted. "You had no right to do that." Did David think that this man would be able to think of a way around Wescott when I couldn't? I could be a doctor if I wanted to be. I was probably smarter than the two of them put together. Did he think his money was going to help? Because next to Wescott, he was a pauper. What part of Wescott being too powerful, didn't he understand?

"Sarah, he's a surgeon!" He said exasperated.

"David, you just-" Oh! This man was a surgeon! Possibly the one person who actually could help me. I stared at David with wide eyes and he grinned, knowing I understood what he was trying to tell me. Getting this tracking device out of my leg had been on my mind from the moment I knew about it, but I didn't have a hope of actually achieving that goal. I couldn't exactly check myself in for surgery and I certainly couldn't do it myself. Although, believe me, the thought crossed my mind more than once. But this man made that impossibility possible. And if he could do it, I could actually be free of Wescott. For good. I could leave this city. Heck, I'd leave the country to be free of him.

"Well, I'm real glad that she doesn't look like she wants to kill either one of us any more," Tim said to David before addressing me too. "But would someone mind telling me what I'm doing here in. I'd like to get home before midnight."

David looked nervous as he addressed his brother. "I already told you, I need a favor."

Noticing the change in his demeanor, Tim looked at David suspiciously.

"You can't be serious," he said after a minute. Apparently he understood what David wanted him to do.

Probably due to the fact that David told me his profession by way of explanation.

When David's only response was to look guilty, Tim got angry.

"Are you out of your mind?" he shouted and I was glad that David had the foresight to close the door already.

"I mean, I know you've done alot of stupid things in your life, little brother, but I never thought you'd ask me something like this!"

"You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," David tried.

"How about illegal?" Tim shot back. "I could loose my license! I could go to jail!"

David watched the floor, chastised, and muttered, "no one has to know."

"I'd know!"

"It's important," David said. "Really important."

Obviously trying to calm down, Tim rubbed his eyes and then flinched remembering the bruise I'd given him. He sighed heavily. "Look, why don't we all sit down and talk," he said. "You haven't actually told me anything yet."

David didn't tell him about me? I felt terrible about jumping to conclusions so quickly. I really could trust him.

"Sure." David seemed grateful for the reprieve.

"You two sit," I said, heading for the kitchen. "I'll get some ice for that eye."

David sent me a questioning look, silently asking if it was okay to fill Tim in on the details. I felt like a jerk, having to decline, but it was too risky. At this point telling anyone anything, had to be a last resort. I shook my head at him, before I left them alone.

Wanting to give them a few minutes, I took my time with the ice and when I returned to the living room, the air was thicker with tension than before.

"You want me to do what?" Tim shouted and I stopped in the doorway wishing I'd waited a little longer to return.

"I'm a cardiologist, David. I don't know anything about the leg."

"Well, you're a lot more qualified than I am!" I took it as a bad sign that David, normally so even-tempered, was getting upset. He must be thinking that this wasn't going to work.

"One wrong move and I could paralyze her," Tim said.

"You wouldn't do that," David argued.

"You don't know that."

"Just think about it!" David's frustration was clear.

Tim put his head in his hands. "What are you two involved in?"

"I promise it's nothing bad," David tried. "It's nothing dangerous. Trust me please."

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Tim looked up at him and I knew by the look in his eye that he wasn't convinced.

"She could die," he said bluntly.

I wasn't sure if David realized that before. Judging by the way he scowled, I guessed not. Having thought about this before, I understood all the negative possible outcomes of this kind of primitive surgery. Sepsis was the most likely. It would leave me dead in a few days.

"That wouldn't..." he started weakly, but Tim didn't let him argue.

"Under these kinds of conditions, without proper medical care," he said. "It's a high possibility. I'm sorry, David. I know you think this is your best option, but it's just too dangerous."

"Please." The word popped unbidden out of my mouth, making them both stare at me.

David had been absolutely right when he said this would be a huge help. It was in fact the only thing that would do any good at all. I couldn't believe my dumb luck in finding David that night and by extension Tim. I couldn't just let the opportunity slip away.

"I know you don't know me, and you have no reason to help me, but there are people looking for me," I said.

"Really bad people. They managed to get me once before and with this thing in my leg, it's only a matter of time until they catch me again. I won't escape a second time. And if I have to go back to that place..." I had to stuff down the panic just thinking about it.

"I'd rather be dead." It felt a little dramatic to actually say, but it was the truth.

"I won't say a word to anyone and if anything goes wrong, I'll be really grateful that you tried."

Tim cast an anxious look at David and I knew he was worried about what would happen to him in the worst case scenario.

"And if I'm not going to make it, I'll leave." I held up a hand to stop David's protest. After all, if I'm about to die, no sense staying in hiding.

"I'll take a train or a cab and neither of you will ever hear from me again. Please, just try. You don't understand what it will mean for me if you don't."

"I'm not even that kind of doctor," he tried.

"You're the only chance I've got."

Tim's shoulders sagged and I began to see similarities between him and David. They shared mannerisms and a certain expression when they were about to agree to something against their better judgement.

David and I exchanged a look while Tim debated internally.

"This place?" He asked me. "It's bad?"

"It's..." Bad? Bad was a trip to the dentist. This place was horrific. "You can't imagine."

After a minute, he turned to David.

"I want that room emptied." He yanked his chin toward the bedroom. "And I want it scrubbed."

"Uh, sure," David's eyes widened with surprise.

"I mean it," Tim said. "Ceiling, walls, baseboards, everything. And you need to seal off the window with a plastic sheet and duct tape."

"Right." David nodded, apparently ready to do whatever his brother said.

Tim looked at me again. "I'm going to need about a week to prepare. And I can't promise anything. If it's too deep, I'm not planning on digging around your leg till I find it."

I nodded. That wasn't ideal, but I guess it was better than nothing.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me any more information." He raised an eyebrow, trying for intimidating, but I already knew he was a pushover.

"Sorry." I did feel bad that I couldn't tell him anything more. "But I swear I'm not involved in anything illegal." I could at least give him that assurance.

"I guess that'll have to be good enough," he sighed. "I can't guarantee that I can get a hold of any kind of anesthesia," he warned.

"Then I'll do without." I tried not to think about how painful that would be. But if it really came down to it, I suppose I could just drink till I pass out.

Chapter 33

"So, you can remember anything you want just by looking at it?" David asked as we scrubbed the walls of his newly emptied bedroom.

"Pretty much." I tried to suppress the annoyance I felt from the constant line of questioning about my 'super powers'. I didn't mind at first. It was actually nice to be able to talk freely with him. And while I deeply appreciated everything he was doing for me, I was starting to feel like a side-show or the science experiment all over again. It was as if he was trying to do his own mental calculations of my abilities and figure out what I would be capable of.

"It would probably only take you a few days to master a foreign language," he mused and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or himself.

"About three." I leaned closer to the wall, unsure of whether the discoloring I saw was dirt or a shadow.

"Maybe longer if it's a dead language." I never had much interest in learning foreign languages, but I'd done it anyway. It was a requirement of my high school to take a year of either Spanish or French. I chose Spanish and was bored with the material for the year, after only a few days. I asked my teacher for the more advanced books and learned those on my own. After that I'd done French too, just for the heck of it. Then in college, I learned Italian and German for something else to do when I got bored with my other subjects. I probably could have kept going down the list in the catalog, but I was beyond bored with linguistics by then.

I glanced at David when he didn't say anything else.

"What?" I asked defensively. He was giving me that calculating, slightly surprised look again.

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Is everything like that? You just read about something and know how to do whatever it is?"

"Sometimes." I shrugged. "With some things I have to practice or ask questions. But yeah, I guess most things work like that."

"So if I told you how to build a bomb, you could just do it?"

If I hadn't been looking at him when he said it, I would have assumed it was a joke. But uncharacteristically, David seemed serious. Maybe even a little nervous. It was hard to tell since curiosity overshadowed his other emotions.

"Probably." I raised an eyebrow. "Why? Do you have plans to blow something up?" I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not yet, but I'll let you know." I didn't understand why, but his smile seemed a little bit forced.

Turning back to the wall, I decided that the spot was dirt and began scrubbing. I had to remind myself that David had a lot of information to absorb in a short amount of time. I couldn't blame him if he was curious or freaked out about some of it.

"Too bad you can't perform surgery on yourself," he said. "That would have made things easier."

"Trust me, the thought crossed my mind. But no, unfortunately I'm not quite that good."

He laughed. "Tim would be so relieved."

As would I, I thought. No matter how much of a godsend Tim seemed to be, he was still a virtual stranger to me. Trusting David was completely different. I'd had time to get to know him first, and his constant presence reassured me that he wasn't out somewhere, turning me in.

I understood that Tim was basically a good person, like his brother. But he didn't know me and I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't get it into his head that the best thing to do was to tell the police or worse. I didn't doubt that David was forefront in his mind. After all, what decent person wouldn't want to save his little brother from the fugitive who might be mentally unstable?

But, as I'd been doing, constantly over the last few days, I reminded myself that trusting David meant trusting his brother. Besides, it was too late for a different course. Even if this did turn out to be a mistake, I'd be screwed either way. It really was only a matter of time until Wescott tracked me down. If I hadn't been sure of that, the growing frequency of that man standing down on the street, would have convinced me.

I breathed a little easier when another scan of the street, as Tim was leaving, told me that the man wasn't there any longer. Unfortunately, he showed up the next day, stayed for a while and left, only to return again in a few

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hours. There was no question that he knew I was close by.

I didn't understand why he stood, seemingly doing nothing each time. But then, I hadn't understood his actions before either, and he'd been able to track me down with frightening speed and accuracy. No, his apparent inaction, I knew, was deceiving.

But there wasn't a thing I could do about it at the moment, so I forced myself to think of something else as I continued scrubbing the walls beside David.

"Deep breath," Tim said, holding the stethoscope to my back. He'd come over to set up the makeshift operating room and decided to stick around to give me a thorough check up.

I could have told him I was completely healthy, but I guessed that this was more for his own peace of mind than anything else, so I kept my mouth shut and did what he asked.

Tim dropped the stethoscope when he was satisfied with what he heard and wrote something else on his little chart.

"Well, you appear to be in perfect health," he said, meeting my eyes. "As far as I can tell, at least."

"I know." I hadn't meant my words to carry a tone, but judging by the curious look that Tim was giving me, they had.

"I'm probably the ideal candidate for this sort of thing," I said, deciding it was best to give him a little reassurance. "To be honest, if anyone in the world can come through something like this...without a problem, it'd be me." Because, possibly the only benefit of being me, was my super-human immune system.

Tim had figured out that I was different, but I knew that he had no idea why. He pensively watched me now, clearly trying to figure it out.

"And you know that because...?"

"I just do."

He stared at me for a minute longer before he said, "And this..." He didn't seem to know how to categorize my situation. "Isn't anything illegal?" There was more curiosity than suspicion in his tone.

"Not on my end," I muttered, glancing away.

"But there's something illegal on someone else's end?" The more I was around Tim, the more similarities I saw between him and David. Right now, I could tell he was attempting to pinpoint a solution so he could fix this the same way David tried to fix most things. He pounced on the idea that someone else might be acting illegally and therefore could be stopped.

But just about the last thing I needed was for Tim, and probably David too, to get it in their heads that they could help me by involving anyone else.

I'd responded without really thinking - after all, how could the things that Wescott was doing, possibly be legal? Technically though, something couldn't be illegal if no one thought there was a need for a law against it.

"Let's just say, technologically speaking, the law's not that advanced."

I wondered if Tim was into sci fi and fantasy stuff the way David was. If so, I could imagine all sorts of possibilities about aliens, radioactive spiders, and who knows what else, passing through his mind as he pursed his lips, thinking. The thought made me want to laugh.

After watching me for another few seconds with open curiosity, Tim shook his head and sighed, giving up for the time being.

"I suppose you're the new stray," he said, taking the stethoscope from around his neck and placing it in his bag.

"Excuse me?" I didn't think he meant it as an insult, and his kind smile emphasized that. But the comparison was a little too close to the mark for my liking.

He continued packing up his things, and for a minute I thought he might not answer.

"David probably never mentioned that his nickname as a kid, was Doctor Dolittle." Tim's words were almost joking, but I could sense a serious undertone to them.

I shook my head.

"He was always bringing home one animal or another," he said. "Every week it seemed, he'd find a new critter in need of medical attention. Usually cats and dogs that got too close to the highway or who'd been in a fight

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with another animal. Sometimes, he'd find a baby deer or some other wild animal in the woods behind the house. And every time, he was sure he could fix whatever was wrong. Most of the time, he was right. Which is pretty impressive, considering that he had to do almost everything on his own. Our parents didn't have money to waste on vet bills for an endless string of animals, and they didn't have the time to play veterinarian themselves. Outside of forbidding David from going near raccoons and other typically rabid animals, they didn't have much to do with my brother's hobby. He was lucky to get any help from me or our sister either." Tim chuckled.

"It's ironic that I wound up, the doctor," he said. "Everyone was sure David would be a veterinarian." I smiled, not quite able to picture David in that career. Not because I thought he didn't have the intellect or heart for it - I knew he did. But you didn't see many vets that looked like David. He'd probably be responsible for a spike in cat sales for single women.

"One time," Tim continued, oblivious to my amusement. "He brought home this dog. Poor thing looked half-dead, but David was determined to help it like always. He managed to do it too. Took him over a month to get it eating and drinking on it's own, but he did it. He patched the mutt up and was thinking about keeping it. Usually the dogs he found were lost, but there were no tags on this one and no lost dog signs anywhere around. It was skittish, and David thought the dog just needed to get used to him before they could have that special bond like in movies."

"I'm not sure if it was a wild dog or if it had been abused. Whatever the case it turned on David one day, right after he fed it. It's a good thing the dog was just scared because it probably could have done a lot more than send David to the emergency room for twelve stitches."

Ah, so that was the reason for this apparently random story. Tim wondered if I was a skittish stray too.

"David was always upset when one of his animals didn't make it or when he had to let them go, but that kind of betrayal really crushed him. He stopped bringing home animals after that. At least, for the most part.

Sometimes one would follow him anyway, but he didn't go looking for them anymore. My mom said he was just growing up since he was at an age when most boys start getting interested in girls and hanging out more with their friends, but we all knew that dog did more damage than could be fixed with stitches."

My heart ached for the little boy David had been, so sweet and fragile that his heart could be broken by a frightened dog. I searched for some reassurance to give Tim that I wouldn't betray his brother's trust, but I wasn't sure what to say. It seemed a little patronizing to simply say I wasn't planning to turn on him.

Before I could worry about it very much, a knock on the door drew both our attention.

David popped his head into the room after Tim answered.

"You about done?" David asked. He must have noticed something in my expression because he gave me a curious glance. I tried to reassure him with a smile.

"Michelle called." He looked at Tim again. "She said there's a minor emergency. Something about how she can't figure out what's wrong with the DVD player and Emma's having a meltdown because her Daddy promised that if she ate all her veggies at lunch, she could watch *The Wizard of Oz*. Again."

"Heaven help us if she has to skip a day." Tim chuckled. "But yeah, we're done. I was getting ready to head out."

Tim packed the rest of his things and left David and I alone.

"I swear Em has every word of that movie memorized," David said. "I don't know how she can keep watching it day after day."

"I was never like that." I slid down from the table that Tim brought for my surgery. "I could never stand to watch stuff more than once." I always thought it was strange that kids could watch movies over and over. I remembered everything that happened perfectly and thought it was boring to watch anything twice. But I guess it was a pretty normal thing to do. Wescott deprived me of such simple pleasures in life.

"I was." David grinned. I wasn't sure if he was oblivious to my thoughts or was trying to distract me, but knowing him, it was probably the latter.

"What do you mean, 'was', Mr. I've-seen-Star-Wars-seventeen-times?" I smirked.

David pursed his lips, and I knew he was faking the irritated expression.

Chapter 34

I was dreaming. I must be. It was strange to be aware of the fact while it was happening.

I was standing in the room that had been my prison cell, looking out the window. I got the impression that I'd been watching the trees outside for a while and didn't expect to go anywhere any time soon.

Turning, I walked through a door that I didn't remember being there in reality. The part of me that knew I was dreaming, thought it was strange that I should have such easy access to any place other than the bathroom, but my dream self didn't think twice about it.

In the small room, was another window that looked into a different room. It was a large area full of toys, clothes, beds, and various items for children. There was a door to my right, leading inside, but I instinctively knew it would be locked. I also understood that this window appeared to be a mirror from the other side, so that if there had been anyone in the room, they wouldn't be able to see me standing here.

I waited a minute before a door opened on the opposite wall. A woman in all black entered the room, followed by two orderly lines of children ranging in age from about four to fifteen or sixteen. They all wore similar clothes, a uniform perhaps, and looked solemn as they walked. Even the youngest children kept quiet and in their place until the woman turned and said something to them that I couldn't hear. It must have been a dismissal from the line because the children all turned and walked in different directions. Some went to sit on the beds. Some went to the large table where various puzzles and coloring books lay. Some took the armchairs by the bookshelves and began reading.

It was almost eerie to see. They didn't act like children should. There was no running or shouting or laughing, hardly any interaction at all. They seemed more like adults, going about their own business, uncaring of what anyone else was doing. The little ones made the whole picture seem entirely wrong. Even watching them do the normal things kids enjoyed, like coloring, didn't seem right. It was as if they were only doing the activities because they were supposed to, and not out of any desire for fun or creativity.

I watched curiously, wondering where all these children came from. Had Wescott lied about me being the only one?

Maybe he just meant that I was the only one who was fully grown.

I wasn't sure why, but I got a bad feeling about this. If I were awake, I could probably figure out what was wrong, but in the dream I felt stupid and slow. Who were those children? Where were their parents?

Not wanting to watch them any longer, I went back into my room where another woman in all black waited, holding a baby.

I looked at her curiously, wondering why she brought the baby here. Was this some sort of exercise or training? Maybe they wanted to see how I interacted with a baby.

"It's time to feed him," the woman said, offering me the baby.

My dream self and my actual self were suddenly on the same page, and I backed away, realizing with awful clarity what this all was. Those were my children in that room, just like this baby was mine.

Or at least, in theory they were mine. According to Wescott, I didn't even belong to myself.

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I understood that this was the worst nightmare yet. Those were my children and I couldn't even go to them if I wanted to. I was locked up, completely isolated. They even kept me apart from the baby, who I knew was only one of several - babies, toddlers, older children, teenagers. There were probably close to two dozen of them. And they were all kept somewhere else, turned into little adults from the time they could walk and talk, to be tested, prodded, imprisoned, used, and probably disposed of on Wescott's whim.

"Abi, you must take him," the woman pushed the baby towards me. "The others are waiting."

"No, get away from me." I tried to back away again, but was stopped by the wall. This is a dream, I thought frantically, and I wanted to wake up.

The woman ignored me coming closer.

"No!" I shouted. I knew it wasn't real, but that didn't make it any less horrific. I wanted out, now.

"No!" I yelled again

"Sarah!"

I blinked, and was back on the mattress in David's small, dark living room. He gripped my arms and I realized right away that he'd shaken me awake as he had so many times before.

Relieved to be out of the nightmare, I threw my arms around him, holding on tightly. Amazingly, I hadn't cried this time. Before all of this I almost never cried, but with these nightmares, I would usually start before I was awake. Maybe this one just hadn't been that type of a nightmare. More horrific than frightening.

"You wanna talk about it?" David murmured, holding me.

I shook my head. Talking about it wouldn't help. Avoiding it was the only solution.

Every other time David held me like this I would push away as soon as I could calm down, embarrassed by my weakness. This time though, I clung to him, in no hurry to move.

The dream had been bad, but the thing that made it so alarming wasn't anything to do with all those kids. That hadn't been pleasant either, but the worst was that little bit before I realized anything was different from the last time I was there. I hadn't realized it in the dream, but the true nightmare was that feeling of total hopelessness and of being resigned to be feel way forever. The part that scared me to death was knowing why I hadn't noticed any of it in the dream - because I'd apparently felt that way for so long that it didn't even seem exceptional anymore.

Pulling away slightly, I tried to spy David's face in the darkness, but was only able to distinguish a vague outline and shadows. I'd hoped to actually see him but suddenly it didn't seem to matter. I didn't really need to look at him. I threw my hand around his neck and pulled his face to mine.

It was a little awkward, since other than that small peck I'd given Mark, I'd never actually kissed anyone before, and this was not the sort of thing you could learn without practice. All I really had to go on was what I'd seen in movies, read in books, and one bad attempt from a kid in junior high that was really more of an attack than anything else.

But I didn't care how well I was doing it. I just needed David. I needed to reassure myself that he was with me and that the horrible residual feelings from that dream were only ever going to be imagined. Besides, it's not

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as if I never thought of kissing him before.

As he began responding, I thought a little less about the terror of the dream, and more about the thrill of what was happening.

He pushed me back against the pillow, and as I opened my mouth to him I couldn't help thinking with a twinge of jealousy that there was no way on earth that he was as new to this as I was. Not that I'd expected him to be. He probably-

Ugh! Not now, Sam!

Forcing all other thoughts from my mind, I slid one hand in his hair, loving the silky feel of it. My other hand went to the hem of his t-shirt. I wouldn't be able to see him, but I could at least feel him without his shirt. It had to be a nuisance for him to sleep in. Probably anyway.

I was ready to take it off when David pulled away, breathing heavy.

It took me a second to catch up and realize what he was doing. Obviously I hadn't planned any of this out, but stopping so suddenly - or at all - was unexpected and not on my agenda.

"We should stop."

"David..." I tried.

"It's late and you're really worked up right now," he said. "I just...I think I should go back to the couch."

"No, please." I held on when he tried to untangle himself from me. "Stay."

He froze, probably wondering what I was asking.

"Just to sleep," I clarified. Now that I was starting to think again, I knew he was right. Desperation and fear were not good reasons to sleep with someone.

He hesitated, and I knew he was wondering if it was a good idea.

"I need...I mean, I don't want to..." I struggled to get the words out. I hated begging, but I really didn't want to be alone right now.

Thankfully, he seemed to understand.

"Alright," he said quietly.

Moving to lie on the bed, he pulled me into his arms, pressing my back to his chest.

"Thanks," I whispered, relaxing against him.

"Forget it," he breathed in my ear.

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When Tim arrived the next morning and asked if I was ready to get started, I was only too happy to oblige.

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I'd been staring out at the street again, becoming increasingly uneasy about the fact that I hadn't seen that man standing out there since the previous morning. Even then, I'd noticed him much less frequently than I had during the first part of the week. I tried to convince myself that it was a good thing because maybe it meant that he was finished here and had moved on to a different area. But I couldn't quite believe it. He was smart. Much too smart. If he was keeping tabs on a specific place, it was for a good reason.

Tim was worried because he was only able to provide chloroform as an anesthetic. He said he knew how to use it in theory, but that he never actually had before. I trusted him though. Even if I didn't, I really had no choice.

"Ready?" Tim attempted to appear calm and sure, but it wasn't hard to tell that he was uneasy.

Lying on the table, I took a deep breath and nodded. I hoped that by refusing to show my own nervousness, he would be more confident.

"Alright." He signaled to David to hand him the cloth saturated with chloroform.

"Wait!" I said, stopping him before he could cover my mouth and nose.

"Don't give up," I pleaded, remembering his aversion to look too deeply for the chip. "If you don't see it right away, please find it."

"I..." Tim hesitated momentarily. "I'll do my best."

It wasn't the assurance I hoped for, but I suppose it was the best I was going to get. I nodded again and relaxed against the pillow allowing myself to be put under.

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When I came to, I could tell right away what a difference modern anesthesia and pain medicine made. My leg was throbbing and almost felt on fire.

"Hey." David was beside me. "How do you feel?"

My first attempt to talk was only a half-hearted rasp back in my throat. After a few seconds, I tried again.

"Like someone drugged me and went digging around my leg." I was shooting for humor, wanting to assure him that I was alright, despite the pain and slight nausea. But I knew I failed when David looked anxiously at Tim who came to stand in my line of vision.

"Don't try to sit up," Tim ordered showing me the pill in one hand and cup in the other. "David will raise your head enough for this."

David moved quickly and did as Tim said.

Swallowing felt strange, especially since I was lying on my side, but I managed to get the pill down pretty quick.

"What is it?" I asked with a groan as my head was lowered back to the pillow. Even that little bit of movement aggravated my leg.

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"Percocet," he said. "You'll probably feel a little loopy while you're on it, but it should take care of the pain for the most part. And it won't conflict with your antibiotic." As a precaution, he started me on antibiotics two days ago.

"Thanks." I hoped it wouldn't take too long to kick in.

I was attempting to relax, trying to relieve the pain a little, when I remembered Tim's less than definitive answer to my request.

"Did you find it?" I asked.

Instead of answering right away, he watched me with a solemn expression and I began to feel anxious.

What if it didn't work? What if this was all for nothing? What if all I actually accomplished was to incapacitate myself even further?

Really starting to worry, I looked at David for some clue, but got nothing. He didn't seem too sure of the situation either.

Tim turned and reached for the bowl on the table behind him. When he met my eyes again, he lifted the pliers to show me the small metal disk with the blinking green light in the center.

I stared fascinated. He really did it! And once my leg was healed, I could truly be free.

"I didn't..." Tim said after a few seconds, regaining my attention. "I mean, I'm not sure what I was expecting." He dropped the instrument back in the dish and set it down again.

"I guess I sort of didn't want to think about it too hard but..." he paused and I had no idea where he was going with this. I couldn't tell if he was angry or suspicious or what.

"I'm no computer genius or anything," he said. "But the only thing I can even imagine that being, is some sort of tracking device."

He stared at me hard, but I wasn't sure what to say. Was he rethinking his part in this? Was he going to do something rash?

"I can't help but wonder who put it there and why? Or how? Obviously, it's been there for a while. That scar of yours was several years old. Decades, maybe."

I seriously thought about just telling him everything. After all he'd done, he deserved to understand, and I really believed he was trustworthy.

He sighed heavily. "I'm not going to try to make you tell me anything. I know you had to be pretty desperate to do this, but...." But he wanted to know.

"You deserve the truth," I said, starting to feel a little lightheaded from the pill. "But...it's just too dangerous."

He watched me pensively.

"And not just for me." I took a deep breath, warding off the growing fuzziness in my head.

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"This could all still blow up in my face," I said. "And if it does, it would be best for you to forget you even knew me. If they know that you helped me, especially if you know everything...it would be really bad for you."

"But it's not too dangerous for David?" I almost wanted to laugh at the sibling rivalry peering through, but I knew he was mostly just worried about his brother.

"I didn't have a choice not to tell David," I admitted. "And he doesn't have a wife and daughter to think about."

It was easy to tell that he was torn between his concern for his brother and his family. He pursed his lips, obviously not satisfied by my answers.

"You've done more for me than you could imagine," I said. "This is the one thing that can give me a chance. And the best way I can even begin to repay you is to disappear."

I hadn't wanted to think about it yet, but it really was the only way. I couldn't stay here much longer with that man so close, and leaving was in Tim and David's best interest too.

I tried to stay focused on Tim, but I couldn't ignore the surprised, slightly betrayed look on David's face.

"When my leg is healed enough, I need to leave." I averted my eyes so I wouldn't have to see David. "I need to get as far away from here as I can, and it would be best for you both to forget about me."

It was quiet as I stared at the white sheet. On the one hand, I was glad that they weren't trying to argue or ply me for more information. On the other, it was a terribly awkward silence.

"I know it's nowhere near enough just to say it." I looked up, facing both of them. "But thank you. You saved my life."

Tim seemed more or less placated, but I knew David was far from it. I only managed to hold his gaze for a few seconds before feeling my eyelids droop.

"Get some rest," Tim said. "After a while, we'll be able to move you to the bed. You're secure enough for now." To ensure that I didn't roll over or move my leg during the surgery, Tim and David had made good use of several belts to hold me steady on the table. It wasn't super comfortable, but good enough. With the Percocet, I doubted that it would matter if I had to sleep on a cold concrete floor.

I nodded and gave into the growing heaviness in my body, ignoring the look on David's face that told me that there was plenty that he planned on discussing later.

A/N: SO sorry for taking so long with this story! I've had so many things come up that delayed me in my writing, but I have been working on it and am nearing the end. And I'm going to try really hard to have the end posted within a few weeks at most. Tonight, though, I will be posting 2 more chapters. Enjoy :)

Chapter 35

"Your popcorn, M'lady." David set the overflowing bowl on the coffee table. The British accent he adopted was obviously inspired by tonight's Robin Hood movie marathon. I thought it was a little excessive to watch more than one version, but David insisted that they were all different and worth watching.

"You're such a dork." I rolled my eyes and tried to suppress my smile as I reached for the snack. "But thank you."

He grinned briefly before taking the spot next to me. I was actually finding his dorky side kind of adorable, and I think he knew it.

David threw his arm across the back of the couch and hit play on the remote while I searched for the good pieces of popcorn on the top of the bowl. I was so immersed in my task, that it took me a minute to realize that I wasn't hearing any previews playing. David refused to skip most of them, so it was odd for the room to be silent for a more than a few seconds after starting a movie.

I looked at David curiously to find that his attention was fully on me and not the television, which was showing the screensaver again.

"What?" I asked suddenly self-conscious, noting the thoughtful expression on his face.

"What are you're plans?"

"I'm...planning to watch three movies about Robin Hood." I wasn't sure what he was really asking, but I hoped to keep things light. "And depending on how that goes, I might be planning on making you sit through a complete chick flick marathon. I'm thinking Sleepless in Seattle and Steel Magnolias, for starters."

David didn't even smile.

"I'm serious," he said. "What are you planning to do when your leg is better?"

Well, that was out of nowhere. I thought that David wanted to have some kind of discussion like this. He hadn't brought it up in the two weeks that had elapsed since my surgery though, and I began thinking he might just let it go. I should have known better.

Honestly, I had no idea what my plans were. I knew that the smartest thing was to get as far away from here as possible, as soon as Tim cleared me to travel, but I didn't have anything definite in mind yet.

I guess I didn't want to think about it.

"I..."

"Because you don't have to go anywhere," he said quickly. "You can stay here."

"David..." I shook my head and looked away. This was probably a necessary conversation, but I didn't want to have it at all. I was beginning to despise the idea of leaving him, but I didn't see any way around it. Aside from it not being smart to hang around the last area that Wescott definitely knew I'd been, David wouldn't be here forever. At some point his leave would be over.

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Besides, I didn't like having to depend on him any more than I had originally. I'd just accepted that it was a necessity for the time being.

"You can," he insisted. "I..."

At his hesitation, I met his eyes again.

"I don't want you to go." The conviction in his eyes left no doubt about his feelings for me.

"You're safe here," he said. "We just have to-"

"No, I'm not." I didn't let him verbalize his plans. Whatever they were, they wouldn't work forever.

Once I was coherent enough to have a conversation with Tim about the chip, we decided that he would take it to the hospital when he went in to work in the morning, and flush it there. It was the easiest way to get rid of it, and would send Wescott on a nice wild goose chase. But eventually he would figure out what was going on and when he did, it wouldn't take all that long for him to zero in on this neighborhood again. I wasn't even sure it was completely safe to be here now, but I also wasn't healed enough to have another option yet. In another week though...

"No one's even come close to finding you here," he argued. "You're safe."

"No one's come yet," I corrected. "They're not stupid and they're not going to give up."

I wouldn't put it passed Wescott to come up with some way to search every apartment in the area, to find me. And he still had all those remotes.

David stared at me and I knew he wanted to argue the point more, but he only said, "I don't want to lose you."

It was hard to hold his gaze and I didn't try too hard. I wanted to assure him that I didn't want to go either, but it felt cruel when I knew I couldn't stay.

I'd never been so attached to someone before, not even my parents. Understandably, I hated having been cut off from my mother and I missed my dad too. But I would have been happy keeping in contact with them by the phone and occasional visits. I didn't really mind being away from them physically. Just knowing they were there would be enough for me. But I'd grown so close to David in the past weeks that the idea of leaving him, especially so soon, was becoming painful.

I tried to think of something to say - anything that would comfort him or change the subject, but nothing was coming to me. Suddenly all I could think of was our impending separation, and how it would completely suck.

His hand came under my chin and I met his eyes a moment before his lips touched mine.

Closing my eyes, I leaned into him as much as our positions on the couch would allow, savoring the sweetness of his kiss.

After that one hysterical episode of mine, we hadn't come close to kissing again. It never seemed like a good time. If not for my surgery and subsequent recovery, then for the pure uncertainty of either of our feelings. Not to mention, not knowing whether those feelings were even a good idea to explore.

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But I'd been anxious to do it again, and my hands had been itching to feel the silkiness of his hair once more. It didn't take long for them to wind up weaved in his dark locks now.

David continued his gentle assault on my mouth without seeming rushed or frantic the way we'd been before. After a while, he nudged me backward so that we were lying in a more comfortable position. Only then did I realize that there were tears in my eyes as they streaked their way down the sides of my face.

It was the sweetness of it all that gave me the intense sadness that was overwhelming me. Because I knew that we could never go further than this and explore the depth of our feelings. It probably wasn't even wise to be doing this much.

Pulling him closer, I decided that I didn't much care right now. I just wanted to savor the moment.

I could worry about the pain and other problems later.

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Sitting at the computer with my head resting in my hand, I studied the page comparing the statistics of the various places along the west coast. A few spots in California and Oregon looked like they had potential. California, specifically, offered a lot of variety, ranging from cities to almost nonexistent beach towns. I think I was leaning toward Washington state for the place I would wind up, though. I liked the idea of being close enough to the ocean that I could hop a fishing boat if needed, while still having the alternate option of jumping the border into Canada.

Canada was probably the wisest eventual destination for me. Once I could get to Washington, I should be able to get a job and save up for a fake passport and other documents.

I'd also be happy to be able to send David some money for everything he's done for me. It would never be enough, of course, but at least I wouldn't feel like a financial parasite any longer.

Just as I was about to look up more information on Maple Falls, Washington, the sound of David at the door made me jump.

David refused to believe that I had to leave. He insisted that I was perfectly safe right here, and seeing me researching towns in Washington wasn't going to be something he handled well. It probably wasn't a good idea for David to know where I was planning to go anyway.

I quickly closed out the window, and opened a new one before proceeding to my email server. Email was never a top priority for me but I had an account, because, well, didn't everyone? It was only ever full of junk mail, but I thought it would provide a nice, mundane excuse as to why I was online.

"Hey," David said, coming through the door and locking it behind him. "Got pizzas. You haven't tasted good until you've tried Tony's New Yorker special."

"Mm hmm," I murmured without turning to look at him.

"I got some garlic bread too and....Stop!"

Jumping at the sudden outburst, my hands froze on the keyboard before I could enter the password. I turned to see David rush over and yank the power cord from the outlet.

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Shocked, I stared at him from beside the now black computer screen.

"What in the-" I tried.

"Do you realize what you almost just did?" he cut me off.

"I'm sorry," I said, warily. He never used that forceful tone with me before. "I didn't think you would care."

"What else were you doing online?"

"I was just looking at different web sites." I hoped he wouldn't ask what kind of web sites. His reaction was already baffling. I didn't want to have to deal with those emotions as well.

"Anything with a password or your personal information? Facebook?"

Seeing him like this, I could actually picture David, the soldier, for the first time. He almost seemed dangerous.

I shook my head. "Nothing like that. I was just looking around."

He sighed heavily and seemed to calm down.

"Is everything alright?" I chose not to ask the more confrontational 'what's your problem'.

"Are you trying to send up a red flag so they can find you? I thought you were smarter than that."

Okay, maybe he wasn't totally relaxed yet. Still, no one had ever questioned my intelligence before, even flippantly, and I bristled.

"What are you talking about? It's only email, David. It's not like I was planning on sending them one."

"How do you think they almost caught you before?"

"I have no idea." I crossed my arms. "But I haven't checked my email in months."

"You do know," he insisted. "Think."

I stared at him confused and irritated. Of course I didn't know how they were finding me so easily. If I'd known, they wouldn't have done it.

David didn't give me any clue as to what he was getting at, he only watched me expectantly.

"I guess they traced me," I said after a minute of angry silence. "Maybe he lied about how accurate it was."

"If that was the case, they would have found you here by now. Think, Sarah."

"David, I have no idea what you're talking about," I said frustrated.

"What were you doing right before they found you the first time?" he pushed, not seeming affected by my attitude.

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"Walking around New York," I snapped.

"Did you do anything but walk? Talk to anyone?"

"No, I didn't talk to anyone, I only-" I stopped remembering that I had done something. But Wescott couldn't have that much power. Could he?

"What?" David didn't look pleased so much as satisfied that I was catching on.

"I called my mom," I said quietly, not wanting to believe that it was my own stupidity that set them after me. And I really didn't want to believe that it was even possible.

"I didn't say anything though! And it was a public phone!"

"But you called your mom," he said. "Any call to her, coming from the city would be a huge tip off."

"That's crazy," I tried. "He couldn't possibly-"

"What about the next time?"

"I was sleeping and well hidden after walking around, sight seeing." I looked at him, daring him to figure that one out."

"How did you know they found you then?"

"I heard them talking. They said they had me on camera, but I have no idea how they knew...."

But I did know, and it was my own fault again.

"What?"

"No." I shook my head in disbelief. "No, they couldn't be that powerful."

"What?" he repeated.

"I tried to withdraw money from my bank account," I said. "But how would they-"

"That's it," he sounded certain.

"He's a scientist, David, not the government. How would he have access to any of that stuff?"

"You don't know that," he said simply.

I tried to remember any indication that Wescott was involved with the government, but there was nothing. In fact, everything pointed to no government involvement.

Why would he need the independent contributors if he had government funds? Why operate under the guise of a pharmaceutical laboratory?

I couldn't imagine Wescott working for anyone but himself either. Hadn't he said that this had always been his project? Him and the woman he killed?

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"No." I refused to believe it. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't make sense otherwise," he argued. "They didn't find you by magic."

"The tracker."

"With a hundred foot range, in the middle of the city? More than once?" he asked skeptically. That would be magic."

If David was right, I really was screwed. What hope did I have of even making it out of the city, let alone across the country? This was all for nothing. It was only a matter of time until I wound up back in Wescott's control.

I stared into space as that hopeless feeling began settling over me again.

"Hey, this is a good thing." David placed his hand on my arm and I was, once again, baffled by his reaction.

"No, really," he insisted. "It's always best to know what your up against."

"The government, David? I may as well have gone into my email."

"The government isn't all-powerful, Sarah. You just have to know how to get around them. Fortunately, I do." He grinned.

I tried to give him an answering smile, but it all seemed so impossible.

"First, we need to take care of this scientist. Then we can worry about the rest."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that?" I humored him. I doubted that he had anything plausible in mind.

"By cutting him off, of course," he stated matter-of-factly.

"David, that's not going to be easy," I said. "You have no idea what you're talking about getting involved in."

He just grinned.

"What?" I narrowed my eyes.

"He may be attached to the government, but it would be very difficult for him to receive any financial help from them. At least, he won't be getting anything substantial. It's too controversial and they wouldn't want to risk having it shut down. So where is his funding coming from?"

I shrugged. "People with too much money."

"Exactly," he said. "People who have nothing better to do than waste their money and worry about their reputations."

"What are you getting at?" I asked, intrigued.

"Just what I said. Cut him off. All we have to do is get the names of his main contributors and threaten to go public with the information. People with that much money are usually thinking about running for office at

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some point or have other reasons for wanting to keep their names clean. Once he's out of investors, he's out of business."

"David, that's...that's brilliant actually."

"I know." He looked quite pleased with himself.

"Brilliant," I said again. "But also nearly impossible. Just how do you intend to get these names? I don't think they're floating around Google." I never tried it before, but I could probably figure out the basics of computer hacking. I didn't have any illusions about being able to crack into Wescott's system any time soon though.

"Never question a magician's sources," he answered vaguely.

I smiled and shook my head. I would have liked to know what he had planned, but I was alright with waiting a little while to find out, so long as it meant I could possibly still have a future.

I never even thought to hope for a future that included him.

## Chapter 36

Over the next several days, David made plans, but his actions told me nothing. If I hadn't already been aware that he was up to something, I wouldn't have known anything was out of the ordinary. It gave me a little confidence that he might actually be able to pull this off. I was still skeptical, of course, and I was annoyed that he refused to give me any details. He just kept saying that I'd find out soon.

When 'soon' came, I wasn't as pleased as I thought I'd be. Out of the blue, he announced that we needed to leave, advising me to take all of my things since I might not get the chance to come back.

It was a little strange. I'd known since the moment I arrived, that I would eventually have to leave, but when the time came, I was terrified to actually do it.

I guessed that the spontaneity of the situation, contributed to my exaggerated fears, but I couldn't help thinking about how Wescott was very likely working with the government. The idea made him seem so much more powerful than he already did.

Logically, I knew that wasn't true, and that if I was able to avoid detection before, even for a short time, I should be able to do it again. Especially considering that I understood the rules now.

But the thought of all the cameras around the city, and how Wescott had total access to any one of them, kept forcing its way into my mind and causing me to doubt that I'd make it more than a few feet before they found me.

David assured me that there wasn't a camera anywhere near the apartment building, but I wasn't convinced. Even if Wescott's resources were currently occupied, chasing the chip, wherever it might be by now, that didn't mean that he wasn't covering all his bases. And if he figured out that I was no longer traceable, I was certain he'd be poking around here again.

Either way, I didn't have much trouble imagining him keeping tabs on this area.

In the end, I agreed to leave via the fire escape. It might look more suspicious if anyone saw us, but I thought it was much less likely that someone was watching the back of the building.

My heart pounded wildly as we made our way down the fire escape and into the dark alley. The fact that it was night helped to ease some of my anxiety once my feet hit the ground, but that feeling of being totally exposed to the looming threat was back with a vengeance, and I realized that I had been truly at ease, tucked away in David's apartment. I'd been constantly aware of the ever-present danger, but my fears faded considerably while I was surrounded by those walls.

Once we reached David's SUV, I was able to relax, but only minimally. I slumped down as much as I could comfortably, and kept the hood of the sweatshirt that I'd commandeered from David, up all the way. Since it was now well into Fall in the north east, hiding the way I was didn't make me stand out, which was a nice change.

As David navigated the busy city streets, I found myself searching the crowds for people in the familiar black uniform. Admittedly, finding anyone that way was a nearly impossible feat, but I was still uneasy when my perusal failed. It should have made me grateful that, apparently, David and I weren't being hunted at the moment, but I knew Wescott hadn't given up. Which left me wondering where all of his resources were.

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We exited the city, and I felt my body automatically relax, watching the bright lights shrinking in the side mirror. I might not know much about what Wescott was doing right now, but he knew even less about me. After a few minutes of contentedly musing on the fact that I was really leaving New York undetected, I sat up and ditched the hood.

Speeding down the highway, David threw me a smile before he reached over to take my hand. I gladly obliged and intertwined our fingers together.

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"So, where are we, exactly?" I asked. After driving for approximately two hours, David turned the car onto a small road that was almost impossible to see in the darkness, and we were promptly swallowed up by trees.

At first, I'd assumed this was a camp site or something similar, but I wasn't so sure anymore. After driving on a narrow, dirt road for about half an hour, we were now stopped, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The road had gradually thinned as we progressed, so that by the time we left it behind, roughly five minutes ago, it was only a line of dirt.

Now that we were sitting, surrounded by nothing but trees and a large wall of a rock ahead, I knew for certain that my first guess had been off. This was just an average wooded area. No camp sites, no RV park, nothing that would explain why he would even think to drive here.

It was away from Wescott's reach, I guess, so I really couldn't complain, but I also didn't understand how this would factor into his plans.

"You'll see." David must have said that phrase a hundred times in the last few days, and I was really starting to despise it.

"Just be patient." He smiled, enjoying my irritation.

He got out of the car and I crossed my arms to preserve warmth as a blast of cold air snuck in from the brief moment the door was open.

David approached the boulder, piquing my curiosity further, and I tried to follow what he was doing. It was so dark, though, that even with my enhanced night vision, I had no idea what was going on. Especially not once he disappeared behind the side of the imposing rock.

After a few seconds, I noticed a line of light at the base of the rock wall, and I stared transfixed as the ground opened, making the light grow.

No, it wasn't the ground that was moving, I realized. It was the rock. It slid upward like a garage door.

David reentered the car suddenly, startling me and I gaped at him.

"The garage." He grinned, obviously proud that he managed to surprise me.

A garage for what though? There certainly weren't any buildings around. There wasn't even a clearing that could act as a campsite. At least, I didn't see one.

"Just wait," David said before I could ask. "You'll see."

Insubstantially Me

I wasn't any more patient than I'd ever been, and despite my annoyance at having been put off again, I didn't actually mind waiting for answers. Not too much, anyway. I guess I really must trust him.

"Now what?" I asked once we stood in the spacious garage with his SUV neatly tucked in one of the crude spaces. I wondered about the few other vehicles, but I didn't ask, knowing he probably wouldn't say.

"Now, this." He headed over to a row of black all-terrain vehicles.

"You've got to be kidding me." I followed, not liking this at all. "I have no idea where we are or where we're going, and it's pitch black out there." And it was freezing! "You can't really expect me to drive one of those to wherever we're going."

"I don't." He shrugged. "They fit two people."

Well, that was a little better, I suppose, but I still wasn't crazy about the idea.

"And you can see better than me?" I crossed my arms. The headlights would only allow him to see a few feet ahead, which wouldn't give much warning of any one of the many potential obstacles we would undoubtedly encounter.

"I know where we're going," he pointed out. "And it's not the first time I've done this. Not by a long shot."

I looked uneasily at the bike, picturing how quickly it would probably flip if we hit a pot hole at just the right angle. I didn't even want to think about how cold it would be, flying through the night on this thing.

"It'll be fine," he said. "I promise."

Turning my wary gaze on him again, I wondered why he suddenly sounded hesitant. I didn't doubt that he was capable of doing what he said, I just didn't care for this particular part much.

"How much do you trust me?" Yes, he definitely seemed nervous now.

A whole bunch, I thought, considering that I was blindly following his plan, but his question made me suspicious. He only said something like that when he knew I was going to hate whatever came next.

"Why?"

He sighed. "Because you have to wear this." He held up a black strip of fabric that I could only assume was a blindfold.

The thought of not even having the limited vision, allowed by the headlight of the vehicle on the journey, was almost suffocating. He literally wanted me to blindly follow? I took an unconscious step back, staring at the offending black cloth.

"It's the rule." He tried to placate me. "I wouldn't ask but -"

"Who's rule?" I was suspicious again. I hadn't been aware of the fact that David planned to involve anyone else.

"None of this is mine." He waved his arm, gesturing around the room. "And in order to bring you the rest of the way, you can't be able to find it again. No one on the outside can."

Insubstantially Me

"Outside of what?" I liked the sound of this less and less.

He let out a loud, exasperated breath. "Please just trust me. I promise, I'll explain more once we get there, but I'm not allowed to say anything yet."

I did trust him, but this was asking too much. Could I really put my faith in him so entirely? Once I was blindfolded, he could be bringing me anywhere and I'd have no idea. The possibility of him bringing me right to Wescott popped in my mind.

But he really had earned my trust, I reminded myself. Again and again, if I was being honest. He never had to help me at all, and he could have turned on me long before now. I knew he cared for me too. I wasn't sure exactly how much, but I was positive he did.

Wasn't this my only option anyway? David claimed that he was able to get around the government and take down Wescott. I might be able to figure most of it out, but it would be risky for a long time, and that time could cost me everything. It would only take one slip up on my part.

"It's pitch black out," I tried weakly, knowing I wasn't going to sway him.

"You'll be able to see enough by the headlight, and you have a perfect memory," he countered. "Besides, like I said, it's the rule for everyone."

Taking a deep breath, I snatched the blindfold from David's hand.

"This better be a short trip," I muttered.

Chapter 37

"Now?" I asked yet again, dying to rip the wretched blindfold from my face. I lost track of time on this torturous ride. It felt like hours, but I didn't doubt that my perception was significantly skewed due to my anxiety.

To be honest, the drive itself hadn't been so bad. David was apparently very skilled at navigating the trail and it wasn't the jerky, harrowing experience that I originally assumed it would be. The cold hadn't been unbearable either. Holding on to David was something akin to squeezing a teddy bear - comforting and warm. Squashed together as we were on the little car, I was able to absorb some of his body heat. He was also much bigger than me, and once I rested my head against his back, I was shielded from most of the wind.

I marveled that he wasn't even shivering. The temperature must have been in the low forties. His jacket seemed thick, but he still should have been freezing.

Objectively speaking, it was wise of whoever made the rule for the blindfold. I would never be able to figure out how to get here on my own. Of course, I assumed that David had driven in several circles to disorient me, ensuring my ignorance. Which just made me that much more curious about where we were headed. What sort of a place was it that required such secrecy as a general rule?

I thought I'd been pretty patient by waiting until I felt a definite change in the journey before I began asking if I could shed the mask. We must have arrived at the destination by now. Light was filtering through the cloth over my eyes. Not much, but enough to tell me that we were indoors. Also, the ground was smooth and we were moving slowly, weaving through a small area. If I had to guess, I'd say we were in another garage.

I was starting to feel like an obnoxious kid in the back seat repeatedly asking if we reached Disney World yet, but the wait was excruciating.

"Almost," David answered. The bike jerked slightly and the engine shut off, letting me know we were finally parked.

There was some scuffling and footsteps, but I couldn't identify some of the other noises I heard - maybe a fence scraping closed? It definitely wasn't the same noise that the door of the previous garage had made when David sealed it up.

He tried to pull away, clearly ready to stand up and I began to panic. This was it. I didn't know where we were and I still couldn't see anything. What if he brought me to Wescott or someone just as bad? What if-

"Time to move, Sarah," he hinted, when I clung tightly rather than allowing him to move away.

I forced myself to release my hold and he disappeared from in front of me. Thankfully, it only took seconds for him to grasp my hands, urging me to get to my feet as well.

I clumsily maneuvered off the bike and stood, resolved not to let him go again until I could see.

"Not yet," David said, anticipating my question as my free hand moved to the blindfold.

"Any way you could speed this up?" I asked in frustration.

"I'll have to lead you along a little bit," he said. "Of course, it'd probably be faster if I carried you."

Insubstantially Me

The blindfold kept me from seeing it, but I knew his statement was accompanied by a smirk.

In the days following my surgery, David had deemed me a bad damsel in distress since I complained whenever he would carry me to the bathroom and back. I kept quiet about it for the first few days since my leg practically burst into flame every time I moved, but it was just ridiculous after that. The apartment was small and there was plenty of furniture and walls to lean on to assist me so I wouldn't have to put weight on my leg. However, Tim absolutely forbade me from moving myself anywhere for two full weeks and David threatened to lock the door if I tried it even once.

Unfortunately, the only alternative either of them left me had been a bedpan, and the idea of being carried to the bathroom was humiliating enough, thank you very much.

I suppose I should be grateful that he actually gave me privacy and didn't follow through on Tim's toileting recommendation though.

But David had derived a great deal of amusement at my expense those weeks, which I can admit was probably deserved after all of my jabs at him about his fantasy obsession.

I gave him a withering look now, but the blindfold prevented the full effect of it.

David chuckled, letting me know he got the gist anyway, and he compelled me forward with a hand at the small of my back.

I shuffled along for about twenty feet before David told me to step over something. A few seconds later a heavy door closed and I had a momentary attack of claustrophobia. Would I be able to leave this place if I wanted to?

"Alright," David said. "You can take it off."

The blindfold was torn away before the words were out of his mouth, and I eagerly examined my surroundings.

We were in a small, dimly lit hallway made entirely of cement. The door I'd heard seconds before, was behind us and looked to be made of solid steel. Next to the door was a number panel which I guessed was the only way in or out. There were no windows in the tight space, which gave it the oh-so-comforting feel of a coffin. The nearby doorway at the other end of the short hall kept me from freaking out.

"Okay?" I said after a few seconds. "So where are we?"

"The Fort," he said. "It's a kind of club house of our division, I guess you could say."

"Division?" I had planned to have an open mind, but it was hard not to be suspicious. "As in military?" I could feel the panic starting to rise again, and I tried to hold it at bay, giving David the benefit of the doubt since he didn't seem to find that detail exceptional.

"Yes and no," he shrugged. "It's not actually military, but it's sort of modeled after it."

I still wasn't sure what to think, but right now anything remotely related to the government was alarming. He seemed to casual, though. Surely if he was in the midst of betraying me, he'd be acting like it. Right? I glanced at the door, wondering just how hard it would be to open without clearance. Impossible was my guess.

Insubstantially Me

Realizing the conclusion that I was finding impossible not to reach, he quickly added, "but it's totally independent. You're safe here."

"Okay..." I prompted, waiting for more.

"Come on." David sighed. Taking my hand again, we ventured on.

The doorway lead to a large, open area that resembled a bachelor pad more than a military base. It still had the somewhat cold atmosphere thanks to the floor-to-ceiling cement, but it also had an almost homey feel with a few rugs and couches, a flat screen TV, desks bearing some pretty impressive-looking computer equipment, and even a small kitchenette. And of course there were the touches that gave it that all-guy-zone feel - posters of skinny girls with big boobs and few clothes mingled amidst car pictures and various sports memorabilia.

After a few minutes of taking it all in, I looked at David, unsure of what to ask first. I don't know what I was expecting, but this wouldn't have even been close to my guess.

"Hey, it's the fugitive!"

At the words, my heart jumped in my throat and I nearly gave myself whiplash, turning to see who was there. I thought that David and I were alone in this room.

"Alex?" My shoulders sagged in relief seeing the familiar face peeking out from under the computer desk.

"The one and only." He stood up and offered an exaggerated bow.

I couldn't help the smile at his goofy display, but I still didn't know about all of this. I wondered how much David told him, since I guessed he wasn't here by coincidence. It's not necessarily that I distrusted Alex, but the more people that got dragged into this whole thing, the more uncomfortable I became.

"It's great to see you again," I said sincerely before sending David a questioning glance.

"Alex is our computer wizard," he explained.

"I got mad skills, yo," Alex put in, taking a seat and hitting a few keys.

"And he's terribly humble about it," David added with an eye roll.

"The most humble freakin person you'll ever meet," Alex said, staring intently at the screen before typing something else.

"He is the best," David assured me, understanding that I wasn't entirely on board. "If there's a way in, he'll find it."

Alex muttered something under his breath at the computer before looking our way again. "Proudly hacking computers since 1995." He grinned. "In high school, the other kids would pay me to bump up their grades. I, of course, had straight A's. Until they figured it out senior year, anyway."

I tisked, shaking my head, and had trouble not smiling back at him.

Alex slid down and disappeared beneath the computer desk again. After a few seconds, muffled four-letter words floated our way. Some in Spanish.

Insubstantially Me

"Did you tell him everything?" I whispered to David.

"Not everything," he said. "But he had to know some things so he could help. He's completely trustworthy though. Don't worry."

"Did you get the story yet?" Alex popped up again and sat in his chair, pausing to look at me.

"Story?"

"Of all of this." He gestured around the room.

"Not yet." I was glad it was assumed that I would, in fact, get the story. I was dying to know what exactly this place was.

"You ever see Enemy of the State?" he asked.

I nodded. Enemy of the State was the movie where Will Smith's character is going about his normal life and then is suddenly being hunted by the government. Not surprisingly, I felt I could relate to that movie pretty well at this point.

"Think of this as Gene Hackman's place," Alex said going back to whatever he was working on. "Totally off the grid."

Gene Hackman's character managed to disappear for years when the government was after him. So this was probably the ideal place for me. Unfortunately, I didn't think David's plan involved me staying here forever.

"What's he doing?" I whispered to David.

"Upgrading. He's never satisfied with the equipment." David added volume and sarcasm to his tone. "Even though he amps it up every time he's here."

"Ever-changing world, my friend," Alex muttered, not distracted even slightly from his task.

"Let's sit." David nodded in the direction of the couches and lead the way.

"So years ago," he began, once we were comfortably settled with Alex typing away behind us. "This guy, we'll call him Joe, decided that the people he worked for weren't always looking out for his personal interest. The country's collective interest, sure, but that doesn't always include individuals."

"Joe?" I interrupted with a smile. "As in G.I.?"

David grinned. "Yep. Anyway, Joe always followed orders, had all the right kind of respect, but he wasn't stupid. He knew that in his particular position, the day might come when government saw him as more of a liability than an asset. So he decided to start this." He waved his hand absently.

"It started as just a hole in the ground with necessary supplies if he should ever find himself a target and in need of a place to disappear to. Obviously over the years, it's grown as he was able to expand and build it up. It's become, like I said, sort of the club house of our particular division. We go through a lot together - a lot of dangerous situations, and it really binds you together. Makes you like brothers. But even within the division, not everyone knows about this place."

Insubstantially Me

"And how would Joe feel about me being here?" I asked.

"As long as you don't violate the rules, or I guess, if I don't since you're here by my invitation, it's no problem. Which is why you were blindfolded."

"So, it's basically just a big bachelor pad?" I smiled. "A secret one?"

David chuckled. "Sometimes, but we do other things too."

"Like?"

"Like deal with your scientist." He knew I was asking for other examples but based on his expression he wasn't going to give anything away. Which I could appreciate since I wouldn't want Alex or anyone else who might be here, blabbing about me.

However, I still didn't like not knowing things and I pursed my lips, which seemed to amuse David.

"But anything that goes on here is top secret," he said seriously. "And anyone involved is automatically bound not to say anything. Unless Joe himself asks. Which he doesn't often do."

I nodded, pleased with the unexpected security. Wescott had absolutely no way of finding me here, and while it wouldn't last forever, it was amazing how much I felt myself relax knowing that.

"So, you hungry?" David seemed more relaxed too.

But he wanted to know if I was hungry? If? After we skipped eating dinner to come here?

"I'm sorry, have you met me?"

Alex laughed at the same time my stomach chose to grumble loudly.

Chapter 38

I could count on one hand, the number of times I'd gotten any sleep on a couch. But whether from exhaustion due to the hour when I lay down combined with my anxiety up until David's explanation, or just because I felt completely and totally secure for the first time in months, I slept like a rock. A nightmare-free rock at that!

There was no way of knowing how long I'd been asleep or if it was currently day or night, since I didn't see a clock and the room lacked windows, but I felt well-rested. I woke to the sounds of David and Alex's whispered conversation. It didn't sound like a good one.

"Try it again." David wasn't happy.

"That's not the problem," Alex said. "And besides I've tried three times. This guy's smart. He's got firewalls around his firewalls."

They had to be talking about Wescott. And if I had to guess, I'd say my escape, for which there was probably a near impossible likelihood of happening, was the reason for his super tight security.

I got up and made my way over to the computer area. Normally, I wouldn't want to interfere, but it was my life they were talking about.

"There has to be something in there," David said.

Instead of answering, Alex stared at the screen in front of him. Maybe trying to figure it out?

"What's wrong?" I asked, startling them both.

Alex sighed. "It's not happening. This is one of the most complex systems I've ever seen."

"You can't get through?"

"Oh, I can get through," he said. "But it would take a while, and I don't think I have that kind of time. But even if I did, it wouldn't really help."

"Why not?" All we needed were names and figures. That information would help tremendously.

"Because as far as I can tell, all the good stuff isn't accessible outside the perimeter."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that to get the kind of information we're looking for, you have to actually be there. Internal server only. Quite possibly one computer only."

"So that's it," I said resigned. I suppose I was no worse off than before, but I'd begun to hope.

"No, it's not." David didn't seem happy about this development, but he also didn't look defeated.

"What do you mean?" Based on the look he gave me, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like whatever he had in mind.

Insubstantially Me

"We can't do it from here," he said carefully. "But..."

I was already backing away and shaking my head. "No."

"I don't like it anymore than you do, but..."

"No!" I said fiercely, turning to go back to the couch. My intuition had been spot on. I absolutely hated this new idea of his. He wanted me to go right into the monster's lair! On purpose!

David quickly joined me on the couch and I studiously avoided looking at him.

"Sarah, it's the only way."

"No, it's not. I'll-"

"You'll be on the run for the rest of your life. You'll have to look over your shoulder every time you set foot outside. You'll compulsively watch out the windows when you're inside. You'll never get any kind of decent sleep. You'll have nightmares, night after night. You'll-"

"I don't care!" I cut him off. "I'm not going back!"

He was quiet for a minute before he tried again. "Running away would only be a different kind of prison," he said. "He'll still be controlling you. Just in a different way. And even if you manage for a while, there's a very good chance they'll catch up to you eventually and then you will have to go back. Permanently."

I had to blink back the tears that began to cloud my vision. It was exactly what I already knew, and I hearing it validated scared me to death.

"Wouldn't you rather go back on your terms? To take out the threat."

A lump had formed in my throat and I chewed on my lip, waiting for it to pass.

"Suppose you do manage to stay hidden forever. What about him?" he asked quietly.

I turned to face David, not sure of what he meant.

"Do you think he'll throw everything away because he lost you?" He said. "He'll do it again. Who knows how many times. To people who are more helpless than you are. And maybe he already took your DNA..."

I was glad he didn't finish the thought, but he was right. Wescott could very well be starting over from scratch. He probably was, actually. And if he took my DNA to do it the way he already planned, it would be my child he had as his new experiment.

Covering my face with my hands, the tears slipped out. I didn't have a choice. I had to go back.

David's arm came around me and I leaned into him.

"I'm scared," I whispered.

"I know, but you can do this. You're strong and smart. You're a fighter. And you won't be alone."

Insubstantially Me

That was another problem. I sat up to look at him.

"David, it's not safe. They don't care about killing people." I wasn't sure if I was more terrified to go in alone or with David just to get him killed.

He apparently found the idea funny, but he was far from invincible.

"I'm serious," I said. "You can't-"

"Do you know what we do?" he interrupted. "Me and Alex and the other guys?"

I shook my head. All I knew - all they told me - was that they were in the Army.

"We're Special Ops," he said. "We live on dangerous. And quite frankly, I've faced much scarier opponents than a scientist."

Smiling was the last thing I felt like doing, but I couldn't help the small one that crossed my face.

It still wasn't a good idea though. "But you-"

"I have a plan," he said. "A good plan. If I didn't absolutely need you to get this done, I wouldn't even be telling you about it."

The thought of David putting himself in danger on my account didn't exactly thrill me, but I knew his mind was made up. And it'd be a big fat lie to say I didn't want him with me.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" At least I wouldn't have to worry about coming up with a plan and second-guessing myself every step of the way, since David obviously had everything worked out already.

"I need you to get in and hack into the system."

"Why me?" I wasn't trying to pass the responsibility off on someone else, but he said he absolutely needed me, and that sounded like something he and Alex could do without me.

"You, Sarah, are like the ultimate secret weapon."

He meant it as a compliment, but I wasn't crazy about the way that sounded.

"Alex and I each have specific skills," he said. "There's not many people who could top them, which is why they picked us for the division. But you probably could. With the right training, you'd outdo all of us very quickly."

"You've been inside this place, so you know the what to expect and how to get around-"

"But I haven't seen all of it," I protested. "I don't even know where the front door is."

"We have the basic layout," he said. "The things you don't already know, we can fill in. But it's always better if you have some familiarity with the place you need to infiltrate. Besides that, you won't have to waste time memorizing the map like I will. You'll only have to look at it for a few minutes."

Insubstantially Me

"Alex is going to be tied up with his job, so someone else will have to actually hack into the system once we're inside. He can teach you everything you need to know much better and much faster than he could teach me. Not to mention, I would probably make plenty of mistakes, which would waste valuable time."

"But what about the guards?" I asked. "You're not invincible, and I'm not much use against them."

"They will have no idea we're coming," he said. "That gives us a nice advantage since they won't be heavily armed. At least, no more than they would be as a precaution against a random break in, which I can easily handle on my own. They won't be prepared for you either. They won't be willing to shoot you and they probably won't be able to trigger your one weakness. But even if they did, I'd take care of that quickly, leaving you able to defend yourself. And I can show you some maneuvers easily enough."

"It should actually be pretty simple. I'm anticipating being able to get in and out in about twenty minutes, if we're dragging our feet."

It did sound like a solid plan, and he was clearly confident that it would be easy to carry out, but that didn't ease the jumble of nerves in my stomach.

"How do you know there won't be more of them than we can handle?" I asked. If they managed to incapacitate me, David would be fighting by himself, and while I guessed he could fight off two or three guards, I doubted he'd have the upper hand if there were more than that.

"Alex was able to get the intel on how many people there are at any given time. We'll be going in at night, so it will be relatively empty. There will be a diversion and we won't need to worry about anyone outside. Inside, there will only be a few guards. We take care of them, and we're home free."

"How exactly do we take care of them?" Wescott might not care about killing, but I did.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll be using tranquilizers. Nothing fatal."

I nodded and nervously bit my lip. David had everything all figured out and I couldn't object. He made it sound so simple, but I was still terrified to have to be part of it. What if we failed? What if There was something he wasn't counting on? What if I wound up trapped there all over again, with no hope of escape? What if he was hurt or killed? Or something happened to Alex?

"Hey." David's arm was still around my shoulders and he gave me a comforting squeeze. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

Nodding again, I rested my head against him and prayed that was the truth.

Chapter 39

David decided to show me some "basics" in self-defense, "just in case". I was about to tell him that I was way beyond the basics and actually knew a thing or two about some pretty advanced martial arts, but his off-handed comment about how I wouldn't be able to handle much of anything beyond a few simple maneuvers and the way that he seemed to think I'd need him to rescue me should the situation arise, made me keep the information to myself.

Instead, I acted the part of the untrained novice as he attacked me. I almost felt bad about my plan, but I got the feeling that he was trying to show off.

He wrapped his arms around me from behind in what I'm sure he thought was a decent hold, and I struggled lightly a few times to ensure that what came next would be a total shock.

I couldn't see his face, but I just knew he was grinning at my poor attempts, which made it that much more fun for me as I twisted out of his grasp and flipped him onto his back.

His face was simply priceless. Beyond stunned. Probably mostly due to the fact that he was nearly twice my size.

"I know a thing or two already." I put my hands on my hips and smirked down at him.

"Apparently." He smiled and popped up again.

After that, it was a pretty good training session. He actually did show me a few maneuvers, and I showed some to him. I was also able to try out a few things that I'd seen in movies but never had the opportunity to attempt before.

It turned out to be a great work out for both of us, and I realized that this must be one of the skills that he'd been chosen for since he was ridiculously good at hand-to-hand. He was much better than anyone I'd ever gone up against, but I still held my own.

At least, I held my own for a while. David was getting more creative with his moves as I continued to block his strikes and execute my own. Eventually, he got me.

Rather than ducking to avoid the kick I directed at his head, the way I expected, he bowed slightly backward, catching my leg and sweeping my other foot out from under me.

Dropping on top of me, he pressed himself against my leg, forcing it across my body. Before I had the chance to use my hands for anything other than breaking my fall, David had my wrists pinned to the mat.

I couldn't move an inch but struggled for good measure.

"Point to me." He grinned cockily when I stilled.

I tried to think of something sarcastic to say to him, but I was having trouble making my mind or mouth work.

His position was enough of a distraction, but the number of people who'd beaten me at a fight after I'd moved passed being a beginner in Karate, was few. Of those, none had beaten me anywhere near as thoroughly as David just had.

Insubstantially Me

That he was so capable was a huge turn on.

And so, chest heaving from the workout, I stared back at him, trying not to look as though I wanted him on top of me for a whole different reason.

Something shifted in his face and I knew that his thoughts were running similar to mine. When his eyes flicked to my mouth, I instinctively bit down on my lower lip.

Alex loudly cleared his throat and I felt my face warm. I'd forgotten that David and I weren't alone.

"Please don't ruin the best fight I've seen in months by making me lose my lunch," he called out from where he watched near the wall.

My cheeks burned a little brighter, knowing how obvious we'd been.

Not keen on providing that kind of show, I was ready to move. I expected David to release me then, thinking that he felt the same embarrassment I did, but he just grinned, apparently planning to tease me.

"You don't like it, leave." He glanced at Alex.

Using his momentary distraction, I pulled my arms free of his grip, pushing him off balance and throwing him off me before I jumped to my feet again.

Alex laughed. "You're losing your touch, Dave."

With a smirk on my face, I offered David a hand to help him up. Taking it, he got to his feet, rolling his eyes at Alex's remark. He didn't look like he really meant it, though. In fact, something told me that he got distracted on purpose and I couldn't help wondering if I'd have been able to break free without him allowing it.

The thought should have scared me, and with anyone else, it would have. But since it was David, I just felt my pulse skip and my body temperature rise a bit more.

I also began to think that his plan could work.

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I worked with Alex next, learning to manipulate computers. I had a basic working knowledge already, having taken a few classes and done my time on the internet. But like most other things, I was bored quickly and didn't have much interest in going further.

Besides, the things I would have learned in more classes wouldn't have been anywhere near as interesting as what Alex was showing me.

He started out at what felt like a snail's pace. It was all new information, but he kept repeating himself to make sure I got it.

I didn't want to be rude or sound conceited, but I got it the minute he said it and didn't need to be quizzed or reminded. I just wanted him to keep going.

## Insubstantially Me

To be fair, it was a lot of information, and it probably would have taken a regular person a few weeks to master it all. But I wasn't a regular person.

After a while, I noticed David smirking at me from the couch. Obviously he sensed my frustration. I was about to say something to Alex, who, after two hours, was still on the basics because he kept repeating himself, when David spoke up.

"I think she's got it, Alex. It's probably safe to move on to the good stuff."

Alex turned to David with a raised eyebrow and clearly didn't believe him. "She's got to really know this stuff if this is going to work. There's so much information and not a lot of time, and with her non-existent background, I really don't think she's got it already," he scoffed. "It took me years to..."

He stopped when he noticed me close down the program completely to start from the beginning. Within minutes, I had it back to the exact place he left off, and then took it to what I assumed were the next steps that he hadn't gone over yet.

Alex blinked at me, surprised.

"I'm a fast learner." I smiled.

He progressed much more quickly after that.

## Chapter 40

"You alright?" David whispered as we huddled together, hidden in the woods that surrounded my former prison.

I turned to him, incredulous. Of course I wasn't alright. I was very close to losing it completely.

It was close to midnight, and like David said, there weren't many people around at this time of night. The parking lot held a handful of vehicles and I'd only seen four people walking the grounds since we arrived. But the thought of where I was and what I was planning to do, was enough to make me feel like I was about to hyperventilate and want to run away.

All that time spent fantasizing about getting as far away from this place as possible, not to mention the planning and the actual escape that I'd just barely managed to pull off, was starting to feel pretty pointless. What if something went horribly wrong and I was trapped here forever, having to do all the terrible things Wescott originally planned for me? I wouldn't be lucky enough to make a second escape.

"Peachy," I said sarcastically, watching the figure in black move passed our hiding spot. We were about fifty feet away, so I wasn't worried about our whispered conversation being heard.

"It'll be fine," he said. "I promise."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to convince myself that he knew what he was talking about.

A popping noise nearby made me jump. It wasn't very loud, but given that the situation was already nerve wracking, and the fact that I wasn't expecting to hear anything like that, it was startling.

"What was that?" I asked, watching the guard run in the other direction, toward the source of the sound.

"Distraction." He grinned just as the lights, shining in and around the building went out. Seconds later, emergency lights hummed to life in a few strategic places.

"Come on." He got up and crept toward the building keeping to the shadows. Despite the fact that it went against all my survival instincts, I followed, thankful for the weight of the tranquilizer gun in my hand.

David assured me that I wouldn't need a weapon. He'd even gone as far as to say that I'd get bored, most likely not needing to fight even a little, but it was still a comforting thing to have with me. It was small - only the size of a large syringe and held four tiny darts containing a powerful tranquilizer. It was made for stealth and close-range fire, so I couldn't exactly take down an army, but it was certainly better than nothing. And having it made me feel as if I would have a fighting chance against someone with a remote. All I had to do was be faster than they were.

I stayed low and close to David, as we reached the building, having to remind myself that his plan was solid and that he was completely capable of pulling it off, so that I could shove the rising panic down.

David said that the other guys, who had joined us, were just as capable.

Aside from Alex, three men were planted somewhere nearby, and were undoubtedly the reason behind the distraction that allowed David and I our opportunity to reach the building undetected.

## Insubstantially Me

I assumed it was another rule that actual names were not to be exchanged in situations like these to protect everyone involved, as no one offered theirs to me and hadn't asked for mine when they arrived at the Fort this morning. David didn't volunteer anything either, and I guessed by his expression that I shouldn't ask.

Despite having extra back up for this, I wasn't wild about more people getting involved. I worried enough over David and Alex's roles and possible consequences. But David told me, that they actually enjoyed doing things like this. The more dangerous, the better, he'd said, and according to him, this particular mission didn't even rank a three on their danger scale.

It was easy to see that David was in his element as he slithered around the building. He moved with such grace and agility, that by comparison I felt clumsy, which was a first for me. If not for following him, I would have been constantly ducking down, unsure whether it was safe to proceed, and I'd have been worried that someone would see me any second. But David didn't display even an ounce of uncertainty. He went quickly along, seeming confident that every move was the right one.

We reached the intended side entrance, and David barely paused before opening the door. I was surprised it was unlocked, but then I realized that must be one of the things Alex was taking care of. He stayed in the car with complex-looking computer equipment.

I would have liked to know everything he was doing, but was only given a vague idea - that he would get us inside. I guess that meant unlocking doors, and probably cutting any cameras. It was a pretty safe assumption that he was behind the well-timed power outage as well.

The area of the building that David and I found ourselves in didn't look familiar, but I knew by the map that Alex gave me, that this section was relatively unimportant and wouldn't have much, if any foot traffic. We were in a hall, dimly lit by an emergency light and lined with what was probably rooms for storage, supply closets, and maybe a boiler room.

David and I moved silently through the building and even though I'd seen the layout, I was surprised by how large this place really was. We covered plenty of area, and I hadn't seen any of it in person before.

It was a little chilling, passing so many mysterious doors and hallways. I didn't want to think about what else my nemesis mad scientist might be up to besides trying to market and sell people. The possibilities were endless, and I didn't put anything passed him, no matter how unethical or creepy.

When David froze in front of me, my heart began drumming in double time. Was this it? Would we have to fight someone now? Would they somehow overpower David and use their remote on me?

He stood a little straighter, leaning against the wall and peering around the corner in front of him.

I wanted to see for myself what put him on alert, but knowing it was smarter to mimic him, I pressed myself against the wall and held my breath.

It wasn't long before he was in motion again, this time with cat-like speed.

A girl in the standard black with dark hair pulled into a pony tail appeared a split second before David whipped her around the corner, cutting off her air supply in a choke hold.

"Do it," he whispered to me as she struggled to free herself by clawing at his arms.



## Insubstantially Me

With no hesitation, I raised the gun to her arm and fired. I was glad I didn't have to worry about aiming from a distance and risk hitting David. No matter how good my aim might be, the way she was fighting to free herself would make the dart's final destination practically impossible to predict.

Almost immediately, her struggling ceased and she slumped in David's arms, unconscious. He released his hold around her neck and scooped her up into his arms before she had the chance to collapse to the floor.

He nodded toward the door five feet behind me, and I rushed to get it open. The tranquilizer would keep her comatose for the next few hours, but she needed to be hidden somewhere in case anyone else happened by this area before we were finished.

The room was another lab, one I'd never been in. I guessed that it would be safe to leave her here since the room probably wouldn't be used until the morning.

I nodded at David and he quickly and silently carried the girl through the doorway, gently setting her on the floor and propping her up in the corner.

Wasting no time, David resumed moving through the building, and again, I followed. We intercepted two more patrolling guards on the way, incapacitating them just as efficiently as the first and using most of my gun's darts.

According to the information Alex recovered, there should only be one more guard in the building, and while I wasn't exactly twiddling my thumbs, David's initial estimation didn't seem so very far-fetched anymore. It was easy. Almost ridiculously so. All we had to do was locate and take out the remaining guard, get the information, and get out.

I wished we would have factored a way into the plan to get the unconscious people outside so we could burn the place down on the way out. But I suppose settling for financially ruining Wescott was alright too. That prospect was pretty alluring all on its own.

Things were starting to look familiar and I realized that we were getting close to my former room. For a fleeting second, I had the urge to go see how they'd changed the vent in the ceiling since I was positive that there'd be no way to open it now.

I wouldn't have needed the map from Alex to know that there was a small atrium at the end of the hall that David and I were currently moving through. I remembered where to go from here.

David paused to assess at the end of the hall, the way he had so many times in our little excursion. His own tranquilizer gun was in his hand, ready to use unlike the last three times when I'd been the one to knock them out while he kept them quiet. But I guess he figured that it didn't matter if this guard made any sound since he was the last one.

I peeked around David, who hadn't executed his attack after a few seconds the way I'd gotten used to him doing.

It wasn't hard to see why he hesitated. The guard was sitting at the desk, about fifteen feet away, and since the tranquilizer gun didn't shoot that far, David was worried about an alarm being pulled before he could take him out.

I smiled though. This was really going to work. And not just because the man was distracted by something on the desk. Or because he had no idea that we were there.

## Insubstantially Me

Before I could explain what I knew to David, he'd begun his attack. Thankfully it was a slow creeping along the wall in the dimly lit hall, so I was able to stop him before he actually carried it out.

"Wait!" I caught his arm, making him turn to me, surprised and clearly worried that I was jeopardizing everything.

The man at the desk heard me too and his head shot up, looking startled. He stood and reached for something, and I guessed that he was about to sound some alarm.

"Mark, wait!" I stepped around David.

He froze and peered at me, squinting slightly before his eyes went wide.

"What are you doing here?" he called in a hushed voice, coming from around the desk. "You're supposed to be in New York!"

"I was," I said, keeping my voice down too. "But I had to come back."

"What do you mean, you had to come back?" He asked. "Don't you know that if they catch you-"

"We're going to shut them down," I cut him off.

He looked between David and I, surprised and clearly skeptical.

"A power outage is a bit unusual, don't you think?" I said sarcastically.

Understanding came to his eyes and he smiled. "What do you need?"

I smiled too, glancing at David. He looked utterly confused and, dare I say, jealous?

Making a mental note to tease him about that later, I turned to Mark again.

"We just need to get in Wescott's office and get out undetected."

He nodded. "Shouldn't be too hard. There's not many people here right now." Remembering the people who were supposed to be patrolling, he looked around nervously.

"We took care of them already," I assured him. "They're sleeping on the job."

"Been there." He grinned and unconsciously rubbed his jaw, reminding me that he was supposed to be "taken care of" too.

"But we..." I hesitated. "I mean you're supposed to be..."

"Right." He bobbed his head before looking down the hall.

"You know," he said. "I think I'd better go look for those other guys. I haven't seen them in a while..."

I smiled. "Thanks Mark."

## Insubstantially Me

"Forget it." He waved me off. "Just take him down. His office is the third door on the right." He pointed down the hall.

"Right." I nodded, wishing I could somehow repay him for all his help. But I guess if this was successful, we would be helping him to get free too. We'd be helping alot of people actually.

Mark started walking away and David and I headed in the opposite direction, towards Wescott's office.

"Hey!" Mark called in a hushed voice, stopping us.

"Check room twenty-seven," he said when we turned back.

Before I could ask what was in room twenty-seven, he was around the corner and out of sight. David and I exchanged a puzzled look before getting back to our task.

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Wescott's office was the only door we'd come across with a manual lock in addition to the automatic one that Alex disabled. I thought it was interesting that he apparently didn't trust his own people that much.

Using his handy little tool, David took seconds to pop the lock, and we were inside.

As we walked into the darkened room, David took out his phone and sent a message to Alex, telling him we were ready.

A minute later, the lights in the hall came to life and I hit the switch to turn them on in the office as well. Rushing to the computer, I started it up and we waited, the silence in the building turning creepy. It was much more comforting to sneak around in the dark.

The computer was almost ready when a noise came from down the hall. It could have been Mark, but I didn't think so. A quick glance at David told me he didn't think it was Mark either.

I was sure that Mark planned to stay away from this area, giving us time to do what we needed to while exonerating himself from any blame in allowing us inside. And if Mark wasn't the one who made the noise, that meant that there was someone else in the building. Someone we didn't want to run into unprepared.

David sent me a nod and hit the lights before going back out into the hall, locking the door behind him.

I waited impatiently for the computer to start up, and only had enough time time glance at the icons on the screen before I heard a key in the door.

David wouldn't be back so soon and his universal key didn't make any noise until the lock clicked open, so I knew it wasn't him.

Muttering a curse, I jumped out of the chair and hid behind the floor length curtain that lined the window behind the desk.

Seconds later, the door opened and someone came inside. I waited on edge, wondering why anyone was in this room at this hour. The only option I could imagine was that they suspected that there was someone here who wasn't supposed to be.

Insubstantially Me

Keeping completely still, I strained my ears to try to figure out who was in the room with me, and why. If it was going to turn into a fight, I wanted the upper hand.

The light came on again, and unhurried footsteps headed my way. My instinct was to peek so I could get the advantage, but I forced myself not to move.

I heard muttering about incompetence and I realized that it was Wescott on the other side of the curtain. He sat at his computer, wondering audibly why it was up and running and I realized that he didn't have the slightest idea that I was here.

Moving ever so slightly, I looked around the curtain and spotted him. He was facing away from me and I smiled, seeing that there wasn't a single remote in sight.

This was a better opportunity than I'd ever hoped for. Now, I not only had the chance to ruin him financially, but I also had the chance to get rid of him for good.

I ignored the twinge from my conscience. Killing someone like him would be doing the world a favor. It would certainly improve my life.

Without a second thought, I was behind him, my forearm cutting off his air supply the way David had done to the guards.

He struggled against my hold, but he was old and out of shape, not to mention unprepared for an attack.

"Miss me?" I said spitefully, choking him a little more.

He reached for his desk drawer and, guessing that there was a remote inside it, I pulled him out of reach.

"How does it feel to be on this end of it?" I asked, remembering his callousness when I threatened to kill the guard before.

His only response was a strained gurgle as he attempted to pry my arm away from his throat.

Keeping a firm grip, I began having second thoughts about actually killing him. I definitely wanted him gone, but I'd never taken a life before. Physically, the task would be easy. Just a quick twisting of his neck to break it. But practically, I didn't know if I could actually do it.

My indecision resulted in Wescott passing out from a lack of oxygen and I let his body slump to the floor while I decided what exactly to do with him.

Lightly touching the tranquilizer gun in my pocket, I began mulling it over. In a few seconds though, Wescott was the last thing I was concerned about.

Mind-numbing pain was suddenly radiating from every inch of my body. It was like when the remote was used against me, only now it wasn't just in my head. Every part of me felt on fire and I struggled to breathe.

When the pain receded, I was aware of lying on the floor, shaking convulsively. My head was pounding and I couldn't see straight.

It was a full minute before I could even move to figure out what just happened. Beyond being terrified, I was utterly confused. There weren't supposed to be any more guards and Wescott was unconscious.

Insubstantially Me

Finally able to partially push myself up, I stretched to look around the desk since my legs didn't feel up to the task of supporting me.

Seeing who was responsible for putting me on the floor, I felt myself go white.

"You," I gasped.

Chapter 41

It was him - the man who I always thought looked like an accountant. The one who'd gotten so close to finding me so many times.

Obviously, I assumed he worked for Wescott, but it was still shocking to see him here. Primarily because Wescott didn't have any idea that I was here before I revealed myself. How had this man known? And why did he have a new remote that was so much worse than the type I was used to?

To my surprise, I realized that he didn't seem much like an accountant up close. He still had the bad haircut and general dorky demeanor, but there was something more sinister and powerful about him that I hadn't noticed before.

Instead of acknowledging what I said, he moved to stand in my direct line of vision, turning what must be the new remote over in his hand.

I didn't want to make myself more vulnerable than I already was, so I struggled to pull myself to my feet, using the desk as support. The way the man watched me made me feel like the lab rat again.

"I admit, I'm not disappointed," he said once I was mostly standing. "You are quite resourceful. Clearly, you were a wise investment."

His words confused me further. What investment? I thought he worked for Wescott.

"What does that mean?" I spat, still having trouble catching my breath. What I wanted to do was figure out how to get that remote away from him, but I couldn't even stand on my own yet.

"You didn't think your scientist was working alone, did you?" He sounded a little disappointed. "That he was able to track you at all, let alone so accurately?"

"So you're government?" Just like David said.

"I am." He nodded. "And you are government property."

Good to know that slavery was alive and well.

"I'm no one's property," I said stubbornly. "I don't know what you want from me, but you can forget it."

His smile was patronizing. "I'm not sure you're in any position to determine what is or is not to be. You will do as I say or there will be consequences."

"I don't care what you do to me." I tried very hard not to show how much this man scared me.

"For now perhaps," he allowed with another disturbing smile. "However I've been assured that when he's finished with you." He nodded in Wescott's direction. "You won't be any trouble."

I swallowed hard, realizing that I wasn't going to trade one horrible situation for another. I was going to be sent right back to Wescott to be subjected to everything he had planned before I was handed over to this man. I didn't need to ask why he thought I'd be compliant. It was because he assumed that they would have control of one or more of my children.

Insubstantially Me

He looked down on the still unconscious scientist and tisked. "I suppose that was deserved," he mused before he looked at me again. "He didn't want to do it, you know. He had no intention of sharing you at all, so I guess I owe you an amount of gratitude for making your very unexpected escape."

This man's involvement was my own fault? Apparently, I was doomed no matter what I did.

"I got wind of what he was up to a while ago and offered to pay him substantially for his finished product, but he would have none of it. Said I had to wait like everyone else. As you can imagine, I wasn't thrilled about waiting another fifteen or twenty years for him to be content with his work. When you got away though, he had no choice but to enlist my help since his chances of finding you in a city like New York were close to nonexistent. I actually acquired you at a considerably discounted rate." He seemed very proud of his bargain and I wanted to throw up.

Still, I couldn't help wondering why he never actually caught me when, logically, he should have been able to. Why didn't he ever use all of his resources to get me? And since he seemed to be in a chatty mood, why not ask?

"So why'd it take you so long? Why didn't you catch me sooner?"

He tilted his head, looking a little disappointed again. "I wanted to see how well you were able to survive without any extraordinary measures on my part. To see how you would fare in a different setting."

It was a stupid test?

"In the future, your enemies won't have the advantage of calling you out with this." He indicated the dark gray remote in his hand. "But they will be able to find you via cameras and other technologies. I wasn't very worried about giving you a little room, since I had a general idea of your location thanks to the trace Dr. Wescott had on you. And by the way, that was rather clever of you to remove it. I honestly did not foresee that possibility. Threw us all a curve ball." He chuckled and it seemed as though he expected me to laugh along too. Was he insane?

"What enemies?" I nervously wondered what kind of plans he had for me. What sort of situation did he foresee me needing to hide from people with that kind of power?

He tilted his head thoughtfully. "How do you feel about espionage?"

"Does it matter?" I asked acidly. It figured that he wanted me as a spy. Didn't David say I was the ultimate secret weapon?

Thinking of David, my pulse jumped in hope. I still had David! But where was he? It seemed laughable that this man could have possibly overpowered him.

As if he was attuned to my thoughts, David came through the door, looking uneasily between me and the man in front of me.

Noticing the direction that I'd involuntarily looked when David came into view, the man turned back.

"Ah, there you are Sergeant," he said.

I was too busy wondering why David hadn't knocked him out yet, to pay much attention to what he said, but a second later I realized the significance of his words. This man knew David?

Insubstantially Me

Baffled, I looked at David for action or an explanation, but he didn't offer either. He just stood there looking like he wasn't sure what to do now.

Why wasn't he doing something? Anything? He promised!

"David?" I tried, feeling my eyes sting.

"David," the man said deliberately. "Won't be assisting you any longer."

I would have scoffed at that, but David's sudden and unusual indecisiveness was making me nervous.

"I expect a report as to why you felt you could ignore orders," he said to David. "Although, I will take into account that you did, in fact, find and deliver the subject, but you should expect some sort of disciplinary action for your insubordination."

David didn't object, and the thing that made it hard to breathe was that he didn't look even a little surprised by what this man said.

He worked for him? He was betraying me?

Remembering that he'd earned my trust so many times already, I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. I tried not to believe it.

Please, don't let it be true! It can't be! Not after everything. Not David, the one person in the world I'd been sure I could trust!

My hands balled into fists as I waited for him to say something to deny it. Anything!

Finally, the indecision passed, but his words broke my heart.

"Sam, I can explain."

Chapter 42

David came towards me, reaching for my arm, and I lurched away, grateful that my legs were more sturdy.

"Don't touch me!" I cried, still in complete shock that he could actually turn on me. "I trusted you!"

How stupid I'd been! I should have followed through on my plan to leave as soon as my leg was healed. Was this all some cruel, elaborate plan to trap me? Tears filled my eyes and I blinked them away. I would not cry in front of him. Not ever again.

"Please, just-" he tried, but I couldn't stand to listen to whatever excuse or lie he was about to try to tell me. He obviously didn't realize his mistake yet.

"I never told you my name was Sam," I cut him off. The only way he could have known that was if what this man said was true and David really did have orders to find me.

I wondered for a brief minute how long he knew. How long did he think of me as Sam and not Sarah? How long was he planning to do this? But then I remembered the top secret mission that he got called in for. It was a mission to find me and bring me to this man, I realized. No wonder he was acting so strangely afterward.

But what took him so long? I stayed with him for months. He could have called his superior to come get me any time. Why wait till now? Was it some twisted joke? To get a "mission" in and to make me fall for him?

I was tempted to ask if any of it was real, but I honestly didn't know what would be worse - turning on me, despite any feelings he might have or faking the whole thing and laughing at me.

Not able to stand looking at him with his stunned and guilty expression any longer, I turned to face my captor.

"Can we just go?" I bit out. I'd willingly go with him if it meant getting away from David.

"Certainly." He nodded with a satisfied smile. "And to think, the good doctor said you would be difficult."

I glared at the floor, seeing a flash forward of what my life would be like after this. It was a string of all the nightmares I'd had since leaving, with the added bonus of whatever unknown horrors this man had in store for me.

"Sergeant," he addressed David. "Why don't you see if you can't make Dr. Wescott comfortable for when he comes to? We'll debrief later." He started for the door. "Come along, Samantha," he said. "Let's get you settled back in your room."

At least he intended to call me by my actual name, I thought as I started to follow, resigned.

I made it two steps before David pushed around me, shoving his tranquilizer gun at the back of the man's neck and firing.

Immediately, he slumped to the floor and David turned around, meeting my stunned gaze.

"I told you I wouldn't let anything happen to you," he reminded me. "Now lets do what we came here to do and get out."

Insubstantially Me

"But...." I was too shocked to move.

"Let's go!" he prompted, glancing at his watch. "I don't know how long we've got."

Nodding, I ran back to the computer and got to work. I wanted to argue with him about...well, about something, but I really didn't know where to start. And he was right about us being short on time. If that man knew we were here, who else would be coming? And how quickly?

Thanks to Alex, I knew exactly what to do. Within minutes, a long list of names along with contact information and dollar amounts filled the screen. I scrolled down the page and was in awe of just how much money showed. The total was easily a few million dollars, and I wondered if I was looking at the complete sum or just one billing cycle.

Disgusted, I plugged in the flash drive that Alex gave me and transferred the information before I deleted it from the system. It was possible that Wescott had everything backed up somewhere, but there was a chance that he overlooked it and only had the one record. Whatever the case, I wanted to make things as difficult for him as possible.

A groan drew my attention to the vile man at my feet who was waking up.

Thinking of how close I just came to being forced into my nightmares once again, I was having trouble summoning even the smallest ounce of negativity, craving his death. In fact, it seemed foolish not to do it now. Leaving him alive meant leaving someone to hunt me down and continue this despicable work.

I would have to kill that other man too. His death probably wouldn't eliminate the threat completely since I was sure he wasn't alone in this. But whoever else was involved would be severely limited without the two men in this room. They might never be able to replicate anything Wescott did and they probably wouldn't have the motivation that either one of them possessed when it came to finding me.

My knuckles whitened around the arms of the chair I sat in as I stared down at Wescott, picturing his execution.

Just a quick twisting of the neck, I reminded myself. It would be easy. And then I'd never have to worry about him again.

I was almost ready to do it when David stepped up and shot Wescott with a dart, causing him to collapse, unconscious once again.

"You can't do it," he said to me.

"Oh no?" I challenged, still furious with him despite his apparent second thoughts in betraying me.

David shook his head. "We have to leave them."

"No, we don't." I raised my chin. "It's stupid to-"

"They're already going to be hunting us down," he interrupted me. "If anyone winds up dead here, there will be a lot more people looking for us. But it'll be for murder. We won't be safe anywhere."

"No one else knows we're here," I said stubbornly. "Maybe they'll assume that they killed each other!"

Insubstantially Me

"Our prints are all over the place," he said. "And I'm sure he's not the only one who knows about either one of us." He nodded at the other sedated man. "He's smart. He has a whole department at his disposal, including a few people who know just as much as he does and will know who to come after without much evidence. And there's still all the people in this place, who aren't like your friend Mark. Even if they did somehow believe they killed each other, all the unconscious people we're leaving behind would be a huge clue that something else happened."

I despised that he made sense. I wanted Wescott destroyed. Financially wasn't enough. I almost didn't care about the rest. Jail would be better than the life he would force me into if he ever got the chance.

Unfortunately, jail wouldn't keep me safe from the government. Wescott or no Wescott.

"You're not a murderer," David said, knowing I wasn't convinced. "It's not as easy as you might think right now. No matter what the justification, you'll have to live with the knowledge that you took a life. Do you really want to give him that?"

I scowled down at the floor. He was right. Self defense was one thing, but doing it this way would haunt me forever.

"Did you get everything?" David asked quietly after a minute. "We need to go."

"Just about," I grumbled, looking at the computer again.

The rest of what I needed wasn't hard to find. It was all labeled under the heading AER, which I recognized as the abbreviation for abiogenetic enhanced replication, the process from which Wescott took the name he insisted on calling me.

Aware that I was running out of time, I only intended to quickly scan over the file before copying it to the flash drive. There was so much information inside and at a glance, it seemed to be divided mostly by year, beginning long before I was born. Then there were various project headings which I assumed were the things I'd been forced to do while I was trapped here.

After transferring everything, I was ready to delete it like I had the previous document, but a folder at the bottom of the page caught my eye. The only label on it was a date, and I had no idea why it was significant enough to wind up in my file. The date was a little over a year ago and meant absolutely nothing to me. It was several months before I'd even been brought here.

Curiosity compelled me to open it, but David's tense words stopped me before I could even move the mouse.

"Running out of time," he said, glancing nervously between his watch and the door.

Deciding I could take all the time I wanted with it later, I deleted the files from the computer before imputing the code for the virus that Alex assured me would make the hard drive and every thing else that mattered, useless.

Once I shoved the flash drive in my pocket, I hopped up to follow David, staying close on his heels as he headed for our escape route. I kept up with him for about thirty feet before I stopped, noticing the gold number twenty-seven, staring at me from the door that he ignored as he rushed by.

We were already getting dangerously low on time, I knew, but I also knew that Mark wouldn't have told me about this room if it wasn't important.

Insubstantially Me

Maybe would be risky to waste valuable time on this, but I owed Mark so much, I couldn't ignore it. I called to David to stop him but didn't wait for his response before I barged into the room, not knowing what I would find.

Chapter 43

In the dark, it seemed like another laboratory, cold, sterile, and unexceptional.

Why would Mark want me to look in here?

Slapping the white switch on the wall, I stepped further inside, squinting momentarily from the overly bright lights that came to life.

It reminded me of the room I'd been confined to. The furniture was all modern-looking, expensive, and lacked any real color. But my initial assessment hadn't been that far off either because part of it did seem to be a lab.

I looked around for a second, confused about why they would have a half laboratory-half bedroom without a bed, when I noticed the boxy piece of furniture to my left.

Part of me wanted to run away, suddenly fully understanding why Mark told me to come in here. But another part - the part that had my feet in motion before I consciously made a decision to move - needed to see for myself.

Wide-eyed and trembling, I reached the cold, white railing and peeked over it to see the tiny, sleeping person in the crib.

Did Wescott do it? Did he actually take my DNA to create this child? Was this my child?

Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just a baby. Like me, maybe, but not mine in any way. I had such little experience with babies, I couldn't guess how old this one was. He looked like he might be about a year. Or maybe I was way off. Either way, I had no basis for figuring out if he was alive before I'd been brought here. The likelihood of him being mine if he was older than that, was pretty slim. Not impossible though.

As I stood there, the brown-haired little boy awoke and stared up at me with large, intelligent eyes that were almost the exact color of mine.

That did it for me. Maybe it wasn't a DNA test, but it was good enough in my mind. Besides, my child or not, no one deserved to be trapped in this cold, unfeeling place. Especially not for their entire lives.

Going to the chest of drawers, I began pulling out the first things my hands touched, piling them in a heap on top. There was no suitcase, of course, so I grabbed a folded pillow case and shoved everything inside.

Luckily there was a diaper bag, in one of the bottom drawers. Pulling it out, I shoved as many diapers and anything else that looked useful inside it before slinging it across my body.

Now for the hard part. I walked cautiously back to the crib, where the boy in soft, blue footie pajamas was standing and watching me curiously. Would he scream when I picked him up? Would this be completely pointless because a frightened toddler would make stealth impossible?

"It's alright," I said softly, reaching for him.

To my relief, he didn't start to wail when I gripped him under his arms. He just continued to watch me, wondering what I was doing.

Insubstantially Me

As much as I needed this little boy to be quiet, I was disgusted by his lack of reaction. He must be accustomed to strange people doing strange things to him at strange times. How much has he been through in his short life?

"Come on." I lifted him out of the crib and balanced him on my hip. "We're getting out of here."

I took a step but hesitated, remembering the chip that Wescott put in my leg. What if the baby had one too?

Setting him on the dresser, I quickly opened the legs of his pajamas, looking for a scar.

Thankfully, there wasn't one.

Just to be safe, I checked his arms too. The skin there was just as smooth and undisturbed.

It was possible that Wescott found some other way to do it, but it seemed unlikely. If he wanted a trace on this child, he would do it the same way as he did with me. Besides, he told me they'd only given me the chip when they decided to send me to my parents, and I doubted that this little boy was scheduled to go anywhere.

At least, that's what I prayed it meant.

As satisfied as I could be with my assessment, I replaced his pajamas, grabbed his blanket and the makeshift suitcase, and rushed back into the hallway to find David waiting impatiently. When he caught sight of my new accomplice, he looked stunned.

"What's that?" he said stupidly.

"What does it look like?" I snapped. "Let's go."

Not needing David to guide me, I took the lead and practically ran to the exit. We were leaving the way we entered, but the return trip was much more terrifying since there was no way of knowing who might be coming after us.

We were almost out when the building fell into utter darkness, making us freeze.

I doubted that Alex was planning to cut the power again. It didn't make sense to hinder our escape with unnecessary darkness when everyone who was a threat was supposed to be unconscious. Not to mention, David would have contacted him before this moment to do it. Which could only mean he had to improvise because there was a new threat he hadn't been counting on.

I hugged the little boy close to my body, hoping that escape was still possible.

As the back up lights turned on, I saw David pull out his phone and stab his finger at the screen, before holding it up to his ear.

Alex's voice was loud enough for me to hear clearly.

"Get the hell out!" he said. "Back up's here. They're still up front so you've got about sixty seconds to get your butts out that door and into the woods!"

"Got it," David said, slapping the phone shut.

Insubstantially Me

We were only about fifty feet from the door, so we reached it in only a few seconds and I let David get ahead of me, feeling my confidence wane by the second.

He slowly peeked outside, moving cautiously and staying near the wall before he turned back to me.

"Stay in the shadows and run to the truck," he said. "Don't stop and don't look back."

I nodded nervously, grateful that the baby still seemed content to go along with whatever we were doing.

"Go!" he whispered, shoving me in front of him.

I pushed myself to run so hard, I nearly lost my balance. The trek was terrifying and even though I knew I was staying in the shadows like David said to, I felt like there was a spotlight shining directly on me, waiting to show anyone who cared to look, right where I was.

My eyes darted everywhere as I ran, but I didn't turn around. Honestly, I didn't think to look back until I was under the cover of trees, and even then I was too afraid to do it.

Relief flooded through me when I reached the black SUV, but it was fleeting. We weren't safe yet. Not even close.

When I stopped running, my brain seemed to start up again. Why did David tell me to go first? Was it because he thought we both wouldn't make it?

What if something happened to him? I was still angry with him, but I was scared to death to be all alone.

I turned around and almost yelled his name when I didn't see him right away. But a second later, he trotted into view, throwing a glance over his shoulder.

"Get in!" He was breathing hard, like me, and didn't stop running until he reached the driver's side of the car.

We pulled open our doors and the same time and once we were securely inside, he got the vehicle moving in record time.

The car jerked and bounced over uneven ground while I fought with the seat belt and struggled to situate myself with the toddler on my lap. He still seemed completely passive, but his curiosity was gone. Now all he seemed to care about was his interrupted sleep. Once I settled into a comfortable position, he yawned and turned to rest his head against my body. A second later his eyelids drooped and then closed.

It was an odd feeling having a tiny person you just met use you as a pillow. And surprisingly, it wasn't unpleasant the way I would have expected. Cuddly was one of the last words I'd ever use to describe myself, but somehow I didn't mind this.

I hugged my arms around his little body to secure him in place, and he popped his thumb in his mouth with a contented sigh. I couldn't help but smile.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced at David. We were on an actual road now, and he was paying more attention to me than where he was going.

"What?" I said defensively.

Insubstantially Me

"Nothing." He smiled and faced forward. "I just didn't figure you as the motherly type."

If things between us were the same as they had been, even half an hour ago, I'd have said something sarcastic and joked with him, hoping to make the situation less tense and frightening. But all I could see now was what happened in Wescott's office.

Those words - Sam, I can explain - would be forever fixed in my memory. They were the words that told me he lied to me. That even though he might regret it, he betrayed me.

I raised my chin and stared out the windshield, unsmiling.

Out of my peripheral vision, I noticed David look at me again, probably wondering why I hadn't responded.

Hearing nothing other than a weighty sigh from him, I knew he understood.

I planned to ignore him after that, but I only kept quiet long enough to realize that I didn't know where we were going. I'd trusted him so completely that I didn't ask before. I assumed we would go back to the Fort and plan from there, but unless David knew some alternate route, we were going the wrong way.

"Where are we going?"

When he didn't answer right away, I met his gaze as he looked between me and the road.

"I suppose it's too much to ask you to trust me?" He sounded a little sad.

"You're not an idiot," I said coldly. "What do you think?"

"Look," he sighed. "I didn't-"

"Not now, David." I looked away from him again. I wasn't sure I'd ever want to hear what he had to say for himself, but I definitely wasn't in the mood now.

He was quiet for a minute and I noticed his grip tighten on the steering wheel.

"There's a cabin about an hour away," he said. "We can stay there the night and get some supplies before heading up north."

"You expect me to follow you up north somewhere?" I hadn't thought much past the sting of his betrayal, but it seemed absolutely ludicrous to even think of staying with him a second longer than it took to put a relatively safe distance between myself and the threat we left behind.

The threat that was David's boss.

Who he saved you from, that irritating little voice in my head reminded me.

"Well, if you've got a better idea, I'd love to hear it." Frustration was thick in his voice.

And of course, I didn't have a better idea. I didn't have any idea at all other than to get out and start walking, which was just idiotic.

Insubstantially Me

I stared out the window in angry silence for a minute before I thought about what he said about getting supplies and going up north.

"You planned for this?" I asked surprised. "You knew it would happen?"

"I...knew it was a possibility," he admitted. "When you do what I do, you plan the best you can, knowing it might fail. You act like you won't need it, but you have a back up plan, just in case."

"And you didn't think to tell me?" That new and unfamiliar feeling of anger towards him rose up again.

He gave me an exasperated look and I decided to let it go. That's not what I was mad about anyway. The knowledge probably would have served only to make me want to do it less than I already did.

"What about Alex and the other guys?" I asked instead.

"They're headed back to the Fort," he said.

"Why aren't we?"

"Too dangerous."

"I thought it was supposed to be secure?" Honestly I wasn't sure where I'd rather go. As nervous as I was about heading into the unknown, I didn't know how I would feel about going to a place that might be full of people who knew all about me and were supposed to turn me in.

I couldn't understand why they didn't. Alex must have known about me. The other guys probably did too, and I'd only met them this morning. So why not do their jobs?

"It is," he said. "It's too dangerous for them. We could be followed."

Unable to help myself, I craned my neck to look out the back window. glad to see that it was free of any head lights. So far, anyway.

"The only reason Pearson would have shown up, was if he knew you were there. And the only way he would have known that, was if he made the connection of you to me. He figured out I was helping you and that I didn't do what I was supposed to by turning you in," he said. "The car is registered in Tim's name, but it's easy enough for them to find out that I drive it."

I assumed Pearson was his boss.

"It would be stupid to lead them to the Fort, and it's not allowed. It's meant primarily as a safe haven for Joe if he ever needs it. If there's a possibility that we are actively being pursued, we aren't supposed to go there. Jeopardizes everyone."

"And this cabin, it's safe?" I asked.

"As safe as we can get tonight," he shrugged. "We can swap out the truck and move on in the morning."

Move on, where exactly?

Insubstantially Me

"How am I supposed to trust you?" I was mostly talking to myself, wondering how I would ever be able to put my faith in him again, but David heard it as an accusation.

"You realize I put my name on the government's hit list back there, don't you?" he said angrily. "I can't go home. I can't contact my family. Could you try and give me just a little credit?"

I didn't need him driving the point home. His talk about going away and forsaking his car made me understand the enormity of what he did.

My anger was starting to give way to sadness. Sadness that things went so badly for him, but more so that he felt he couldn't be honest with me. If he had, this would have been the single greatest thing anyone ever did for me, and would have told me without a doubt that he loved me. But now... Now I didn't know how to feel about it. Or him.

I didn't have much of a choice other than to trust him. But if I didn't have a choice, was it really trust? And if it wasn't trust, how could I simply stay with him?

But what were my options?

"You lied to me, David," I said quietly, staring out the window.

"I had to." His tone was softer, pleading.

But feeling like he had to lie didn't make it alright. I silently continued to watch the dark trees glide by outside.

"And what would you have done if I'd told you I was supposed to be hunting you down?" he asked. "If I'd come home and said that I was told that you were a dangerous fugitive, and that I was supposed to bring you in?"

His question was rhetorical. We both knew I'd have run at the first chance I got. And I probably would have been caught not long after.

"And don't forget," he said. "I'm not the only one who lied here, Sarah." He emphasized the name to remind me of my own deception.

"That was to protect myself!" Was he really comparing the two?

"From who?" he was almost shouting. "I was a complete stranger. You're lucky I am the way that I am, because anyone else might have wondered what else you lied about and turned you in because of it!"

I wished we weren't trapped in a car right now. I hated fighting with him and wanted to walk away.

And I really hated that he was making some good points.

Apparently, we were getting too loud because the little boy on my lap grumbled irritably in his sleep, making me swallow the remark I was about to shout back.

"Can we just agree that we both lied for good reasons?" David tried after a minute.

If only it were that simple. I didn't answer and he didn't attempt to make me.

Insubstantially Me

"Should we talk about the tiny elephant in the room?" He changed the subject, glancing at the little boy.

I looked down on him too, smiling sadly.

"He's like me," I said. "I don't know if he's..." For some reason, even admitting the possibility that he was in some way mine, felt too huge. Too scary.

"I couldn't leave him there."

I'm not sure what kind of reaction I would have expected from David, had I thought about it. Anger maybe? Since I put another target on our backs and added a complication in traveling and staying hidden. Not to mention the additional responsibility of taking care of someone who could contribute absolutely nothing.

I would have at least counted on irritation at my impulsiveness.

Either emotion would have made it easy to stay angry with him. I didn't want to have to try to be angry the way I found myself doing when I glanced over at him and saw that he was apparently going to act like the man I'd gotten to know and trust so well.

Of course he was.

The real kicker was that his understanding half-smile wasn't even directed at me, so he couldn't have been trying to soften me up. No, he was looking down on the sleeping child in my arms with that patient and sympathetic expression on his face.

I bit my cheek and turned away from David, annoyed with myself for thinking it was sweet.

"We should probably come up with something to call him," David said after another minute.

Curious as to what he had in mind, I looked at him, waiting for his pronouncement.

Instead of offering anything, he said, "You should probably be the one to do it, don't you think?"

He had a point, I guess. But how would I know what name this kid would want? I frowned down at the boy, thinking.

David chuckled. "Really? This is what you have trouble figuring out? Haven't you ever named something before? A dog? A stuffed animal?"

I shook my head. "I never had any pets and I thought it was stupid to name something that wasn't alive."

"Just think of a name that's meaningful," he said. "I'm sure he won't object unless it's Methuselah or something."

I caught myself just as I was about to smile. I did not want to let go of my anger. I had a right to it.

He betrayed me. He lied to me.

Glaring out the window, I tried hard to ignore that nagging voice that wouldn't let me forget that he also saved me and threw his life away for me.

Insubstantially Me

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Over the next hour, I must have turned around thirty times to check for headlights behind us. Thankfully when David turned the car onto a dirt road, we still hadn't been detected. At least as far I could tell.

The excursion along the barely-there road was similar to when he brought me to the Fort. The entrance was easy to miss among the trees if you didn't know what to look for, and the actual place we found ourselves when David put the vehicle in park didn't seem to be anything other than an unexceptional wooded area.

The only thing that seemed out of place - besides us - was the camouflage tarp, covering what I guessed was the vehicle that David planned to take in place of his SUV.

"Here we are," David said, switching off the engine. Apparently he expected me to jump out of the car to follow wherever he would lead me, but I was suddenly frozen in place by indecision.

Logically, I knew that I had a much better shot of surviving and avoiding any unwanted attention if I were with him. And I knew that I could trust him, even though he lied. I understood that he did it to protect me and that he was basically in the same fugitive boat I was now because of his actions against his superior.

But he still lied.

The problem wasn't even that he lied. It was that I believed him.

I'd trusted him so completely when I didn't think I could trust anyone. And now that faith that I'd thought was so solid, had been shaken.

I wasn't sure I could get passed that.

David's shoulders sagged, guessing what I was thinking.

"I know you have to think this over, and I don't want you to think I forced you into anything." He sounded resigned. "So, I'm going to get out and walk to the cabin - it's over that ridge and around the bank of trees at the bottom. If you decide to join me, there's a flashlight in the glove box."

Surprised, I stared at him. I didn't think going off on my own was even an option, but he was giving it to me. He was allowing me to take back some semblance of control of my life.

He touched the door handle, ready to get out. "Whatever you do, you shouldn't keep him out in the cold too long." He nodded at the boy in my arms.

"Will," was all I could get out.

"What?" He looked at me curiously.

"My dad's name was William." Maybe it wasn't the most original idea, but the name was meaningful to me.

David smiled, but it faded quickly. He opened his door and stepped into the cold night air, pausing before he could close Will and I in again.

"You know you can trust me, Sam." He said my name deliberately. "I know you do."

## Insubstantially Me

"David, I..." I looked down, unsure of what to say.

"I know," he said, pulling my gaze up again. "You know where I'll be."

With that, he shut the door and began navigating through the darkness without a light. His keys dangled from the ignition.

I could really leave him if I wanted to. By leaving the keys he was giving me the car if I wanted it.

It probably wouldn't be wise to drive around in this car for very long. That was the reason David decided to come here. But he had given me the choice. It was more than I expected and definitely more than he had to do.

Shifting Will in my lap, I dug the flashlight out of the glove box, grabbed my back pack and Will's pillow case which were stashed on the floor, before undoing my seat belt and exiting the car.

Will woke up long enough for me to rearrange him so he could rest his head on my shoulder, and then his eyelids dropped once again.

Carefully picking my way through the brush and debris, I reached the top of the ridge and looked out. My small beam of light didn't offer much other than a few feet in front of me, but I could just barely see a figure moving down below. David.

After this, I wouldn't be able to be upset with him for what happened. Walking through the cabin door would be the same as volunteering to forget about it and start over.

David was smart to do this. He was making me choose to stay with him despite his lie. I didn't really have a choice if I wanted to survive and stay free, but his actions made me feel as if I did.

Sighing, I hugged Will tightly as I began making my way down the uneven ground in the dark. I didn't know what I was heading for, but whatever it was, I knew I wanted to be with David. I loved him.

And so, baby on my hip and few possessions to my name, I headed towards an uncertain future, praying we would have more than just tonight.

Insubstantially Me

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