

THE ESCAPE SERIES BOOK 1

PLAYING IN THE RAIN

WHEN ALL THAT MATTERS IS FREEDOM

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Playing In The Rain



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Published 2019 by Next Chapter
Cover art by Cover Mint

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For my siblings

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family for putting up with my long hours and disappearance to my office. Especially to my husband who made meals without complaint when I couldn't tear myself away.

Thanks to Myron Stenzel who gave me the suggestion of Cecil when I was looking for the name for my evil character.

Thank you to Sandra Kenny-Veech for being a great first-time beta reader and for taking my new bio pics (Another Perspective Photography).

Thank you to Next Chapter; I look forward to this new publishing journey.

Prologue

I tilted my head back to look at the cloud-filled sky. Large, grey puffs danced and swirled overhead.

A drop of water landed on my nose. I brought my head forward and wiped up the bead with my finger before it had a chance to spill down my face.

I stared at the liquid; a smile pulled at the corners of my lips, stretching them until my eyes crinkled. Another droplet landed on the top of my head, cool and wet. It trickled down the part in my hair, leaving behind a trail of tingling skin. I reached up with my other hand and scratched it away.

Laughing voices caught my attention and for a moment pulled me away from the dripping sky.

The sound of a whisper filled my ears and interrupted my dream. My eyelids fluttered open. The streetlight outside lit my room and shadows danced across my ceiling. My heart skipped as they moved closer.

I turned my head and opened my mouth. Before any sound could escape a hand clamped it shut and my eyes filled with darkness. I struggled against the weight on my arms as my legs tried to kick free from under the blankets. A harsh ripping sound halted my efforts. For a second my mouth was freed; I called out, but my cries were muffled by a large piece of tape. My arm jerked as a sharp point pierced the skin of my shoulder.

My muscles eased and relaxed and my movements slowed. The pressure on my arms abated. I willed them to move and strike out at the nearest object, but they lay still at my sides. The skin on my cheeks and lips stretched upward as the tape used to seal my mouth came free.

I yelled, but the sound I heard came from inside my own head, my voice had been silenced. The blindfold was tugged away; the dim light returned.

Black shadows loomed in front of me, devoid of form or shape – blurred, dark blobs moved in the night. My eyelids slammed shut.
“Move them out!” A voice bellowed. And then there was nothing.

One Sterile

I woke to the bright and unpleasant buzz of the overhead lights. The sterile, white room glowed with such intensity it was almost blinding.

It happened every morning, first the click, then the hum. My eyelids flew open as though a power button inside my head was flicked to the 'on' position. My arm rose to cover my face and shield me from the bright lights. It had been that way for as long as I remembered which seemed both a long time and only a few days.

I rolled over onto my right side, and my eyes darted between three sliding doors on the wall parallel to my bed. The first, located directly across from my resting head, was the entry. The door I passed through twice a day, once when I left the room and then again when I came back.

My gaze skimmed a little further to the left. In the middle of the wall was the much smaller opening of the dumbwaiter. I favoured that door as each whoosh signaled a meal or snack.

I tucked my chin a little and looked over toward the third opening at the far end of the wall. My focus drifted toward the white surveillance camera with its ever-watchful red eye. For the moment, it pointed directly at my bed, silent and still. Yet, once I rose it would awaken and begin its daily routine of stalking me around my room. I resisted the urge to wave and returned my attention to the laundry chute. It wasn't as big as the entry but certainly larger than the dumbwaiter. Large enough, in fact, I believed it could hold two small or even average sized people. *Who would try?* The thought made my skin prickle.

All three doors remained closed and silent, but soon the daily procedures would begin. The sound of sliding doors would replace the irritating hum of the overhead lights.

I flung back my pale sheet, my eyes skimmed over my green nightgown, and I sat up. The whirring of the camera drowned out the buzzing lights, and it caught my attention. It was only in those

first few minutes of the day that the sounds of the room were grating. Soon the noises would disappear into the background. Only recalled at night when they finally quieted.

A thought suddenly came to mind and erased my irritation. I was getting a surprise today.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and rested my feet on the white tile floor. Soothing warmth radiated through my body and tempted me to lie down on the hard surface.

The first whoosh of the day interrupted my thoughts. The door of the dumbwaiter had opened; my breakfast had arrived. Small gurgles deep inside my stomach rolled through my gut. It finally concluded with a loud, inhuman grumble as the smell of bacon wafted through the room.

I rushed toward the small compartment behind my table and pulled out the covered tray. I breathed in the delicious smell. My free hand curled into a tight fist at my side as a distant and unclear memory flashed in front of me. I placed the tray on the table, exhaled, and uncurled my hand. Morning procedures had to be followed.

I hurried toward the fourth door in my room which led to the washroom. It was unlike the others and made no sound when pulled open. It sat centred on the end wall closest to the head of my bed. The only thing that gave the door away was the small, clear glass knob that stuck out from the bleached wall.

The light turned on the instant I pushed open the door. The small bathroom was as clean and white as the rest of my room. I stepped further in and jumped when the door clicked closed behind me.

I sat down on the toilet seat and emptied my bladder. The sound echoed in the small room, and I couldn't help but wonder if anyone heard. *Hurry up!* I told myself. I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my thighs and held my head in my hands.

The toilet flushed on its own. The water drained with such force that tiny drops sprayed up onto the seat. I didn't bother to wipe it away; the room would clean itself.

The soap dispenser whined and spat out a foamy liquid that was as free of colour and scent as everything else. I moved my hands under the tap and activated the warm water. Tiny bubbles squeezed out between my fingers and covered the backs of my hands. The white froth swirled around before it gurgled down the drain. The distant whisper of some strange tune peeked out from the shadows in my mind. My eyes squeezed shut, and I worked at remembering the lyrics. As a word was about to form, the water turned off signaling the end of my hand washing.

My eyelids fluttered open, and my heart skipped as I caught my reflection in the mirror. I stared at myself for a second. My straight, light brown hair rested on the top of my shoulders, freshly cut from the day before. The light blinked in warning, a reminder my time in the bathroom was over. I would have to examine myself closer the next time.

I pushed the button on the wall and pulled the door open. The alarm buzzed; the five-second countdown had begun. I stepped over the threshold, and the door closed behind me. An audible hissing sound came to my ears as scalding hot steam filled the small room. The hissing stirred a distant voice; it whispered from somewhere deep inside my head. Garbled and incomprehensible words bounced and echoed in my skull. *Sick* was all I understood.

Intrusive beeping pulled me away from the door and my thoughts as I headed back over to my table. I only had three minutes left to finish my breakfast.

The smell of bacon saturated the air around me the second I removed the lid from my tray. Three pieces of crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, and home fries covered the plastic plate. My tongue swept across my lips, and I stared at the colourful arrangement of food in front of me. Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to revel in its taste, but that didn't concern me. The meal would repeat itself in so many days.

With breakfast over, I sealed the dishes back inside the dumbwaiter. The whining camera pricked my ears as it followed me across the room.

My plain white dresser sat in the corner, wedged between the end wall and the head of my bed. I pulled open the top drawer and removed a white paper robe wrapped in plastic and placed it on top. I stripped the sheets from my bed, scooped them up in my arms, and retrieved the neatly packaged robe.

I glanced up at the surveillance system as I crossed the room on a diagonal towards it and the laundry chute. The only good thing was I would soon disappear from its view. The camera was unable to see me in the corner when I stood underneath it.

I pressed a button, and the door to the laundry chute slid open. I piled the sheets inside, the plastic package dangled from my teeth, and I pulled my nightgown over my head. My hair stood on end; static electricity crackled. I removed my underwear and tossed all my nightclothes onto the pile. I tore open the plastic package and pulled on the paper robe. Before I closed the door, I threw the packaging in with the laundry.

My feet took me the few steps along the wall and over toward my table where I sat down and waited. I stared at the dimmed red light above the entrance. Within seconds of sitting down, the light glowed, and the door slid open.

He stepped through the entrance covered from top to bottom in white as he pushed his cart into the room in front of him. The only part of him that showed was his brown eyes peeking out from the holes in the hooded mask. Over the mask he wore goggles. I called him *he*, but I wasn't sure. The baggy suit gave no sign of curves or bumps of any kind.

My paper robe crinkled as I brought my right arm forward and rested it on the table. I bent my left arm and placed it in front of me. He pushed his little cart against the table and stood on the other side. My attention focused on his white-gloved hands as he prepared two injections.

Another syringe, already prepared, sat on the cart. I recalled seeing it before but was unsure of its use. I narrowed my gaze as I stared at the mystery needle. A memory flashed of a gloved hand picking up the syringe, followed by a stinging prick, and then darkness. I shuddered and small bumps rose on my arms. I had

received that injection. It was the consequence should you find the strength to resist.

One of his rubber gloved hands held my arm as the other wiped a small gauze pad against my shoulder. The cold dampness caused more bumps to rise. My nose wrinkled at the strong smell. His rubbery fingers compressed the skin on my shoulder. The silver point of the needle pierced my flesh. He pushed down on the plunger. I concentrated on feeling the clear liquid as it entered my body, but it was not possible. When he finished, he pulled it free and placed the gauze pad back on my arm. He repeated the process with the second needle. Once again, I focused on the liquid and much like the first time, I felt nothing. When he pulled the needle out, he dabbed at the small point of red blood that had bubbled to the surface.

"Any idea what my surprise is?" I whispered. My voice sounded foreign to my ears. *Why?*

He stopped dabbing for a split second as though my speaking had caught him off guard, and then he resumed his work. He placed a small bandage on my shoulder, cleaned up his tray, and hurried from the room. The sliding doors closed behind him.

"I didn't think so," I whispered to the sterile room.

The overhead light flashed its warning. I groaned. "I know," I said between clenched teeth as I stood up and shoved my chair back. Its felt-covered feet slid over the floor. I moved toward the washroom; my paper robe rustled with every step. The back of my head burned with the sensation of watching eyes.

I wadded the paper robe into a ball and placed it inside the plastic tube that hung between the sink and the toilet. Within seconds it disappeared, sucked out of sight with a loud pop.

The small shower stall stood in the corner opposite the toilet. The glass door slid open as I stepped toward it. Once inside, warm water gushed out, and I closed my eyes, revelling in the relaxing spray. I only had a minute or two to enjoy it as the soothing warmth would end soon.

I washed my hair with creamy, unscented liquid, squeezed out from the dispenser on the wall. Below that was the dispenser for

the body wash. Yet, another colourless and odourless gel that oozed into my hand.

The bathroom light flashed, warning me my shower would be over in seconds. I stepped toward the door and when it opened the water turned off. The mat's rubber bristles tickled my feet as I stepped down on them. Warm air shot out from the wall behind me, from the ceiling, and from the mat on the floor.

I turned a slow circle; rivulets of water ran down my body and evaporated. I combed my fingers through my hair and worked out some of the tangles that had formed while washing. I bent over; the warm air blew my hair around in wild fashion. I resisted the urge to close my eyes and stared at my feet instead. Soon the light would flicker and my time in the blowers would be over.

I pulled open the medicine cabinet. Inside were many plastic wrapped toothbrushes and one-use packets of toothpaste. I selected one of each and closed the door. The toothbrush was like everything else in the room – white and temporary. I ripped it from its cocoon of clear plastic and covered it with every bit of paste from the packet. The bristles massaged over my gums and teeth, removing all traces of food and bacteria. When finished, I held everything up to the tube and watched as it was sucked out of existence.

I stared into the mirror and combed out my hair with my fingers. I leaned close, almost touching it with my nose, and looked into my blue eyes.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

Two Surprise

Inside the middle drawer of my dresser were several packages containing a white bra and a pair of plain underwear. I chose a set and pulled it out. The plastic wrap crinkled. The camera droned behind me, its mechanical noise louder than usual. *Why had I gotten rid of my robe?* The thought caused my stomach to knot.

My question was rhetorical; I knew the answer. It's what I'd always done. But for some strange reason, being naked suddenly bothered me. If it weren't for the warning, I would have still been in the washroom trying to think of a way to cover myself. I pulled on my underclothes and breathed easier as my body relaxed.

I yanked the bottom drawer open with too much force. It slid out with ease, but my quick reflexes stopped it before it freed itself from the rails and landed on my feet. I pulled the remaining green dress from inside and pushed the drawer closed.

My dresses were the only things I had that weren't encased in plastic. I ran my hands over the soft fabric and carefully unfolded the dress. It was plain, short-sleeved, and came to below my knees. Three buttons closed it at the front and elastic cinched it in at the waist. Two large pockets adorned the skirt.

The red eye followed my every step toward the laundry chute, but I kept my gaze focused in front of me. When I reached the opening, I pressed the button nearby and the door slid open with a faint, airy sound. My eyes widened.

A white envelope sat on top of the packaged clean linens. I leaned into the compartment to get a better look. I reached out my hand but hesitated for a second; my heart had picked up speed. I concentrated on the lettering. A20100315L was penned with care in black ink on the front. *That's me!* I smiled at the sudden realization.

I reached out, grabbed the envelope, and stuffed it down the front of my dress. I closed my eyes for a second and slowed my breath. The action calmed my nervous excitement, and I grabbed the packaged linens.

My thoughts raced as I moved back toward my bed and started unpacking the sterile sheets. The envelope ruffled and poked into my chest while I made my bed. Each movement reminded me of its existence.

It took every effort not to reach inside my dress and pull it out. The poking annoyed me, and it was getting difficult to contain my building curiosity. Still, it would have to wait until I began my studies. My body would block the intruding surveillance system behind me, and I could read the note in safety.

My desk sat at the foot of my bed. It was a plain white table with one small drawer for writing tools and a bit of paper. Textbooks and other reading material sat on a shelf mounted above it. It was in this corner of the room, across from the intruding camera, that I studied whatever textbook happened to be on the shelf.

The padded white desk chair rolled with ease as I took my seat. I pulled out my black textbook with its silver lettering from the overhead shelf. The camera whined behind me as I moved. The back of my hand slid across my forehead, smearing away tiny beads of sweat. My stomach muscles ached from tension and made me a little queasy. The sensations were strange. While a part of me feared I'd contracted some illness another part assured me my feelings were normal.

I opened the textbook to where I'd left off. I removed the envelope from inside my dress, held the damp packet in my hands, and stared at my ID. I had no doubt it was mine, though A2 was my usual name.

What is this? I turned it over and laid it flat on the pages of the open book. My fingers eased out the flap tucked inside the envelope. I reached in and pulled out the note. With great stealth, I slid the envelope underneath the textbook. My shaky hands unfolded the piece of paper and rubbed out the creases. Written in black ink was the same neat handwriting.

A2,

It was addressed to me.

I am sorry I did not answer your question. Your voice caught me off guard. I was not expecting it to return so soon.

I reread the first line as I recognized who the author was. What did he mean by my voice returning? I returned to the note.

It is imperative you never speak while facing the video equipment.

Had I? I recalled the moment I'd asked him my question and was sure I'd faced away from the equipment. I squinted. *Why?* I looked at the letter and kept reading.

I will see you later. If you must speak keep your back turned to the camera. When I speak to you, I will keep my head lowered and continue with my work. DO NOT react to anything I say.

J.

I stared at the letter, lost in the writings penned by its creator. A sudden whooshing from behind entered my ears and startled me. I was no longer alone.

I stuffed the letter into the pages at the back of the book and pretended to study.

"Hello, A2! Busy with your studies?"

His voice was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. I eased around in my chair. He stood behind me a few feet away, his hands on his hips. My lips parted a little, and I nodded. *Was it okay if I nodded?* My heart thumped. *What if I wasn't supposed to acknowledge anyone?*

A thin red smile came across his face, and my heart slowed. My head nodding hadn't surprised him. He stepped closer; his clothing made no sound. He didn't wear one of those baggy white suits that swished with movement. His clothing, though as white as the baggy suits, were more fitted. Only his thick, white hair covered his head, and he wore nothing over his eyes. Even his hands were gloveless.

His grey eyes darted around before he finally fixed his gaze on my face again. There was something about him that made me feel like I'd known him for a long time. It was much longer than what my memory suggested. He was someone you didn't forget.

"Do you know who I am?" He tilted his head back a little and from my desk, I could see up his long, pointed nose.

I nodded, though I recognized him, his name and who he was, did not come to mind.

"Good!" He nodded and took another step closer. The surveillance system hummed, and my heart quickened. Beads of sweat trickled down the small of my back. The back of my throat tickled, as my nose caught some strange scent. I resisted the urge to lean forward and sniff, but there was no doubt the strong perfume came from him. It wasn't entirely unpleasant only too much, although there was something familiar about it.

"Let's see how your studies are progressing." He moved beside me and peered over my shoulder at the textbook on my desk. "Ah, history."

I nodded again. I was sure my heart had climbed up my throat and was about to pop out of my mouth.

"Let's see." He pushed me and my chair out of his way, and I bumped into the foot of my bed. He reached over with his long, bony fingers and flipped over to the next page.

I swallowed the thickened spit in my mouth; my eyes fixed on his every move.

"I'm a little bit of a history buff myself. Well... truth be told," he turned his attention away from the book and looked at me, "I'm pretty much a buff at everything." He chuckled for a second before a crooked grin took its place. "You and I have a lot in common. Well, I must go. Nice talking *at* you." He turned on his heel and headed back toward the door.

For the first time, I noticed someone by the entrance, dressed in full white-blob mode. He stood back from the door, and when it slid open, he followed the white-haired man out the exit.

I exhaled a huge breath, resisting the urge to fan the air with my hand. My shoulders dropped in relief, and my heart crept back into place. I returned to my textbook, grabbed the note and envelope, and stuffed them down the front of my dress.

Why had he come into my room? I flipped the page of my text and pretended to read. Confusing thoughts filled my head. I couldn't

concentrate on my work, but I couldn't stop either. I had to keep pretending until study time was over.

I grabbed my yellow highlighter and picked a few sentences. Their importance was of no concern to me. I hadn't read a single word on the page. I flipped another page, mindless in my actions. My eyes stared at the words, but I saw nothing. The urge, to leave my desk grew stronger. The strict regimen held me in place.

Instant relief came in the form of a ringing bell, and all the muscles in my body relaxed as the tension eased. I closed my eyes and exhaled through pursed lips. The unmistakable sound of the dumbwaiter filled my ears, and I turned around. I had never looked so forward to my break.

I hesitated before I reached in and pulled the small tray from the compartment. My thoughts drifted to earlier events, and for a moment, the procedure was forgotten. I placed the tray on the table and pulled the lid free.

The moment the buzzing reached my ears my stomach dropped. I had made a mistake. It was all I had time to think before the flash of blue light.

I picked myself up off the floor; my legs shook under my weight. I managed to climb into my chair, folded my arms on the top of the table, and I rested my head. The smell of singed hair was in my nose. I inhaled and filled my lungs several times before rising on shaky legs and made my way over to the washroom.

The red apple stared up at me from the tray as the bathroom door clicked closed behind me. I had no appetite but couldn't afford to face any more consequences if I didn't eat. My feet dragged me back toward the table.

Was his visit my surprise? I bit into the sweet red orb as I remembered. *Some surprise!* I bit again, but my teeth sunk in too far, and I ended up with a mouthful of seeds. I spat them out on the plate and wiped the spittle from my chin with the back of my hand. *Where am I?* I stopped mid-chew. *What is this place?*

I didn't hear him enter. I stared wide-eyed at his baggy white figure. For a moment, his brown eyes stared back at me as he stood

in the entrance. I finally broke contact with his gaze and looked at the chair he held as he walked into the room.

He stood across from where I sat. "Remember, do not respond as I speak to you," a voice floated from behind the mask. It was soft, yet deep with an unfamiliar accent, and it was most certainly male.

He set the chair down by the table, and we went about our business as though the other weren't in the room. I wiped the juice from my chin and took another bite from my apple.

My ears pricked to the sound of the door; J had left the room. *What kind of a surprise is another chair?* I stared at the other chair, an exact copy of my own.

The door alerted me again, and J came back in with a bed he rolled across the floor.

"Do not follow me with your eyes," he warned as he pushed the bed past me. The click of the locks on the wheels rang in my ears. I wanted to turn around to see what he was doing, but I didn't.

J came into view again and left the room. Minutes passed. I finished my apple and placed the remnants on the plate with the seeds I'd spat out earlier. I replaced the lid on the tray and pushed the whole thing into the waiting dumbwaiter.

As soon as I stood up from the table, the door slid open.

"Keep going about your business," J said.

I peeked out the corner of my eye and saw two figures enter the room. The first was J's unmistakable white blob. The second was much shorter, and from my glimpse, was dressed in blue. I entered the washroom.

I could not rinse the soap from my hands soon enough. It was hard not to hurry. I wanted to see who had entered my room with J, but the memory of the smell of singed hair kept me from leaving too soon.

Finally, the water shut off. I dried my hands, and I was free to leave. I stepped toward the door and pulled it open.

A girl sat on a bed at the far end of the room. Like me, she had shoulder-length, brown hair, though hers was wavier and darker.

The alarm sounded, and I hurried out from the washroom. The door clicked behind me.

The girl looked to be younger, but not by much. J stood at the head of her bed in the back corner underneath the video equipment.

My lips parted.

"Do not speak," he reminded.

My pink tongue poked through and I licked them instead. I moved back toward my desk as though I were alone.

"So she's my surprise?" I said with my back to the girl, J, and the prying camera.

"Yes."

"Hmph! What kind of surprise is that?"

"She is your sister."

Three C.E.C.I.L

It took every ounce of self-control not to push myself away from my desk and whirl around to face them. I would have if I hadn't become lightheaded. I wiped my hand over my forehead; my skin was cold and damp, and my mouth watered. My stomach tensed, and I gripped the edge of my desk. I focused my attention on my fingers as they grew as white as the room around me.

"I don't have a sister," I whispered through clenched teeth. I exhaled a slow breath.

"I understand your disbelief, but trust me, you do."

Trust you? I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "Why don't I remember? Why doesn't she say anything?" I released my grip from the desk, and the colour returned to my aching knuckles. I flipped a page of my text. My ears pricked up at the sound of the camera. The thought of picking up my book and launching it at the intrusive piece of equipment crossed my mind. Instead, I flipped another page, not caring it was too soon.

"She is in somewhat of a hypnotic state, a trance, if you will. She has muscle control and fine motor movements. She can follow directions and procedures. She can process information and learn, but she is mute with no memory of any life in the past – she just exists. Much like you did until recently."

My eyelids fluttered. *What is he talking about?* "I don't understand."

J sighed. "I know."

I jumped a little at the sound of his voice as he stood behind me. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"I am going to introduce you now – merely a formality," he said. "Remember, they are watching." He placed his ungloved hand on my shoulder. The warmth of his touch radiated down my arm; the sensation was strange.

"Wait!" I stopped him before he turned me around. "Why are you introducing us?"

"It was Cecil's idea. He does not know you are becoming aware, so he does not think the two of you becoming roommates will be a problem."

Questions filled my head, and I didn't know which to ask first. In the end, there were so many they overwhelmed me, and I didn't ask a single one. He turned me around, the camera hummed, and I was silenced.

The girl sat on her bed. Her focus was straight ahead on the wall in front of her. J pushed me toward her in my desk chair and placed me in her line of vision – our knees almost touched. I stared at the girl, but she didn't see me, only looked right through me instead.

J moved beside me, his back to the camera. "Remember do not react in any way. They think you are still in a hypno-state." The sound of the ever-watchful eye came from behind him, but I couldn't see it. J's body had blocked it from my view.

"I think they know," I said in my best ventriloquist voice. I kept my focus on the girl in front of me.

"W-why do you say that?" J's voice faltered and gave away his shock at my words.

"Because before you came, I had a visitor, and I nodded when he asked me a question." I studied the girl's features. They did look a little familiar.

"Who?"

The intensity in J's voice made me jump, and my concentration on the girl's face broke. I closed my eyes and pictured the man in my room. His white hair was the first thing that came to mind. "White hair," I whispered.

J sucked in a large gulp of air. I turned my head and looked at him. His brown eyes had narrowed in a thoughtful way. "It is fine you nodded to him. His voice would be the only one to elicit that sort of response. I overheard once it had something to do with a song. Anyway, he would expect that."

A song? I questioned for a moment and in the same instant forgot about it. My body relaxed, surprising me. I didn't think I had been holding any tension.

A loud buzz filled the air. I stood up from my chair and pushed it back toward the desk. My body reacted before my brain even registered the reason for the alarm. I cleaned up my desk and put my book away. The note and envelope poked at the skin between my breasts as I moved.

"What do I do with your note?" I said as I feigned straightening and cleaning.

"Put it back in the laundry chute. I will retrieve it."

Without even thinking, my feet transported me from my desk and back toward my dresser. My body continued following procedures as much as my brain tried to resist. The video camera whined behind me, but it wasn't its eye I sensed on the back of my head. I pulled open the bottom drawer and removed the package of gym clothes. "Who is he? The white-haired man?" My hands tore at the plastic.

"He is Cecil. He runs this centre."

I stopped for a moment, the vision of the word C.E.C.I.L flashed in front of my eyes. "It's on the wall." My hands freed the green t-shirt and shorts from their confines.

"It is the name of this place. At least it is now." The last bit he said more under his breath as though speaking a thought out loud.

Another alarm buzzed, interrupting our conversation. I turned around, and for the first time since entering my room, the girl in blue had climbed off her bed. J guided her toward the desk, and she sat down. The laundry chute door slid open, and J moved toward it.

"You better put your gym clothes on," he said as he reached inside the chute and pulled out a box.

I turned away from him and unbuttoned my dress. I pulled it over my head and laid it out on my bed. My eyes caught sight of the note and envelope peeking out from my bra. I tugged my t-shirt over my head, reached inside, and smoothed out the papers the best I could. Satisfied they would not be visible, I pulled on my shorts.

"What is C.E.C.I.L?" I thought of the word engraved into the wall as I straightened out my dress on my bed.

"Contagion Eradication Centre for Intelligent Life."

I stood up straight, abandoning my dress. My confusion cleared.
“It's both his name and this place?”

“Hmph. It is. We must leave now.”

My back stiffened. Something in his tone told me there was much more to it than that. “What do I do with her?” I reached out and smoothed another wrinkle from my dress.

“Nothing.” J's voice was flat.

I turned and followed J toward the door. It slid open; we walked out and left the girl behind.

Four
B20130623L

The door opened with its usual airy sound. I entered my room and pulled at my t-shirt, glued to me with sweat, and stepped into the washroom. The mirror on the wall captured my attention. I stared at my flushed and sweat soaked face. My hair hung in limp strands, damp and tangled.

I pulled my wet shirt over my head. The smell of perspiration caused my nose to wrinkle. My shorts and underwear clung to my legs as I worked at sliding them down. When I'd finally stepped out of them, I stood back up. My reflection showed the dampened papers sticking out from my bra. I unhooked it and let it all fall to the floor in a heap with the rest of the wet clothing. My shower would be brief as it was almost time for lunch. My stomach rumbled at the thought.

Feeling fresh and dry, I picked up my clothing and the note from the floor and opened the door. The warning bell followed me out of the room.

The sight of her sitting at my desk surprised me. I had almost forgotten about my new roommate. It was difficult trying to keep my focus in front of me as I crossed the room. I wanted to watch the new girl.

I hesitated before depositing my clothes and the note into the laundry chute. My damp clothing had been my only protection, and now I had nothing. I drew in a sharp breath as I stood in the far corner of the room under the ever-watchful eye. Naked - I gasped. *How had I ever done this before?* The thought came to me again.

I took a deep breath and walked toward my dresser, all the while I told myself to act as though clothed. *I hadn't cared before*, I thought, as my hands pulled a packaged set of underwear from the drawer. But before, I hadn't quite been myself, though I wasn't sure if I was now. It was like waking up from a dream, in that state where you aren't asleep but aren't awake either. I was stuck somewhere in the middle.

I sighed as I pulled on my dress and sat on my bed. I stared at the dumbwaiter and waited for the door to open. When it came seconds later, I stood and traipsed to my chair. The girl walked to the washroom and entered.

The first tray in the compartment was labeled B20130623L. It was her tray. *Do they call her B2?* I placed the tray on the table. A moment later the dumbwaiter opened again. I reached in and pulled out a tray labelled with my ID.

The girl, B2 I'd decided, returned to the table and took her seat across from me. I stared at her and her blank eyes for a moment. *Did I look like that? Did my eyes look as though they saw nothing?* A shiver ran through my body as I wondered about my previous trance-like state. I pulled my lid from my tray and began to eat.

B2 finished her meal before me and placed her empty tray back in the dumbwaiter. *Did she even taste her food?* I looked down at the few bites still on my plate and devoured them. I was suddenly afraid to arouse suspicion if I didn't behave like B2.

For days I followed B2's lead, acting as she did, but it was getting difficult with each passing moment. I was growing tired of the act, tired of the procedures, and tired of B2. The expression "*bored to death*" popped into my head like so many other things. I wasn't sure if it was based on truth. If it wasn't, I was close to actually being boredom's first victim.

During the day, flashes of moments from the past flickered in my mind like bits of a hazy dream. Some things I understood, while others were out of reach, and I couldn't grasp their meaning.

I had begun backing off on the memory blocking/hypnotizing drug on B2 on the first day she'd moved in. But, the process was slow. I'd learned it had taken almost three months for the effects to begin reversing on me. I was still a long way from being normal.

Restless sleep filled my nights. Strange dreams invaded the peace I had grown accustomed to. There was nothing that made sense and as the weeks passed even B2's blank gaze began haunting my dreams.

B2 and I sat at the table and waited for J to arrive. She gazed with her usual blank expression as I stared up at the light above the door. As it turned out, it wasn't unusual for me to do so, and so I continued. The light flashed red, and the door slid open with its familiar whoosh. J stepped inside and pushed his cart toward the table.

I stared at the array of syringes on the cart. J kept his head down as he prepared the needles and placed blue stickers on half of them. As usual, I got mine first, the ones without any labels.

"Are you still giving me the memory blocker slash hypnotic stuff?" I said.

J stuck the last unprepared syringe into a bottle and pulled back on the plunger. Clear liquid seeped inside. He stopped it as it reached one of the many lines marking the appropriate dosage. "Yes," he said as he pulled it free.

"Why?"

"I give you an injection daily, if I stopped altogether, they would notice." His voice was flat.

"What are the other two?" I kept my focus on the cart. It wasn't clear to me how many injections I received on a daily basis as three syringes had been prepared for me this day. My head tilted back as though I looked at the light above the door.

"You certainly are filled with questions."

"I'm bored." I was careful not to shrug as I spoke.

My eyes wandered away from the door to J's face. His head bent over his work, but his eyes looked upward, and our gazes met for a moment.

"This is the alcohol swab," J said as he rubbed the cold and damp piece of gauze over my shoulder.

I smiled. He'd never explained the process before, and listening to his words interested me. J picked up the first syringe with a small amount of liquid inside.

"This is the memory block hypnosis drug – Cecil designed it. In its full strength, it keeps the patient in a trance with no memories of their past. A small amount must be administered daily to keep the patient in that state. This dosage, however, is much smaller and

diluted." The tip of the needle pierced my skin, and I closed my eyes for a second. "This one prevents menstruation for three months." He poked me in the arm again with the new syringe.

The word was familiar. I looked away as if the definition of the word could be found floating in the air. "Oh!" The memory came to mind. That was a good needle to get. *How many of those had I received?*

"And this one," J stuck the needle into my shoulder, "is the booster to the vaccine I gave you the other day."

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to recall both the shot and the meaning of the word vaccine. "Against what?" I said as it came back to me.

J pressed a piece of gauze on my shoulder for a second and replaced it with a bandage. "You always bleed a little."

He avoided my question, and so I tried again. "Vaccination against what? Do you get one?" My voice rose a little.

"Nothing you need to be concerned about. And no, not for the last year," he said as he prepared B2's arm.

B2 sat motionless as J injected her with her three injections.

"I have backed her off her block a little more today."

I rubbed at the creases in my forehead, "Why are you dressed like that? Are we sick – are you?" The questions blurted from my mouth without thought, and my heart picked up its pace.

J sighed through his mask. "You are not sick. I am not sick. The garb is merely a precaution. Now, I must go." J finished packing up his cart and left the room. I was sure he had not told me everything.

We sat a few minutes longer; each of us stared off into space. While my brain buzzed with thoughts and memories, B2's gaze was as blank as ever. I was tempted to wave my hand in front of her face. The phrase "*The lights are on, but nobody's home*" whispered in my head.

Hours later we sat eating our dinner. Seated at the table was the only time my body relaxed as the camera behind me focused on B2. My boredom turned me into a little child, and I made faces at B2

between bites of food. I mimicked her movements. Head down – take a bite of food, head up – chew. Only when I put my head up, I changed my expression. I fluttered my eyelids, stuck out my tongue, and puffed out my cheeks. Not a single face produced a reaction. B2's eyes continued their blank stare.

I sighed, dinner would be over soon, and the long night would begin.

I put my head down and stared at my last bit of food before finally placing it into my mouth. In unison, we tipped our heads up to chew. I opened my mouth wide; my chewed food rested on my tongue.

B2 stared at my open mouth, and I stared back. She blinked. The dark shades behind her eyes lifted, and the light filtered through. B2 had suddenly returned home.

Five
April

Children's laughter echoed in my ears. There were giggles and snorts of varied pitches – it was a kaleidoscope of sound. I looked down at my bare feet. Cool blades of lush, green grass stuck up between my little toes, warmed by the sunlight that bathed them. They wiggled, and the sparkles in my purple nail polish reflected the light like shining amethysts. I pulled my hands from the pockets of my shorts and looked at the nails on my fingers. Each nail was painted a different bright colour. I fanned my fingers, and the colours reminded me of a rainbow arcing across the sky.

A pair of smaller hands reached up and grabbed for mine. The same bright coloured nail polish decorated the fingernails of the little girl standing in front of me. Wavy, brown shoulder-length hair framed her round face. Her icy blue eyes beamed at me as giggles shook her body and sputtered out through her pink lips. We spun around in Ring-Around-the-Rosie fashion. The yard whizzed by in a dizzying blur as we twirled faster and faster. I leaned back, tilted my head toward the sky, and closed my eyes.

Suddenly, our bodies sprawled out on the grass, but I couldn't remember how we got there. Had our spinning dizzied us so much we fell down?

We lay on our backs and stared up at the bright, blue sky. Our imaginations created animals and other things from the fluffy white clouds. I reached up and pointed out the shape of a rabbit, taking note my hand looked much larger and older than it had earlier.

I found myself standing once again, and like before, with no recollection on how I ended up in that current position. A bead of sweat trickled down my chest and wound its way down the front of my purple tank top and between my breasts. To my surprise, I was certain I didn't have those small lumps moments ago when I'd been spinning around. My hands cupped each small mound and pressed them lightly toward my chest. They were real. I shook my head in confused disbelief.

I took a step forward; something pricked the underside of my foot. I immediately looked down and searched for the cause. Brown, dried grass poked up between my toes like little needles. I took another step. The sensation of breaking and crunching grass travelled up my body and reached my ears. I was certain there had been an audible crunch. My eyes scanned the ground and searched for any evidence of the lush green grass I'd been standing in not long ago.

The yellow and brown hues of dying and dead grass met my wandering eyes. I squinted. "What's happened?" I whispered. My hand brushed away a damp lock of hair that had fallen in front of my eyes as a bead of sweat dripped from my nose. I watched as it fell to the ground in slow motion. When it hit, the drop broke and splashed on a few blades of yellowed grass. I stared in wonder as the blades bent and moved toward the tiny amount of moisture. I crouched down and lifted the wilted blade with the tip of my finger. The grass would need much more than a drop. I tilted my head up to the cloudless, blue sky. The blazing sun was hot on my face.

"April!" A distant voice called and pulled my attention away from the sky. I rose to my feet and looked around. Who was calling? Who was being called?

"April!" It was her voice, the girl who stood beside me. She looked familiar, older than the girl I'd spun around with, but younger than B2. I stared at her; my lips parted, and my eyes narrowed again.

The girl reached out and touched my arm. My eyes fell on her warm hand. Beads of perspiration glistened in my arm hair. My gaze wandered up her arm and took in her round face. Her icy blue eyes widened as her grip tightened a little on my arm. Her lips parted.

"What's wrong, April?"

My eyelids fluttered open in the dark, and my hand reached down toward my waist and pulled the sheet up to my chest. B2's soft snore from across the room entered my ears. I rolled over, pulled the sheet up to my shoulder, and faced the wall. The surveillance equipment reminded me of its presence. I focused on the tiny

leftovers of my dream. Piecing the senseless bits of information together with the hope they'd make sense. Each scene became more defined as I put the pieces in place. I pulled my right hand out from underneath my cheek where it had been tucked and wiggled my fingers in the dark. *Had my fingers and toes worn such bright sparkling colours?* My toes wiggled under the sheets as though blades of dried grass were stuck between them.

The image of the round-faced girl with the brown, wavy hair came to mind. *Was she B2?* I squeezed my eyes shut to erase the picture of her face. A distant voice whispered deep inside in my head. *What did it say?*

I focused on the sound, on the word. The whispering voice grew louder as the memory forced its way out from the deepest part of my brain. *Come on!* I willed. Invisible hands reached inside my head and pulled the voice closer.

My eyes sprang open. *Was my name April?*

Six Reawakening

Morning couldn't come soon enough. J couldn't come soon enough.

It was hard moving through the procedures like I was nothing - like I merely existed. I was more than an ID number; I had a real name. A name I remembered or at least thought I had. Only J could help, I hoped.

We sat at the table; my gaze darted from left to right as B2's fixed straight ahead. The clarity I'd seen in B2's eyes had been fleeting. My restless feet wanted to tap on the hard, white floor, but I kept them still. My hands rested flat on the table in front of me. Once I caught the absent tapping of my finger but stopped it the second I noticed. I had no idea if I'd been doing it for long. My concentration was on keeping my feet still and watching for the red light.

A large exhale blew out between my lips when the light finally glowed red. The muscles in my upper body relaxed as the door opened. I focused on the entrance.

"Good morning." His voice boomed.

I stiffened and held my breath. It was him, the man with the overpowering scent and the white hair. The man I knew but didn't know at the same time – Cecil. J trudged in behind and pushed his cart through the door. He shot me a look. I understood and kept my gaze fixed straight ahead.

"Did you girls have a good sleep?" Cecil said.

I could see B2 nod her head, and so I did the same.

"Good, good," he said with a lilting voice. His heavy hand rested on my shoulder; the paper robe offered little protection against his cold touch. My skin prickled and tingles coursed up from my feet and out through the top of my head. My heart thumped in my ears.

I focused my attention straight ahead as J stood in his usual spot at the table. I couldn't see what he was doing, but my ears tuned into every sound.

"Excuse me, *sir*," J said in a tone I'd never heard before.

The pressure on my shoulder eased. The smell of alcohol stung my nose as the cold swab touched my skin. My shoulder registered the sharp jab of a needle. My heart picked up its pace when a wave of numbness travelled over my body. There was no time for thought as I slipped into unconsciousness.

I gasped as warmth rained down on my head. My eyes closed. Fuzzy memories and thoughts teetered on the verge of clarity. Seconds later, they bombarded me like the spray of water from the shower head.

I stepped from the shower, allowing the blowers to dry me off. *How long had I been gone?* My stomach tightened as more memories came rushing back.

When I stepped from the bathroom, B2 was already seated at the table, waiting, and I joined her. Thoughts swirled in my head. My last memory was of sitting in my chair waiting for J to come into the room. I had something I had wanted to ask him, but that was one memory I couldn't reach. I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, the red light flashed, and J came into the room alone.

"How long?" I whispered.

"Glad you are back." J glanced at me for a moment; his eyes crinkled. He returned his attention to his cart and went back to work.

"How long?" I repeated a little louder.

"It has..." he wiped and poked in one quick motion, "only been two days." My arm jerked a little. It had hurt.

"Two days?" The revelation surprised me.

"It depends on how you look at it; I might even suggest three."

I didn't think my eyes could open any further. I opened my mouth instead.

"It does not seem to have left any ill effects." He pressed a small cotton ball over the injection site.

"Did *he* come every day?"

"No, only that one time. The next day I dropped the dosage back down to what you had been getting. It was a bit of a risk,

though.”

“What do you mean?” There was a sudden flutter in my chest.

“Just your body went from having one full dose to about an eighth in a twenty-four-hour period.” He stuck a bandage on my shoulder.

“You risked my life?” My ears burned with anger.

J paid no attention and continued to prepare B2's injection. “I only risked returning your complete memory, but it was a risk I had to take. I need you to be aware sooner than I expected.”

I furrowed my brow. “Why?”

“Things are...” he paused as he stuck a needle into B2's arm. Her blank gaze showed she never registered the prick.

“Are what?” I said. My patience waned.

“Well, I am not exactly sure what. But trust me when I tell you things are feeling a little different.”

“What about B2?” I said as I stared into her empty eyes.

“I am backing her down as quickly as I can. It is far riskier for her to go too fast. You had already been on a much lower dose for quite some time before I had to give you a full one again. Your sister on the other hand...”

J's mention of the word sister sparked memories of brown grass, sparkling nail polish, and a round-faced girl calling a name.

“Is my name April?” The words blurted from my mouth.

J stopped cleaning his cart and stared at me for a moment. Clearly, I had asked the question of all questions.

J didn't answer. Instead, he finished cleaning up. Then he pushed the cart toward the door.

My heart beat faster as the burning returned to my ears. “Is my name April?” I said again. My stomach clenched with my words.

“Yes.” The door slid open, and J disappeared along with his clanging cart.

Seven Auto-pilot

Wisps of hair around my face fluttered in the breeze created by the sliding door. I stepped inside the doorframe and looked back at B2. Her body hunched over the desk in the corner as she worked on her studies like a programmed robot.

I followed J down the long, white corridor. The lights hummed and flickered overhead. Cameras with red eyes tracked our progress down the corridor. We passed several doors along the way, none of which gave any sign as to what lay behind them. Thoughts of what, or who, buzzed through my head.

J turned right, and I followed. We had made this trek several times a week. My eyes focused on the empty hall, a fact that I only noticed in recent days. We met no one and, apart from the humming lights, there was no other sound but the echo of our footfalls. I concentrated and thought back to my other trips through the corridor. No memory existed that showed any contact with anyone.

Not a single picture adorned the walls to add colour to the starkness. The floor was as hard and white as the one in my room, the corridor a long, white tunnel.

J stopped and stepped to the side. A glass door marked the end of the long hall and stood about ten feet away. The glass entrance glowed with bright, warm light. It differed from the light in the hall in that it was not as sterile. I stepped forward and walked past J, my steps hesitant.

“Do not look back at me.” J's voice cautioned.

My back stiffened. I continued forward, pushed open the glass door, and stepped outside.

The bright light stung my eyes for a moment, and I squinted and blinked until they adjusted. I inhaled the fresh air and stretched my arms above my head. My heart skipped, and I allowed them to fall back down to my sides. *Should I have done that?* My body tensed. I

closed my eyes for a moment. *It's too late to worry now.* I opened them and exhaled the worry away.

I sighed. I wasn't outside but in an expansive room designed to mimic the outdoors. Sunlamps hung from the sky-blue ceiling. Their heat warmed the top of my head. White, puffy clouds hung from the rafters to complete the look. A cut stone path meandered through the imitation grass. Colourful, plastic flowers poked out in a random pattern. Tall, artificial trees stretched up toward the fake sky. Somewhere on the other side of the room the name C.E.C.I.L was etched into the wall.

I stood still and stared at the simulated outdoor landscape in front of me. Murals of mountains and forests made it look like the room never ended. I closed my eyes and inhaled again. Even the air smelled fresh. It was, in fact, the only thing that was real, piped in from outside. According to J, it was the newest feature, added only several days ago.

My hesitation lasted only a moment, and when I opened my eyes, I began my walk. Bird songs, buzzing insects, and the whisper of something else resounded through the pretend forest. I stepped inside the tree line. Rustling leaves caused me to tilt my head back. The treetops swayed in a gentle motion, pushed around by fans high above.

The walk would lead me through the artificial forest ten times. It would take me about twenty minutes to complete. The entire journey measured over a kilometre and a half or just under a mile. An illuminated sign at the beginning of the trail documented the distance and number of every loop around.

I wanted to stop and investigate the forest surrounding me, but to do so would only alert them of my awareness. Despite the real outdoor look, many red eyes tracked my every movement. My curiosity would have to be satisfied by the images my eyes captured. Every once in a while I found my pace slowing; I had to remind myself to walk as though I didn't care about my surroundings. Relief washed over me when the number ten lit up on the sign. Each loop had shown me things I hadn't noticed before and tempted me to leave the trail.

I turned off the path that wound its way around the perimeter and headed down another. The trail would break free from the forest and lead me into a clearing in the centre of the room. In this area, stations were set up for the various exercises I had to complete.

How I'd ever managed the monotony before was unimaginable, but of course, before I hadn't been aware of it. I went through the motions without thought or emotion. There wasn't one station I enjoyed. After a few minutes, I left one post and moved on to the next. Each area was timed and monitored. After completing one circuit, I started again. It ended when the number five appeared on another illuminated sign.

Hot and sweaty from my exercises, I moved back to the forest trail for a final lap and my cool down. It was the lap I enjoyed the most; plodding around had been engrained into my head. The slower pace allowed for me to absorb the phoney sights much easier than before. Small crevices inside trees caught my attention and urged me to explore them, but I did not veer off the path. Instead, I continued my observations from afar.

My heart skipped a little as a thought entered my mind. *Do I dare?* I was approaching a large rock that sat on the edge of the trail. I had perceived it as real, but I couldn't be sure. I allowed my steps to move me closer to the edge of the path as I neared. The boulder was only feet away. My left hand hung at my side. Another few steps and I would be walking close enough for my hand to brush up against it and satisfy my curiosity.

My heart raced as my thoughts wrestled back and forth. I stretched out my wiggling fingers. *Just a few more steps*, my mind whispered. A bead of sweat trickled down my lower back. The anticipation was growing as I made the final approach; my pulse quickened. As I passed by, my fingers curled back into my hand. My fists clenched at my sides, and I finished my stroll. I exhaled through pursed lips, relieved and disappointed at the same time.

J was waiting where I'd left him and led me back to my room. The door opened, B2 was cleaning up her desk, and I stepped into our

room.

“Have a good day.” J's voiced called out before the door slid closed behind me.

I headed to the bathroom and continued my mechanical routine. My auto-pilot life needed to end. I was about to lose control.

Eight Recognition

I lay on my side and stared up at the camera in the corner of the room. Its watchful red eye focused on B2 as she made her bed. It would be several more minutes before it turned its attention to me. B2 headed to the bathroom and continued her morning routine.

As every second passed, I found it increasingly difficult to keep up the façade of a robotic state. I'd figured out the surveillance equipment focused on us at different times. When B2 rose from bed a half hour before me, it spent its time watching her and ignored me like I wasn't even in the room. I grew brave enough to even wave at it, but it never wandered away from B2 as she stood by her bed and made it. During those several minutes, the time was mine. I could do whatever I wanted in my corner of the room, and the intrusive equipment would leave me alone. I learned to steal several moments during the day, moments I would use for myself.

I stood in the corner of the room underneath the ever-watchful eye. For all it knew, I was piling my laundry into the chute. I pressed my back into the painted, concrete wall and let myself slide down to the floor. By the time I reached the white ceramic, my dress had risen and exposed my lower back. I did nothing to fix it; the coolness of the wall was pleasant on my skin.

B2 was over by my – now our – dresser, and she removed some clothing and a set of fresh bedding. It was a task the camera found more entertaining than trying to see my actions.

I pulled the folded piece of paper from the front of my dress. My hands smoothed it out on the hard floor. I reached into one of my pockets and pulled out a shortened pencil.

I'd discovered or remembered I enjoyed drawing. It was as natural for me to draw as it was to breathe. Every day I worked on my illustration for a few minutes. It was a face I couldn't get out of my mind, though I had no recollection of whose it was. My memory shared small fragments of the image in my dreams, a collage of

blurred features that made no sense. I sorted through the pieces of information in my head and used those bits that were the sharpest.

My most recent dream had given me another clue. The brief flash of the face came to me again behind closed lids. My eyelids fluttered back open to the faint pencilled outline of an oval shape. Hair and indiscernible features stared up at me from the wrinkled sheet of lined paper. The details were rough. There was no telling if the face was male or female, young or old, but I was determined to make that change.

I gripped the pencil and began working on the eyes. They were the only thing that had stood out from my dream. I couldn't remember the exact colour, only that they were light. Thick, long lashes framed them, and they twinkled with happiness. I made sure to capture the emotion in my sketch.

The whirring of the video equipment interrupted me. It had turned toward the wall as far as it could. I jumped to my feet, folded my drawing, and tucked it back inside the front of my dress.

I trudged back to the dresser for clean bedding. As I made my bed, I removed the drawing and tucked it under the fitted sheet. The hair rose on the back of my neck as though a pair of eyes glared at me. I wanted to turn around and glare back at the camera. My pulse quickened, and my face warmed at the thought. I let out my breath. "No, I won't," I whispered to the wall in front of me.

The bathroom had also become a place where I could do what I wanted. I'd learned that I could go a day without a shower and use the time for drawing instead. I looked forward to those days. My twelve minutes of bathroom prep time dropped to about two, and I had a full ten minutes at my leisure.

It wasn't long before more detail filled in my sketch, and the face of a young boy emerged on the wrinkled paper. The creases had distorted the image somewhat, despite my careful folding. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to protect the drawing. It was only about a week and a half old, but the wear made it look much older than that.

I studied the smeared pencilled features, the full cheeks and laughing eyes, yet he remained anonymous. I shut mine and focused on the blackness behind my lids as I tried to get a clearer image in my mind. *Who are you?*

The alarm sounded, and I was forced to fold the drawing up once gain and tuck it between my breasts. I pulled on my paper robe. With B2 sharing the room, J now arrived after my morning shower time instead of before.

A quick look in the mirror showed I did not look as though I'd had a hot shower. I dragged a wet brush through my hair and pinched my cheeks until they flushed red. I scrubbed my teeth with a wet finger and swished water I'd drank from the tap, around my mouth. I pulled the robe tighter around my body and exited the room just in time.

B2 sat at the table, and I joined her, the image of the boy's face still in my head.

When J entered the room, I couldn't wait to show him the picture. My heart thumped, and I was sure it rustled both the paper robe and the drawing.

"I have something to show you," I whispered in a somewhat shaky voice as J prepared my arm.

"Hmm." His eyebrows rose, but he didn't look at me.

My right arm rested on the table in front of me like it always did. All I needed to do was reach between the folds of my paper attire and pull the drawing out from underneath. But, I was afraid any movement I made would catch the attention of whoever watched.

"It's under my robe."

J pulled the protective red cap from the needle. It slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor with a light tap. He placed the syringe back on his cart. "Oops!" he said, as he moved behind me. "You can take it out now."

I peeled back the fold of my robe and eased out the paper. It was difficult, but I managed to unfold it with one hand. All the while J positioned himself between me and the camera.

"Okay?" he said.

"Yes."

J returned to the cart and placed the red cap on the tray. He picked up the syringe. I narrowed my eyes as I saw the second needle.

"Do you know who this is? And why another needle?" I smoothed the paper against my chest the best I could.

J glanced at the drawing as he moved closer to inject me. "No." He was abrupt and went back to work. "And the second needle is another booster." He picked it up and pricked my arm.

I rubbed the creases in my brow as my shoulders slumped a little. The hope I had disappeared when J paid little attention to my drawing. I stared down at the table in front of me and studied its surface. For the first time, I saw tiny flecks of grey dotting the white table. From the top of my vision, I could see B2's hands as they rested in front of her. A small flicker of movement caused me to raise my eyes a little. I stared at B2's hands and once again her finger moved. My eyes scanned up her arms before they rested on her face.

B2's eyes focused on the drawing that I still had pressed to my chest. Her expression was no longer blank; her eyes registered recognition.

Nine Seed

My mouth dropped open. My gaze fixed on B2's face. The light had once again returned to her eyes, and I hoped it would stay. My lips moved, and I spoke J's name, but no sound reached my ears. I forced more air over my vocal chords. "J," I whispered.

"Hmm," he acknowledged as he kept his head bent over his cart and prepared B2's injections.

"She's back."

J's head tilted up, giving me a full view of his masked profile. I stared at the respirator on his face; his amplified breathing was louder than usual. I concentrated on the sound. *Was it always like that?* I tried to recall hearing the echoed inhale and exhale of his breath. I suppressed the urge to whip my head around and look at the room from every angle. *Am I becoming more awake?* I closed my eyes for a moment and refocused my thoughts on the immediate issue.

B2 stared at the paper I held against my chest. She squinted for a moment then resumed her steady gaze.

I moved my hand over the paper and blocked out part of the image. B2's eyes scanned up to my face. We glared at each other and then her gaze dropped back to the drawing pressed against me.

I slid the piece of paper down my chest until it curled and travelled across the table in front of me. The whole time B2 followed it with her eyes.

"I think she knows who this is," I said to J as he stuck B2 in the arm.

"Perhaps," J stated in monotone. His breath hushed through the respirator. The sound irritated me.

I glared at the back of J's head. "Don't you care that she's awake?"

"Of course, but it may not be permanent. There is no point in getting our hopes up."

Heat rose up my neck and settled in my cheeks. "This is different," I hissed.

J straightened at the sound of my voice. Despite the bagginess of his white suit, I could sense the tension of his muscles underneath. He sighed; his shoulders rounded as he relaxed. "Give it a little time, A2. If her eyes still register awareness for the next twenty-four hours, then we can move forward." J gave B2 her second injection.

"No, it's different this time, I know it. Before it only lasted a couple of seconds, maybe minutes. But now..." My attention returned to B2. She squinted again as she maintained her focus on the drawing that lay on the table in front of me.

J cleaned up his cart and turned back toward me as he pulled it away from the table. "The same thing happened with you - several times. I too, thought you had come around only to find minutes or hours later, that you had returned to your previous state." He pushed the cart toward the door. It slid open. "Twenty-four hours," he said again as he left the room.

I stared back at B2 and folded the drawing with care. She watched my every move as I tucked it inside my paper robe. *It is different this time*, I whispered inside my head. I stood up from the table and pushed my chair back into place. B2 remained seated, her eyes focused in front of her.

"You better get up, too, before they notice."

B2 rose, pushed her chair back into place, and headed for our dresser.

My underwear and green dress were laid out on my bed. I peeled my robe from my body and put on my clothing before moving toward the desk. I sat down, pulled my book from the shelf and placed it in front of me. I heard the gentle whoosh of the door. The camera buzzed; it followed B2 out of the room and would soon be focusing its attention on me.

I opened my history book. *How many chapters had I pretended to read?* I slid open the drawer and grabbed my yellow highlighter and a pencil. I stared at the words not reading any of them as my thoughts swirled in my head. My hand gripped the highlighter and

picked out sentences and words in pretense. I cared little for whatever it was I studied. I flipped a page. The movement of my arm caused the paper in the front of my dress to shift a little, reminding me it was still there.

More words bombarded my eyes. I tried to refocus my attention, but having not read anything before; the words did not make sense.

I highlighted text at random. A single word caught my attention, and it seemed to jump from the page. To me, it looked larger and darker than any others that surrounded it. My highlighter ran over the word, back and forth. The bright yellow accentuated it and burned it into my mind. I closed my eyes. The word had imprinted. In the blackness behind my eyelids, the bright yellow stain turned into a purple blob. In its centre was the word "escape", and it glowed.

It was all I could think of; that one word was like a tiny seed planted in the soil, only it was an idea planted in my brain. All it needed was light and nourishment to grow and turn into a plan.

The buzzing signaled the end of the study hour. I closed my eyes and shook my head in slow motion. When I opened them again, they focused back on the yellow word. I had been so lost in thought, trying to develop a plan; I hadn't turned a single page.

I cleaned up my desk, my ears tuned into the sound of the doors behind me. The impulse to turn and look at B2 was almost irresistible. I needed to know if she was still aware. *What if she isn't?*

My heart thumped in my ears at the thought. I continued cleaning, and when I finished, I sat on my bed and waited for B2 to finish in the bathroom.

It was hard to sit still, hard to keep my feet from tapping on the floor. I squeezed my hands together in my lap. When the bathroom door finally opened, I jumped from my bed. The camera with its ever-watchful eye whined at my sudden movement.

Oh no! Did I move too quickly? The thought spun in my head.

B2 plodded toward the table and took her seat. I continued toward the bathroom; my pace slowed by my worry and opened the door. The warm air left over from the blast of steam rushed into me.

I stepped through and closed the door behind me. I leaned back against it and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and let the air escape from my pursed lips. With each slow exhale, the thumping of my heart slowed to a near normal pace. I washed my hands and exited the room. I stared straight ahead as I moved to join B2 at the table. I had to be more careful.

Tension released from my body as I looked at the food in front of me. B2 picked at her meal, in the same manner, she always had. Her eyes were trained to her plate, and I waited with patience for her to raise her head. I needed to look into them. I only hoped when I did it wouldn't be my reflection staring back.

B2 kept her focus on her food. She seemed fascinated by every bite she took. She chewed much slower than usual as though she were relishing every mouthful. *Look up*, I willed. But she denied my wish.

I rushed through my sandwich, realizing that it sat untouched on my plate as B2 moved onto her salad. She picked up her fork, gave it a quick inspection and plunged it into the bowl of greens. I matched her every bite as I kept my focus on her face. I wasn't about to look away and miss what I'd been waiting for – hoping to see.

B2's lips glistened from the dressing, and she ran the tip of her pink tongue over them. She picked up her apple and turned it around before sinking in her teeth. The crunch echoed in the room. I followed suit, though my bite was much smaller. Apple juice ran down B2's chin as she chewed. She reached inside her mouth with her fingers. The brown spec landed with a plink on her plate. B2 continued eating. Her throat moved up and down as she swallowed the pulverized chunk of apple.

"Seed," she said, and she looked into my eyes.

Ten From Hope

I gasped and almost dropped my apple. The sudden inhale sent a small amount of juice down the wrong way, and I coughed.

"Don't speak," I said in a panicked and scratchy voice.

B2's eyes narrowed, and her lips parted.

"And don't look at me like that. Stare down at your food or straight ahead. Do you understand?"

B2's mouth opened, and I held my breath. Fear replaced panic at the thought of her speaking again. Her eyes drifted past my face and stared at the wall behind me. She brought the apple to her mouth and took another bite.

"We're being watched," I said between bites. B2 continued to chew and stare past me – through me. "B2?" My chest tightened. *Is she gone again?*

B2's eyes wandered up to my face and back down to her plate. She took another bite. "Yes," she sputtered as she chewed; her eyes pointed at the table in front of her.

A loud breath escaped from my lips. My body shook with excitement. I had so much to tell her, but I didn't know where to start. "I hope you understand everything I'm saying," I began. I took another bite and chewed until there was nothing left. Its sweetness flowed down my throat. With every meal, food tasted better, and I wanted to enjoy every moment. B2 was looking down at her piece of fruit. "There's a camera behind me. It watches everything we do." I watched B2 and looked for some sign of understanding. She held her half-eaten apple in her right hand while her left lay flat on the table beside her tray. Her eyes focused on the fruit. I curled my fingers into a fist. I leaned forward; the edge of the table touched my upper body. An idea popped into my head.

"If you understand me, slowly raise one finger on your left hand." I sat back. My gaze concentrated on her fingers. The tip of my tongue swept over my lips. Finally, she raised her index finger, and I grinned. "You can talk when your back is to the camera. They

think we're mute. There is no microphone, so they can't hear us. Do you understand?" A few moments later B2's finger rose again.

We continued our pattern of conversation. We ate; I explained what I knew or remembered, and B2 raised her finger in understanding. I did not mention the sister thing and wouldn't until I was certain. As we cleaned up our trays and placed them in the dumbwaiter, I could only hope she truly understood.

B2 headed toward our desk and got ready for her study time while I dressed for fitness. The act had yet to get any easier.

I approached the door, and it slid open. The empty hallway confused me. J was not waiting on the other side. I felt a little skip in my chest. He had always been there to escort me or at least for as long as I remembered.

I turned left out of my room and moved along the corridor. Every doorway enticed me to stop. There was a strong desire to put my ear to the sliding panels and listen for life on the other side. If only the cameras weren't watching. My eyes travelled up to the nosy piece of equipment pointed in my direction, and I squinted. It sat still, its glowing red eye extinguished. My pulse quickened. *Was the other one behind me the same?*

The lights overhead flickered, and I stood still. *What is happening?* I took a deep breath and turned back around. As I moved, my ears listened for the familiar whir of the camera. An eerie stillness blanketed the corridor. The intermittent buzzing of the lights and my quickened breaths were the only sound.

The equipment I stared at was as lifeless as the other. I took the chance and placed my ear on the first door I saw, but I heard nothing. I crossed the hall to the next door, but again I heard only silence. I moved back to the centre of the hall; the lights overhead flickered. After a few seconds of hesitation, my feet moved me back and delivered me to the first door again. I waved my hand in front of the entry panel and held my breath. The seconds ticked by but nothing happened.

I sighed and turned away. I closed my eyes and shook my head at my stupidity. The familiar sound of an opening door interrupted

my self-chastisement. I whirled around to an open doorway and stepped inside the strange room.

The light turned on as I entered the dark apartment. Inside, it was as bright and sterile as my room. A bed, free of sheets and blankets, pressed itself against the blank, white wall. A white dresser stood at its head and a desk at its foot.

I made my way over toward the dresser but came to a halt after a couple of steps. I clenched my fists at my sides and took a deep breath as I gathered my nerve. My insides shook. I turned and looked toward the opposite corner. The surveillance system was much like the one in my room. But like the two cameras out in the hallway, it too sat motionless and dark. My pulse slowed, and I relaxed. I reached the dresser and held my breath. I opened the first drawer and then the next. Each was as empty as the room and my hope for finding something – anything - evaporated. By the time I opened the final drawer, disappointment replaced my optimism.

I trudged over to the bathroom. Despite the feeling that I would find nothing, a small spark of hope flickered. The empty room extinguished all that remained of the spark.

My heavy feet carried me out of the apartment and back into the corridor. I turned my head in time to catch the lights turning off. The door closed behind me.

Across the hall was the second door. *I might as well*, I thought to myself. A quick glance at the cameras to either side showed me they remained still. The lights overhead flickered, and I walked across the hall.

I held my hand over the panel. As with the first room, there was a hesitation before the doors opened to another darkened space. My heart sank even further. A quick inspection of the area revealed that it too was empty and seemed never to have held any occupants.

Were B2 and I the only ones here? Was that why we were sharing a room? The door closed behind me, and I stepped into the middle of the corridor and stood motionless. For a moment, I was unsure of my next steps, but my feet moved me forward before my mind could even think.

I rounded the corner to my right and entered a brighter, buzzing hallway. The sound of active surveillance systems indicated that the hall was quite alive. I inched toward the glass door at the far end. My heart thudded. I heard unrecognizable voices echo from the corridor I'd left behind.

"It looks like it's just this section, sir." The voice behind me said.

I slowed down my pace as my ears strained. After a long pause, I heard the voice again.

"Yes, sir. The corridor is clear." Another pause. "No, sir. Hang on." My heart and my pace quickened at the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Yes, sir. Subject in sight, sir." Another pause.

I reached the glass door and placed my hand on the handle.

"She's about to enter the Simulation Room, sir."

I pulled open the door.

"Yes, sir..."

The door closed behind me and shut out the rest of the conversation. *Where is J?* I questioned myself as I stepped into the forest.

Eleven To Despair

Thoughts of J and his absence had run through my head while I completed my circuit training. I had hoped that he'd be waiting to escort me back to my room, but as before, I walked alone.

The corridor outside my room was back to normal. The overhead lights buzzed and emitted a steady glow. The ever-watchful red eyes whined and made sure they caught my every move.

B2 sat on her bed with a book in her hands. She was reading *Charlotte's Web*, though she seemed too old for it. *How old are we?* It was a new thought, one that hadn't crossed my mind before.

I stepped into the bathroom. My body gave into the freedom I had for the next fifteen minutes. I rubbed my forehead in thought as the question about our ages could not be ignored.

B2 was younger, though not by much, a couple of years at the most. I stared at my face in the mirror, leaning closer to get a better look. *How long have we been here? When did we come here?* My ID flashed in front of my eyes. I tapped my forehead as I thought about the letters and numbers. *Does it mean something?* I believed the A at the beginning indicated the first initial of my name, April, but the rest remained a mystery.

I stripped off my clothing. My ID number rolled through my head. A20100315L, A was for April. I repeated the numbers again. "Twenty, ten, zero, three-fifteen," I said aloud. *An address?* I shook my head and stepped inside the glass surroundings of the shower, warm water cascaded over the top of my head. "Twenty, ten, zero three, fifteen," I chanted. "Twenty-ten, o-three, fifteen." The numbers rolled through my mind and out my mouth. I tipped my head back and allowed the water to flow over my face. I recited the numbers in my head.

"Twenty-ten." There was a familiar ring. "Twenty-ten," I repeated. I clapped my hands with excitement as it came to me. *Twenty-ten, two-thousand and ten – it was the year I was born.* The rest of the numbers fell into place. *Zero three, fifteen – March*

fifteen, the numbers marked the month and the day. The water trickled, and I stepped out of the shower as it stopped altogether. Hot air blew all around me. The drops of water evaporated. I ran my fingers through my hair and untangled the drying mess. My birth date swirled around my head.

What about the L? I questioned the final bit of my ID. *B2 and I had an L at the end of our identifications. If we're sisters...* "The L has to be the first initial of our last name," I whispered. But what that was I couldn't remember.

I finished up in a hurry and left the privacy of the bathroom behind as I strolled naked from the room. My only protection came from the fitness clothes I held in front of me.

B2 sat in silence on her bed engrossed in her book, or at least she pretended to be. I deposited my clothes into the laundry chute and walked back toward my dresser.

I dressed quickly, pulling my dress over my head and making sure the drawing tucked inside did not fall out. Once clothed, I headed over toward the desk. I stared at the small assortment of books on the shelf. Every few weeks the volumes were changed. There was a random collection which usually incorporated books from several different genres.

My fingers bumped over the spines as I read the titles. I fixed on one particular book that held my interest. It wasn't the title that caught my eye, but the corner of a piece of paper that stuck out from its pages. I pulled the blue novel with the gold lettering from the shelf and moved back to my bed. I sat down and leaned back against the wall. I drew my legs toward my chest and laid the book on my thighs. I opened it to where the piece of paper nestled between the pages and unfolded it. The camera hummed, and I hoped it couldn't see what I was doing.

Hi – my eyes rested on the word before moving over the others.

I don't remember my name – the handwriting was small and neat.

Do I know you? – It took everything I had not to look over at B2.

I've seen the boy in the picture. I mean, I think I have...maybe – My eyebrows rose.

What is this place? Why are we here? Who is watching us? Why do we have to act like we're robots? – Her questions filled the page. Some I could answer, but most were the same as mine.

How long have we been here? I don't remember much - anything - before today. I feel like I just woke up from a very long sleep. I think I'm going to freak out – At those words, I looked up from my book and over at B2 for a second. She looked enraptured by her book. But I knew from experience that her mind reeled with her questions. She was likely not reading anything at all.

I returned to the paper and the few remaining questions.

What's your name? Why do we get needles? Are we going to get out of here? – *I hope so*, I whispered in my head.

I slid the piece of paper out from the book and onto my stomach, then I turned the page. I folded the paper with one hand till it was small enough to fit inside my fist. I held onto it until our reading time came to an end. When I climbed from bed, I managed to stuff it down the front of my dress. It rested next to my drawing.

At dinner, I answered as many of B2's questions as I could between bites of food. Her face registered understanding as she stared off into space. She'd perfected her faked blank expression. At times her nose would wrinkle with one of my answers. The action led me to believe that it wasn't satisfactory and likely left her with more questions. I did the best I could, under the circumstances, but I couldn't wait for morning and J. I would get him to explain further. My pulse raced a little at the thought of him. *He will be pleased when he sees B2 is aware*, I smiled.

Bedtime came. I tried to sleep, but every time I closed my eyes all I saw were B2's questions floating around behind my eyelids. I stared into the dark until my eyelids slammed shut and sleep erased the dancing words.

Bright light from above blinded me. I rolled over onto my right side and blinked. A wide yawn took over my face, and my eyes watered. I wiped away the blur in time to see B2 heading into the bathroom. I sat up and stretched, eager to get the day started – eager for J to arrive.

We sat at the table; B2 stared through me, while I waited for the red light. I spoke few words, only telling her that I felt we could trust J and that he would tell us all he could.

The red light glowed, and my pulse quickened; my fingers wiggled with excitement. The cart came through the open door; its contents rattled as it entered the room. My eyes widened as they watched in slow motion. Blue, unfamiliar, gloved hands gripped the handle that pushed the cart forward. *Did J change glove colours? His are always white.* My eyes glanced down at my chest as my heart thumped. The edge of the white, paper robe fluttered with each beat. The cart rattled and moved closer to the table. Unfamiliar, blue eyes stared at me from behind the goggles and mask. I stared past the stranger. There was nothing I could do but wait for the needle to prick into my flesh.

"Come on, get up! Get up!" A strange and hurried voice called in my ear. My numb body was pulled forward, and my eyes fluttered open. A blue-white light flashed around in the dark.

"Wass goin' non?" I sputtered. It was as though my tongue had grown and no longer fit inside my mouth. Drool pooled at the corners of my lips until they overflowed, and warm, sticky saliva dripped down my chin.

"We have to leave." He pulled on my arm, my body followed, and I sat up with my feet resting on the floor. Tingling travelled up from my toes until it reached the top of my head and dissipated.

"Don unnastan." I willed my tongue to function. "I don't... understand," I repeated with great effort. My eyes closed, tired from the exertion of speaking those few words.

"Look at me!" The voice commanded. A weight pressed down on my shoulders, and my body shook. My eyelids fluttered back open.

The white-garbed man knelt in front of me. He released my shoulders and shone the blue tinged light towards himself. I focused on the light, and my brain finally registered that it came from a flashlight. My gaze travelled up the white arm and rested on a masked face. The man's goggles caught a little of the glare from the light. I squinted and tried to see behind the mask. He turned his

head a bit, and I caught sight of dark, familiar eyes. The light shook; my focus wandered back to his shaking hand then up to his covered face. His eyes were familiar, but barely. The puffy, multicoloured skin around them made them difficult to see.

My jaw dropped. "J?"

He nodded.

"Wass happen..." I squeezed my eyelids shut and willed my tongue. "What happened?"

"We have to go." He rose to his feet in what looked to be a painful motion. He moaned a little confirming my suspicion.

"Wass goin' on?" I said as I stood on shaky legs.

"There is no time for that now." He grabbed my hand and pulled.

"I not movin' – tell me." My words came out a little rough but good enough to be understood.

"It has all gone awry." J tugged on my hand again as he turned.

"What has?" I glanced up at the camera in the room. My thoughts became clear. The red eye no longer glowed.

"Everything." He pulled harder, and I followed a few steps but stopped. He wasn't pulling me in the direction of the door.

"Where are you taking me?" I questioned. My voice and my words had grown stronger. I pulled my hand free from J's and folded my arms.

"You cannot go out through the door." He reached out, grabbed my hand, and pulled me toward the laundry chute. The door slid open with a loud, airy sound. "Get in."

I gasped. "No!" My heart raced. "The bottom drops out."

"It does not. It is more like an elevator. Now get in. I will meet you at the bottom."

Elevator? I couldn't quite grasp what that was. Panicked thoughts swirled in my head. I tried to pull away, but his grip had tightened. I reached up to wipe beads of sweat from my face.

"B2!" I cried. "You can't leave her behind."

"Do not worry about her." He pulled me closer to the opening.

"No, no, she's aware. She talks."

His grip loosened and he moved behind me. "You must get in." He pushed me forward. I tried to stiffen my legs, but they were still

too weak.

“No, B2!” I braced my arms on the wall on either side of the opening. “B2!” I yelled. A sharp point entered my shoulder. “What you do,” I slurred.

“Sorry, we do not have time.”

My legs gave out, and darkness fell.

Twelve

Sweet Sounds

My eyes fluttered open to blackness, and I stared out into the dark. I had no thoughts or memories. My mind was as blank as a clean sheet of paper. I blinked and waited for something to return.

It was slow at first, like the first few words typed in a message. The information came in spurts then began to build, and the blank page of my mind filled with thoughts.

I squeezed my eyelids shut and ran my hand over the surface underneath me. It was not my usual soft mattress I'd lain on every night, but something much different - spongy. My hands and fingertips investigated the material. They pressed and rubbed as my mind searched for recognition. After a moment, they ventured over the edge and found a much rougher and harder surface. *Am I lying on a floor?* I opened my eyes back to the dark.

The exploration of the mysterious surface continued as I tried to determine what my hands touched. I stretched out my arm. A sudden dull ache in my shoulder flooded my brain with the memory of voices and yelling. My voice had called out to B2, J responded, a sharp poke, and then the darkness that followed. My memories returned and invaded not only my mind but my entire being. *Where am I?*

Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. Fear enveloped my body. I wanted to jump up from where I lay, but could no longer move – panic set in and held me in place. The beat of my heart echoed in my ears. My mouth opened, and I thought I was going to scream, but a quiet voice spoke instead. "B2," I whispered.

A soft groan came to my ears; I whipped my head to my right side. I gasped, and as the air passed through my lips, my heart slowed. *Did I only imagine the sound?*

I concentrated hard. My ears strained to hear any noise, any sound that would drown out my beating heart and racing thoughts. Another tired groan echoed in the dark followed by a distinct

rustling. I shivered and curled into a ball, wrapping my arms around my head.

"Who...who's there?" I whispered with a shaky voice.

A light snore was my response.

I unfurled and uncovered my head. "B2? Is that you? B2, wake up."

More rustling, I was certain I was not alone. I took a deep breath and stretched out my arm. The dull ache returned to my shoulder once again. My stomach knotted as my fingers touched another sponge-like surface. I pushed down, and they sank a little.

"B2!" I called again.

There was another groan and then after a moment of silence a sleep-filled word.

"What?" an irritated voice whispered back.

I closed my eyes and allowed my body to relax into the cushioned surface. "It is you? It is B2, right?" For a moment I wasn't sure. B2 had spoken few words before. Her voice was not familiar, and as she was still becoming aware, I wasn't certain how much she understood.

"Y-yes. It's m-me," she stuttered the most words I'd heard her speak at one time.

"Are you okay?"

"I th-think s-so."

I rolled onto my right side and faced her voice; my aching shoulder brought back the memory of the poking needle. I shifted my weight a little until the ache eased.

"I th-thought we weren't..." she paused, "allowed to t-talk." She finished. Her tired and hesitant voice cut through the dark.

I scanned the blackness for a red eye. After several seconds, I sighed. "I think it's okay now."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't think we're in the same place anymore. Do you remember anything?"

She shuffled, and I waited in the quiet dark for her answer. After a while, she spoke. "Yes and n-no...I remember..." she paused, "I remember...the p-picture and -"

"Who is it?" I interrupted.

"I don't know...I th-thought I knew, but now..."

My hope turned to disappointment. "What else?"

"D-different things...they don't m-make sense."

I nodded. More thoughts and memories than before ran through my head since I'd woken up and nothing made sense to me either. "Have you always done that?" I said.

"What?"

"Stutter."

There was another long pause before B2 spoke again. "I don't know... I th-think so. Why?"

I shrugged my left shoulder; my right arm rested under my head as a pillow. "I just wondered. My name is April." The introduction spilled from my lips like I'd said it many times before. Of course, I was sure I had, for the moment I didn't remember.

"I'm..." she paused. "Hmph, I d-don't know." She sounded a little frustrated.

"I didn't remember my name at first either, at least not until I dreamt of it."

"Maybe I should g-go back to sleep." She spoke without pauses, the first since waking.

"It might help. Anyway, I already know it starts with the letter B."

"You d-do?" Her voice perked.

"Yes, I figured it out before..." I was about to say 'before we left C.E.C.I.L.' but I wasn't quite sure we weren't still there. "At C.E.C.I.L. Your ID begins with the first initial of your first name and ends with the first initial of your last name. The numbers in-between are your birthday." I smiled at my reasoning. But doubt erased it within seconds of telling my idea to someone else. "At least, I think it is. Anyway," I pushed the doubt away and replaced it with self-confidence. "We both have the same last initial, L, and J said we were sisters. Did you know that?"

Once again there was silence before B2 spoke, "I remember him s-saying that." She sounded as though she were smiling. "Are you sure he's t-telling the truth?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"Where is he?"

My smile disappeared; the memory of him dragging me toward the laundry chute came back. "I don't know," I snapped.

"What's wrong?" B2's voice echoed.

I sighed. "I think he brought us here, but I don't know why." I rolled over onto my back and stared up into the blackness. "I feel more trapped than before."

"What's C.E.C.I.L.?"

"It's both a what and a who."

"Huh?"

I rolled back over to my side, ignored the protest of my shoulder, and propped my head up in my hand. "C.E.C.I.L - Contagion Eradication Centre for Intelligent Life. Cecil – the guy who invented it, or came up with it, or whatever."

"A little...v-vain...isn't he?"

"Ha," I laughed, "Yes, and I would say a lot vain."

"W-what's it for?"

"I don't know, but it can't be good. Contagion means –"

"Disease."

I raised my eyebrows. I still had trouble remembering the odd word, but B2 didn't seem to have a problem. "Yes. And eradication–"

"Get rid of, d-destroy," B2 interrupted again.

"Why did you ask if you already had it figured out?" I pressed the fingertips of my free hand into my forehead.

"It just came to m-me."

"You must be smart."

"You t-too."

"I don't know. Maybe a little."

"No, a lot. You figured out the ID th-thing."

"That wasn't hard."

"Let's just s-say we're both smart." There was an awkward silence for a moment, and then B2 continued. "Centre for Intelligent Life," she said. "We wouldn't b-be there if –"

"If we weren't intelligent." It was my turn to interrupt.

We lay in the dark, an easy silence between us. My mind worked at revisiting memories, old and new, and placed them into chronological order. B2's soft snoring caused a smile to spread across my face. My eyelids grew heavy, and despite my attempts to stay awake, I drifted back to sleep.

Moments or hours later there was no telling which, my eyes sprung open to the darkened room. I stretched my arms above my head, but a sharp pinch in my shoulder caused me to pull them back down to my side. My hands absently plucked at the cushioned surface underneath me. I rolled the small bits of soft material between my fingers and dropped them on the floor. B2's quiet and even breaths lulled me into a state of relaxation. My arms and legs grew heavy and sunk further into the cushion beneath me. I was about to cross into unconsciousness, but a low groan pulled me back. The sound of a rustling sheet and smacking lips disturbed the quiet dark surrounding me. "B2!" I whispered. "Are you awake?" I turned my head to the right and stared out to where I imagined her lying beside me.

She groaned again, a little louder than before.

"Is that a yes?"

"Hmmm!" she mumbled. "I w-was having a g-good –"

"Sh!" I placed my finger on my lips, even though I knew B2 couldn't see my gesture. I turned my head away and stared up at the dark above me.

"What?" she whispered.

"Do you hear that?" My thoughts were fuzzy and unsure. I concentrated on the silence. *Am I hearing things?*

"I d-don't hear anything. Let me g-go back to sleep." B2 stammered with a somewhat cranky voice. I imagined her crossing her arms and stomping her foot. The corners of my lips pulled into a smile, but it was fleeting as my focus returned to the sound I was sure I'd heard. The crease in my brow deepened.

I rolled my eyes. "Listen!" My words were sharp. I closed my eyelids and inhaled, held it, and then allowed it to rush out through my pursed lips. "It sounded..." I searched my memory and tried to recall the sound I was sure my ears picked out in the dark, "like

rain." The blackness closed in around us, and we waited in silence for a sound we hadn't heard in... *How long had it been? Months – years?*

"What's –"

"Sh!" I silenced B2 once again. She shuffled beside me. Even in the dark, I understood she'd rolled away.

Finally, there was a delicate tapping overhead. At first, it was a few light beats, a random collection of taps. Within seconds, it settled into a rhythmic pattern. I was sure it was rain.

"I knew it. It *is* rain." I smiled and sat up, my hands behind me for support. My delight did not last long. *Where the hell are we?* My eyebrows pulled together, and my smile turned into a frown.

"Rain?" B2's voice whispered. She shuffled once again; her hand brushed the back of mine as she sat up beside me.

I searched my memory for the last time I'd seen rain. Visions from my strange dream of the dried grass came to mind. There was a bizarre feeling, almost an understanding, that it had been a long time. If I knew how long we'd been at C.E.C.I.L., then I'd have a bit of an idea, but my memories were still foggy.

At that moment there was nothing else I wanted more than to see the rain, to feel it wash over my head and down my face as it fell from the sky. My mind tried again to sort through the stored memories I managed to conjure. Unfortunately, they were not clear, and I could not gather any accurate details.

The dream interrupted my thoughts and brought with it visions of cool, soft, green grass. I reveled in the memory. Real grass under my bare feet, my toes curled at the thought. Almost in the same instant, the grass turned to brown, sharp blades. C.E.C.I.L.'s Astroturf flashed in my mind. Grass – that was another thing I longed for, even the brown, crunchy kind.

"What do you m-mean – r-rain?" B2 whispered with an impatient tone. Her words snapped me back to our reality.

"Don't you remember rain?" With the help of some faint light source, shapes and shadows began to form as my eyes adjusted to the dark. The light highlighted B2's shadowy figure sitting beside me.

"I know w-what rain is." Once again B2 did nothing to keep her impatience from showing. There was a long pause as we sat listening to the drumming beat. "I j-just can't remember when I s-saw it last." Her tone softened to one that was more wistful.

We sat in silence, each of us lost in our thoughts and memories. "I've been trying to remember, but..." I sighed, "I can't," I admitted.

Tap, tap, tap.

"I wish I could remember," B2 whispered so low I had to strain my ears to hear what she said.

Tap, tap, tap

"You will. We will both remember – everything." I wanted to believe my words, but as they fell from my lips, I wondered if that would ever be possible.

We sat still and listened to the soothing sound of the rain pounding on the roof overhead. My heavy lids closed for a moment, and I yawned.

"The s-sound is making me sleepy." B2 yawned in return. Her voice caused my eyes to spring open, and my heart raced as though she'd wakened me from sleep.

"Me, too."

"Where are we?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea."

"Do you th-think we're still at C.E.C.I.L. but m-maybe somewhere else?"

I concentrated and forced myself to remember. *We have to leave*, J's voice whispered. I shook my head. "No. I thought so at first. But no, we're somewhere else."

"How d-do you know?"

"Because J said we were leaving."

"But maybe we didn't. Maybe he only told you that. M-maybe –"

"No!" I cut B2 off mid-sentence. "J said we were leaving." My hands clenched in my lap.

"But –"

"Stop! You don't know J like I do. I trust him... I..." My voice wavered as I remembered him pushing me toward the laundry

chute. My eyes squeezed shut at the memory of my voice calling for B2. *He did bring her – he hadn't left B2 behind.*

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know," I whispered. My attitude dissolved with her words. "He'll show up soon." I bit my lip. I hoped I was right.

The darkened room was different. It wasn't sterile like our room. I filled my lungs. The warm, stale air filtered through my nostrils. Traces of familiar and unfamiliar smells stayed behind. Like something my nose knew, but my memory couldn't quite wrap around. My eyelids fluttered. "I'm tired." I lay back down as my mind continued to search its memories.

"M-me too." B2's hand rested on my leg for a moment. "If you trust J, then I d-do, too."

I sucked my lips into my mouth. I hoped I hadn't misread J and that he was trustworthy. I held my hand out in front of me and turned it back and forth. The room had grown lighter, but it wasn't enough to show our new surroundings. I could at least see my hand moving in front of my face. It wouldn't be long before we saw where we were.

"It's not s-so dark, anymore," B2 spoke as though she'd read my mind.

I shook my head, "No." My hand flopped back down by my side.

Tap, tap, tap.

The rhythmic drumming of the rain was hypnotizing, and my eyelids grew heavy. B2's breathing eased into a quiet snore beside me. I forced my eyelids open and stared up at the darkened rafters, the first glimpse of any detail in the room. *Where are we?*

The soothing tapping on the roof pulled my attention away from my thoughts, and my eyes fell shut. My leg jumped, as though it was trying to keep me awake, but it was too late as sleep had begun to take its hold once again.

Thirteen

J Returns

My eyes blinked open, sleep blurred my vision. I rubbed them awake, getting my first real look of our room in the dim light. I stared up at the small, high window. The initial moments of actual daylight – the first that I had seen in a long while – captivated me. My mind shifted back to the simulation room. The painted blue sky, the fake clouds, and the solar lights could not compete with the real thing. I thought of the large fans that imitated the wind and pushed around the artificial trees and grass. I heard the recorded sounds of birds and insects that played on an unending loop in my head. *What happened to everything or is it all still there? What happened when J said everything had gone awry?*

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment and pushed away my thoughts and memories. When I opened them again, my gaze fixed on the faint light, and it made my heart beat a little faster. *This is real.*

A soft snore pulled my attention away from the window and down to the sleeping form on the floor in front of me. B2 curled on her left side and faced my direction. Her skin glowed in the faint light, her arms folded close to her body, and her hands tucked under her head for support. Her pink lips puckered, and she emitted a small endearing snort. She was peaceful. She was my sister. I knew that for sure.

Memories from my past floated in front of my eyes. And they were not random fragments from a strange dream but were real memories. There were memories of times we played together and moments we fought. We were typical siblings – best of friends one minute, rivals the next.

I concentrated on another memory as it worked its way to the surface. A pink and black birthday cake with a number ten candle that burned in the centre. *Was it my birthday?* I shook my head in answer to my questioning thoughts. No, it was hers. It was B2's.

The memory of my sister's tenth birthday was vivid in my mind. Turning ten had been as big of a deal to her as my thirteenth birthday had been to me a few months before. She had left the single digit years behind, while I had finally become a teenager.

My thoughts drifted to our ID numbers; my assumptions had been correct. Our birth dates were three years and a few months apart. A reminiscent smile spread across my face. I returned to the memory, afraid that it would disappear if I didn't etch it into my mind.

The black number-ten candle sat in the centre of the birthday cake. Beads of melted wax ran down and dripped onto the pink frosting. Black icing was piped along the top edge and around the bottom. Tiny white frosting flowers with yellow centres adorned the cake in a random pattern.

Pink and black were B2's favourite colours and our mother...I stopped remembering. Where was our mother in all this - where was our father? It was the first time since becoming aware that thoughts of them came to my mind. I narrowed my gaze as I tried to conjure their images. Hazy faces appeared with no definition. They could have been anyone.

Sadness enveloped me, and I swallowed back the tightness in my throat. B2 mumbled unintelligible words; a small smile came to her lips. *Maybe she is dreaming of our parents right now, maybe she will remember.* I ran my fingers through my tangled hair and shook my head.

I shut my eyes and returned to the memory. *Mother had always made our birthday cakes, regardless of how busy she was with her work. It was a tradition in our house, and no matter what we wanted, she always came through. While she made birthday cakes and planned parties, father shopped for the present.* I squeezed my eyelids tighter as I concentrated on B2's tenth birthday. I remembered sitting in my father's office as he surfed the internet looking for the perfect gift. *B2 had wanted the latest in the world of telekinetic toys. While searching, he began to laugh. His sudden outburst had confused me; I stared at him and waited for an explanation. After a moment, he revealed his laughter was due to*

the unexpected return of a childhood memory. As a young boy, his vivid and active imagination had led him to believe something had occurred when it had not. The supposed act had reduced him to a ball of tears and had frightened my grandfather. It was only when my father had calmed down and wiped his tears that he'd revealed he'd only imagined the situation. The daydream had been so intense that it had scared him.

I giggled. He and I shared the same creative nature and wild imagination. At the time, I didn't think the story was funny, and now for some strange reason, I saw the humour in it.

My focus returned to B2. She slept in blissful peace, undisturbed by my laughter. *Am I all she has now?* I reached over and brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen across her face. The vision of the picture I'd drawn back at C.E.C.I.L came to mind. My hand pressed against my chest. I could almost feel the paper poking into my skin and hear its crinkling sound, but it was only in my mind. I had placed the illustration under the mattress while making my bed. The drawing was now long gone.

Once again I thought back to the birthday cake. When I had it in view, I lifted my head and looked around the room at the blurred faces of family and guests. The only one that was clear was B2's. I squeezed my eyelids tighter trying to focus on the vision, but there was nothing more. No images or echoes of voices came to mind.

I rolled over onto my back; my eyes focused on the high ceiling above. The smell in the air around me stirred up a faint memory. The image of Grandpa's old barn flashed in my mind, as the memory of musty, wet wood filled my nose. A wistful smile tugged at my lips.

I stood up, careful not to disturb B2, and stretched my hands out in front of me. The dim light was not quite enough to illuminate the whole room. I took my first tentative steps not wanting to awaken my sleeping sister or alert someone of my movement. I wasn't sure J had brought us here and if he did, if he could be trusted. But, remaining quiet was difficult. With each step, the rough, wooden boards under my bare feet creaked. Each creak sounded louder than the last.

"Six," I whispered under my breath as my hands made contact with the uneven, wooden surface of the nearest wall. It had taken me six steps.

A rustling behind me caused me to whirl around. B2 had rolled onto her back with her head tilted to one side. A small breath of relief escaped from my lips.

I turned back toward the wall again and with caution, ran my hands over the rough, dark surface. My fingertips caught on the occasional protrusion. I rubbed over them trying to understand what they were, but in the dim light, I could not tell.

My frustration grew as I moved along. There were no sliding doors to open, no door knobs to turn, or light switches to flick. Apart from the window, nothing else indicated we were in an ordinary room. The faint light made it difficult to get a clear view of the area I tiptoed around. My mind drew a picture as my fingers traced the walls, and I counted the steps in my head.

When I reached the final corner, I had a clear picture of the area. It was longer than it was wide and there didn't seem to be anything that suggested there was an entry into the room. A small, circular window was placed high in the centre of an end wall. It was the only window in the room, and my heart beat a little faster whenever I looked up at it. It was the first window we'd had access to in... I didn't know how long and if I ever saw J again, I was going to ask.

A flood of thoughts, ideas, and possibilities entered my mind as I stared up at the window. Unfortunately, I couldn't stand underneath it to get a good look. There was a large object that prevented me from getting too close. And in the dim light, it seemed it was the only thing in the space.

I tiptoed back toward the centre of the room, towards my sister. Each gentle step emitted a low whine from the floorboards. I crouched down until I sat on my thin mattress. My flesh prickled into goosebumps as a shiver rose from my feet and carried its way up to the top of my head. My body trembled as my mind buzzed with thoughts. *What if J doesn't come back? What if someone else brought us here? What if the vaccinations we received don't work*

and what were they for anyway? I looked back up at the dirty window; the light outside was becoming brighter.

"What're you d-doing?" B2's sleepy voice cut through the eerie silence. She startled me, and my heart skipped.

"Nothing, go back to sleep," I whispered. My eyes still focused on the window. The desire to look outside and see where we were was growing.

"I can't. I'm not tired anymore."

"Try anyway." I pulled the thin blanket lying at her waist all the way up to her neck.

"I'm getting hungry." B2 pushed the blanket back down, sat up, and faced me.

There was enough light in the room to pick out her features, from her tiny ball of a nose to her slightly pointed chin. *'You can certainly tell they're sisters.'* A strange voice from the past spoke in my mind.

I thought back to my reflection and agreed with the voice. We were alike with the slightest of differences. B2 had wavy, brown hair and icy blue eyes. My hair was straight, and my blue eyes were not quite as piercing.

"I'm hungry, too." I nodded, my stomach rumbled in confirmation. The sound caught me off guard, and my hand hurried to press against it.

"I hope J brings us some f-food soon."

I nodded again. My stomach tightened, but not from hunger. There was something about our new living quarters that made my muscles tense. Until J appeared, I didn't think that feeling was going to go away any time soon.

"I th-think it's way past b-breakfast." B2 rubbed a hand over her growling stomach.

Our scheduled meals were always on time. "It is." I confirmed.

Flashes of the last meal we ate at C.E.C.I.L came to mind, or at least the last meal I recalled. It had been breakfast. A laugh came to my lips as I remembered. B2 had hit the handle of her spoon by accident when she reached for a mouthful of cereal. The round oats catapulted forward, and while most landed on the table, one had

managed to land on the top of her head. A drop of milk trailed down her nose.

B2's lips had trembled as she held in her laugh. I, however, wore a broad grin at the mess. Had it not been for the camera watching us, I would have been rolling with laughter. After that meal, we'd each received a full dose of the hypno-drug, and I had no memory of any other meals after that.

"What did we have for s-supper – I don't remember." B2 stared at me.

I shrugged. "I only remember breakfast."

"Huh, me too! Why?" Her nose crinkled.

"Needles."

B2 stared at me with a glazed over expression like she had many times before. The light returned to her eyes. "Ohhh! J better come s-soon."

I bit my lower lip; my pulse picked up speed. I couldn't help the growing concern that J was not going to come back. I pressed my fingertips to my forehead, and I smiled weakly at B2. There was no need for her to know my worry.

The room brightened. The details I had looked for earlier appeared, emerging from the dark shadows. I tilted my head back and looked at the rafters in the ceiling. The rough wooden beams matched the rest of the wood. We were definitely no longer at C.E.C.I.L.

"Av!" B2 cried.

The immediacy in her words caught my attention, and I abandoned my careful investigation of our confines. "Why did you call me, Av?" I said.

B2 shrugged. "I, I don't know, it s-seemed normal."

I shut my eyes, the word Av floated in front of them. A tiny voice, B2's voice, whispered the word in my head. It was a name she used when she wanted my attention. Av was short for Avril, the French word for April, it was the nickname my parents called me. My shoulders rounded as the vague memory of my mother's face came to mind. It was still unrecognizable, but it was hers. I opened

my eyes and nodded. "It's normal. You called me that sometimes, same as mom and dad."

B2's eyes widened as my ears picked out the rattling sound behind me. I scooted around. B2 shuffled; the weight of her pressed into my back as she sat close behind. My heart quickened, and I grabbed my sheet and covered myself.

The door opened into the room in a slow and even motion. A man dressed in blue jeans and a grey plaid shirt stepped inside. Dark glasses hid his eyes, and a white surgical mask covered his face. Blue, rubber gloves protected his hands. He pulled a cart behind him. The clanking of items reminded me of J.

"Did you sleep well? I brought you breakfast." He removed the white towel that covered the top of the tray and revealed two bowls, spoons, and a box of cereal. Two small containers of milk also sat on the tray. "It is not much, but it will keep you from starving."

"J?" I said, standing up from my mat. I took a step forward, but he held out his hand.

"Stop! Do not come any closer." He leaned forward and pulled out two large buckets from underneath the cart and a roll of toilet paper. "I am sorry, but you will have to use these for now as your toilet. Perhaps later...Well, again I am sorry." He set the two buckets down and placed the roll of toilet paper inside one of them before returning the lid.

"What's happened? Where are we?" I said. I folded my arms.

J sighed. "Know that you are safe, you are no longer at C.E.C.I.L. it is all I can tell you right now. I am trying to work on a plan." J turned and headed to the door.

"What plan?" I called.

"I will bring you some clothes later. Oh!" J turned back and faced me. "You might want these for a bit." He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out two pairs of sunglasses, and placed them on the floor. "It should not take too long for your eyes to adjust to real sunlight." He looked up toward the window behind me.

"J?" I called again as he turned and headed toward the door. "What's going to happen?"

He stopped for a moment but didn't turn around. "I do not know," he said and walked out the door.

I ran forward and grabbed the edge of the door as J tried to pull it closed. "J?" I cried. My fingers lost their hold, and it slammed shut. Dust and dirt rained down on us from the rafters of the high ceiling above. My fists pounded on the entrance. "J!" I yelled. I put my ear to the door, but all I heard was the clunking of something heavy banging against it on the other side.

Fourteen

Wooden Sentry

I grabbed the box of cereal from the cart, turned it over in my hands, and examined the carton. I chuckled under my breath as B2's cereal mishap came to mind once again. I glanced up at B2. She glared at me as though she knew my thoughts. My stomach rumbled, and I returned to my inspection. It wasn't what I was hoping or expecting, but under the circumstances, it was better than nothing. I only hoped that our usual morning fare would return once things settled, though a part of me doubted it. I shook the box then pulled open the flap, noting that it wasn't new and in fact, had already been opened. I guessed about a bowl's worth of cereal was missing from the unsealed bag. I poured a small amount into a bowl. Each piece clinked in a random melody as they hit the inside of the china dish.

I stirred the cereal with my finger and inspected the dried bits. I scrutinized the carton of milk before I poured it into the dish. Satisfied that it was edible, I moved back toward my mat and sat down.

"What k-kind is it?" B2 said. Her nose wrinkled as she craned her neck a little to get a look at my breakfast.

"Some puffed stuff." I stared at the small pieces floating in the milk on my spoon before placing it in my mouth. The cereal was sweet, but something in my memory told me it wasn't as fresh as it should have been. I chewed with consideration; the soft crunching was loud in my head.

"Is it any g-good?" B2 said. Her eyes fixed on my mouth.

I shrugged and swallowed the pulverized food. "It's something to eat." I placed another spoonful in my mouth. B2 watched with an expression somewhere between curiosity and disgust. "You better eat." I jutted my chin toward the cereal box I'd left on the cart.

"Is the m-milk good?"

I nodded. "It's fine."

"N-not sour?"

"Why would you say that?"

B2 shrugged. "I d-don't know. Why did you s-smell it?"

I shook my head and shrugged. "It's fine. It's not that cold, though."

B2 wrinkled her nose again. She sighed and rose to her feet. Standing at the cart, she reached for the box of cereal. She stared at it for a moment before pouring some into her bowl. By the sound of the clinking, I was sure she didn't have as much as I had, and I had taken little. She opened her carton of milk and poured it over the cereal before returning to her mat. I watched her with as much intensity as she had me. She allowed one small puff to float onto her spoon and raised it to her mouth.

"It's not going to kill you," I teased.

"It might," she replied. She sucked the spoonful of milk and the one puff of cereal into her mouth. She chewed, and her face contorted into several expressions of distaste.

"It's not *that* bad," I said. I placed another spoonful into my mouth. The puffed pieces had soaked up more milk and were soggy. I swallowed down the mashed bits and scrunched my face.

"I thought you said it w-wasn't bad," B2 said as she placed her spoon back into her bowl.

I shrugged. "If you don't like it now, you're going to hate it if you let it get soggy. Eat it fast." I scooped up a large spoonful and filled my mouth. I chewed, swallowed the mush, and stopped a gag as it slid down my throat.

"I wish we were b-back at C.E.C.I.L.," B2 said as she shovelled a spoonful into her mouth. A strand of her hair, still attached to her head, ended up between her lips. She pulled it free from the corner of her mouth and swallowed without chewing.

"You're going to choke if you don't chew it," I scolded as I prepared to swallow another soggy mass.

"Ya, 'cause you g-gagging on the mush is so much b-better."

I swallowed the last bite and set my bowl and spoon down on the floor beside me. My body shook. "Eww! That was awful." I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"It wasn't that b-bad." B2 placed her empty bowl beside her and smiled.

My eyes widened as did my mouth. "You're kidding?"

"Yup! That was d-disgusting."

I nodded. "Something tells me we better get used to it." I stared at the cart parked near the invisible door.

The room had grown much lighter, and I was able to inspect the details that were lost in the shadows earlier. As guessed, the space was not much larger than our old room and was quite empty. The only furnishing was a tall, wooden cabinet. It stood as though on guard against the back wall under the round, dirty window.

I squinted in the sunlight. We'd grown accustomed to the simulated sun, but the real thing was different. I crawled over to where the sunglasses sat on the floor and picked them up.

"Here, you better put these on," I said as I sat back down on my mat and held a pair out to my sister. She was busy playing with a lock of her hair, twirling and twisting it around her finger. The action reminded me that it had been a habit of hers for a long time.

"Don't n-need them. It's not that b-bright." She pulled her finger free, and her hair remained in a tight curl.

"That's because you're too busy playing to notice."

"Fine!" She reached out and snatched the glasses from my hand. "Happy now?" She placed them on her face. I stifled a laugh. They were too large for her, and she looked like a bug. "Yours look funny, too." She squinted and grimaced.

I smiled and pushed the glasses, which had slipped down my nose, back into place. I stared past B2 and resumed my examination of the cabinet. It hadn't exactly been a surprise. My toe had already made contact with it during my earlier half-blind inspection of the room. I wiggled it as the memory came back to me.

Behind the dark glasses, my eyes narrowed in thought. *I wonder if there's anything inside.* I stared at the cabinet, my mind preoccupied with its possible contents. A flash of movement in my peripheral vision distracted me and pulled my attention toward B2.

"Wha ar u starin' at?" B2 sputtered; her mouth was full of dry cereal, and her hand reached in for another scoop.

"What are you doing?" I said wide-eyed as B2 tilted her head back and dropped a few more pieces of cereal into her mouth.

She looked at me; her icy blue eyes sparkled with mischief, and she shrugged. "They t-taste way better d-dry." She smiled and stuck her hand inside the box again.

"Can I have it?" I reached for the cereal.

"Wait your t-turn," B2 grumbled and pulled the box out of my reach.

"That might be all the food we're getting today," I said and pointed to the cereal.

B2 looked at the carton she held in her hands. "No. That's not p-possible." She devoured another handful. She picked up a few pieces that landed on her lap and popped them into her mouth.

"This isn't C.E.C.I.L.," I reminded her, my hand still outstretched and waiting for the box.

B2 groaned. "Fine, but I h-hope you're wrong." She shoved the box into my hand.

I hope so too. I set the cereal on the floor beside me.

"You didn't answer m-my question," B2 said as she resumed the habit of twirling her dark waves.

I pressed my fingertips to my forehead for a moment before her cereal-sputtered question came back to mind. "I'm staring at that." I pointed over her shoulder toward the cabinet.

B2 stopped playing with her hair and turned herself around. "D-do you think there's anything in it?" Her voice rose with excitement.

"I don't know, it's locked." I shrugged and pointed out the small lock at the top of the cabinet doors. "Let's see if we can move it." I stood up and walked toward the wardrobe as an idea came to mind.

"Why?" B2 crossed her arms and remained seated on her mat.

"Maybe we can tell if it's empty." I had another reason for moving it. If we could pull it away from the wall, it would provide some privacy for our makeshift toilets. The thought of having to go in buckets was bad enough, let alone out in the middle of the room.

I moved to the side of the cabinet, placed my left hand on the back corner, and my right on the front. The large, wooden box was wide enough to fill my outstretched arms as I hugged the side. "Can you please help?" I pleaded. B2 was still seated and didn't look like she planned on moving.

She groaned and trudged toward me. My sister made her reluctance quite clear, and she didn't try to hide it.

"Grab the other side, we'll try to move it forward," I instructed.

The large piece of furniture rested tight to the wall, and it was impossible to get a good grip. After several minutes of struggling, the wardrobe hadn't moved, and both of our faces were red from the effort.

"Forget it, it's too heavy," I panted and wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. I lifted my damp hair off the nape of my neck and fanned my face.

"Good!" B2 walked over to her mat and plopped herself down; her sunglasses almost popped off her face. A few seconds later, I joined her on her mat. We sat without speaking and stared at the wooden sentry. Once in a while, my gaze travelled up toward the window. After a few seconds, I moved over to my mat, and B2 turned her back to the large piece of furniture.

"I really hope J lets us out s-soon, 'cause this room is full of n-nothing and that st-stupid cabinet." B2 jutted her thumb behind her in the direction of the only furnishing in the room.

My stomach tightened. As much as I wanted to get out of there, a voice inside my head told me that wasn't happening soon.

We spent the rest of the morning lying on our thin blue mats. B2 drifted in and out of sleep with her sunglasses still resting on her face, while I stared up at the rafters. I couldn't sleep; my mind was too busy. Memories tried their best to catch my attention, but I pushed them aside. There were more important things to worry about, one of which was our current state of imprisonment. We needed a plan – or several.

First on the list was getting a look out the window. I was sure B2 wouldn't be able to boost me up to the top of the wardrobe. I wasn't big or tall, but I was larger than my sister. It would have to

be B2. My second plan involved opening the closet. A flat, metal bar ran across the top and secured the two doors with a lock. I imagined somehow prying it open at the bottom if only enough to peek inside. Last, and of course the most important, was a plan for escape, should we determine that our new home was a prison.

I recalled a word etched into my memory. It was a single, yellow highlighted term in a textbook that had spurred a thought - a fleeting idea. At C.E.C.I.L, it seemed impossible. But our new location had a window. We were in a room that had no cameras watching our every move; it was enticing - the idea had new life. I sat up and stared up at the window - at the possibility.

But what if J has gotten us out? What if this place is where we escaped to? What if this is only temporary? We have to wait. I nodded, agreeing with my thoughts. We needed to know for sure. My gut knotted as sweat beaded on my forehead and trickled down my nose, taking my glasses with it. My heartbeat quickened along with my breaths. Every inch of my body tingled, and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. *What if we waited too long? What if we escaped?*

The thought of escape brought with it an uneasiness of its own that confused me. I'd never had to worry about those things before - before I only existed. I missed C.E.C.I.L. I missed my room, my few things. B2's statement echoed in my ears; our new room was full of nothing. We had no desk, no books, no beds, no bathroom, no clothes, no food - no camera. I turned around and looked at each empty corner in the room. Despite the camera, C.E.C.I.L could almost have been heaven compared to our latest surroundings. I pushed my glasses up and lay back down.

Fifteen
2029

"What is this place?" B2's sleepy voice interrupted my thoughts.

I turned my head in time to see her waving her hand at the rafters. I sniffed the warm, musty air. "A barn, I think." It was the only description I had that made sense of the room.

As I said the word out loud, my mind drifted to C.E.C.I.L and the variety of books I'd read. One, in particular, had been my favourite.

I closed my eyes, and the image of the cover came to mind – *Charlotte's Web*. The book had drawn me to its pages. The words inside offered a comfortable familiarity. At the time, I hadn't remembered why it had meant so much. And while a lot of my memories hadn't returned, some were beginning to peak through the fog in my head.

When I turned nine, my grandmother gave me a hard copy of *Charlotte's Web*. It was exciting as most of the chapter books I'd read had been digital. This real book became my favourite. When I finished reading it, I would flip back to the front and begin again. I could not recall my grandmother's face, but the book easily came to mind. My eyes popped open – *Charlotte's Web* disappeared.

Bits of dust danced in the sunbeam that shone through the window and bounced off the rafters. *Is this really a barn?* I sniffed again. The faint smell of wood, dirt and something else crept into my nose.

"A barn?" B2's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"You know – a place where farm animals live." I put my hands behind my head and rested it in my laced fingers. My eyes fixed on the rafters. *Or human animals*, my mind whispered.

"I know what a b-barn is. But why?"

I rolled my head back and forth on the mat. "I don't know."

I listened to the sounds in the room. Each noise had its rhythm – our breathing, the creaking floorboards, and a distant and indistinct melody.

I focused on the tune, the imaginings of chirps and peeps. I thought the memory of recorded birds and insects from the simulated forest had come to life in my head.

I sat up, excited by the realization that what I heard was real. The melody reminded me of the world that waited for us beyond the window.

"Come on." I grabbed B2's hand, pulled her up off her mat, and almost dragged her to the cabinet.

"April, you're h-hurting me."

"Sorry," I said as I focused my attention on my hand and felt my sister's squeezed inside. I released it.

"I'm going to boost you up to the top of the cabinet." I smiled at B2 who still rubbed her hand.

She shrugged and looked up at the wardrobe. "Why d-don't you go up there? It looks a little high for m-me."

"It's not that high. Anyway, you'll get to see what's outside the window." I hoped the suggestion would be enough to entice her and erase any fears she had of climbing onto the cabinet.

B2 smiled back. "Okay." She placed a hand on the wardrobe.

I laced my fingers together and made a step for her. "At the count of three."

B2 nodded. The smile on her face disappeared, and a strange look came over her. I couldn't tell if it was fear, determination, or a little bit of both, though I suspected it was more a look of fear.

Somewhere in my head, there was a memory of B2 and a phobia of heights. I couldn't quite grasp the details, but I knew it to be true.

B2 placed her right foot in my hands and stretched her arms up as far as she could on the cabinet. They didn't quite reach the top; it was still about a foot away. But, a good push would fix that.

"One, two – three," I grunted and heaved her with all the strength I had. She grabbed the top of the cabinet; her legs kicked and squirmed. I stood on tip-toe, pushed on her bottom, and shoved her higher.

After a few tense seconds, B2 managed to pull herself up the wardrobe. All the while her feet searched for a foothold. Finally, she

pulled her left foot up, and it rested on the rusted, metal bar where a lock held the doors together. She drew herself the rest of the way and landed on top.

"Okay?" I said.

A half-smile crossed B2's face, and she gave the thumbs-up signal.

"What's the matter?"

"It's higher than you th-think."

"Tell me what you see; it'll keep your mind off of it." I couldn't wait for her to describe the view.

B2 crawled to the window and wiped it with her hand. She cleared away what must have been years of dirt. "Wow!"

"WHAT?"

"Sh!" She turned and scolded.

"Sorry. What is it?" I spoke in a quieter voice. My fingers tapped on my chin with nervous energy.

B2 stared out the window for what seemed like forever. Finally, she turned with a smile. "Trees!"

"Trees?"

"L-lots of them."

"Anything else?"

She turned her head from left to right. "Nope."

"Are you sure?"

She looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Of c-course, I'm sure. I'm not an i-idiot."

"Lots of them," I said more to myself in resignation. I rubbed my forehead.

"What's the matter with t-trees?"

"Nothing, it's just that..." I closed my eyes and shook my head as I pressed my lips together.

"What?" The irritation in B2's voice caused my eyes to pop open. I stared up at her as she knelt on the top of the cabinet. Her head was inches away from the rafters.

"We're in a forest."

"And..." B2's eyebrows rose to meet her hairline as she waited for more of an explanation.

“And if we have to leave...” Again I let my words trail.

“We might not find our way,” B2 finished and sat down with her legs dangling over the edge of the cabinet. She sighed. “I’m coming d-down n-now. I’ve been up here t-too long.”

“Do you need help?”

B2 shook her head, turned around, and lowered herself until she hung from her fingers. She let go and landed on her feet with a soft thump.

With B2’s help, I had accomplished my first task. And although the result wasn’t what I hoped for, I was at least glad that she got to see the outside. I stared up at the window, next time I would have a look.

As the morning went on, we sat on our mats and made plans. We recounted every memory that had surfaced in our heads, no matter how strange or out of place they seemed. As it turned out, B2 had about as much recall of our family as I did, complete with blurred faces.

“Was it just us?” I placed our empty lunch plates on the cart. J had brought more food but nothing else; his brief visit did not allow for any more questions. I returned to my mat on the floor.

B2 tangled a wavy lock of her chocolate hair around her finger. She pulled her knees up close to her chest, her bare feet planted on the floor. Her sunglasses sat beside her on her mat. She looked up at me; her chin had reddened from resting it on the top of her knees.

“What do you m-mean?” She stopped twirling her hair.

I shifted from my crossed leg position and pulled my knees up like B2’s. I wrapped my arms around my legs and laced my fingers. “I mean just you and me and our parents. No one else?”

A thoughtful look crossed my sister’s face as she tilted her head back and looked up at the rafters. “I don’t know. I want to s-say yes but...”

“But you think there’s more.”

B2 nodded. “Do you th-think there’s someone else?” Her icy eyes stared into mine.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think...I don't know." I sighed.

I unwrapped my arms from around my legs and placed them behind me, supporting myself on my hands. The rough, wooden floor scratched at my palms. I stretched my legs out and wiggled my bare toes.

When was J bringing us our clothes? I looked up at the dirty window. The sunlight no longer shone directly into the room. I reached up, pulled off my sunglasses, and blinked a few times. B2 was right; the light didn't hurt. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back.

"Where did you g-get that?" B2's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Get what?" I said. I tipped my head forward and opened my eyes. My actions reminded me of an old doll.

"That?" B2 pointed at me.

I drew my eyebrows together. *What is she talking about?* "What?"

B2 grumbled a little and crawled toward me. She knelt beside my left thigh and reached out with one of her long fingers toward my neck. She scooped up a delicate gold chain from underneath the rounded collar of my nightgown. My eyes widened as it lengthened and pulled free from underneath the fabric. She let the chain drop, and a golden heart fell against my chest.

I tucked my chin under and bent my head forward to get a better look. I reached down and held up the heart between my fingers. "Where did this come from?" I did not recognize the piece of jewelry.

"That's j-just what I was asking you. W-when you tilted your h-head back; I saw s-something shiny on your n-neck."

"I didn't know it was there. I mean I can't feel it."

"D-did you have it b-before – at C.E.C.I.L.?"

I closed my eyes and saw my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I shook my head. "No," I said.

The sound of creaking startled me. I let out a small gasp and whirled around. The chain around my neck was for the moment forgotten.

"I see the light does not bother your eyes," J said as he stood in the doorway. Dark sunglasses still covered his, and a white mask was over his nose and mouth. He held a large box. I tried to look past him and out into the hall, but I could not see around him.

"No. It's fine." I shrugged. J's glasses were so dark that I could not make out his eyes.

"I brought you some clothing and dinner. Sorry, it took me so long." J inhaled a sharp breath and coughed a few times as he set the box on the floor.

I folded my arms and took a step forward.

"Stop!" He held out his hand. "You must not come any closer."

"Why not? Are you sick? What's going on J? Where are we? Why are we here? Who are you? Are you going to let us go? What's happened?" My mouth spewed out questions faster than my brain could register my thoughts. My cheeks grew warmer with each one.

"Ya!" B2's voice boomed beside me and made me jump. "What she said."

J's eyes widened as he looked at B2. His whole body slumped in resignation. "I will answer all your questions, but I cannot answer them all right now." He cleared his throat.

"Can you answer one for me...please?" I begged.

J sighed and nodded. "Which question?"

"Not any that I asked. I have another one."

"Yes." J leaned against the wall behind him as though standing tired him out.

"Where did this come from?" I held out the necklace around my neck.

"You were wearing it the night you came back to C.E.C.I.L."

Back? My mind questioned, but the thought was fleeting. I looked down at the small heart that dangled from the chain below my fingers.

"And when was that?" I whispered.

"That all depends. For three years you lived at C.E.C.I.L with the rest of your family. You came and went as you pleased, sometimes not returning for days or weeks. Then one night everything changed, and you became permanent residents."

My face twisted into one of incomprehension. I had no recollection of any of it. B2 gasped as she grabbed my arm and squeezed it. I shut my eyes and concentrated. I willed myself to remember the last memory I had before oblivion took it away.

Flashes of brilliant and colourful fireworks illuminated the night sky. The resulting boom so loud it resonated in my chest. I turned my head to the right; glowing numbers signifying the year sparkled in the dark.

“What year is it?” I said as my eyes popped open to the present.

“I thought you only had one question.” J folded his arms.

I shrugged. “What. Year.”

“2029.”

We had lost five years.

Sixteen
My Sister's Name

"It's beautiful!" I gushed. The gold chain hung from my fingers; the heart dangled. It glinted in the morning sunlight that filtered in through my bedroom window.

"We're glad you like it," Mom said from her spot on my bed. She wadded the yellow flowered wrapping paper up in her hands.

"Remember to look after it," Dad said. He stood by mom; his hand rested on her shoulder.

"I will." I smiled and looked back at my gift. The gold heart was perfect in every way.

"Are you surprised?" Mom said. Her smile showed off her white and straight teeth.

"Yes, very!" I shifted back a little and leaned against my headboard. Mom's hand rested on my lower leg. Even through the blankets, I could feel the warmth of her touch. A broad smile stretched across my face. "I thought gold was expensive."

"It is," my father said, "but you're worth it." He smiled.

"You're thirteen, now," Mom said. "We expect you'll take care of it."

"I will." The smile disappeared from my face. "What about Ben? She's going to want one for her birthday too."

"Ben will only be ten; she'll have to understand she has to wait," my mother said.

"But what if gold gets more expensive?"

"Don't worry, Av. We already thought of that and bought her one, too." Dad smiled. "But she still has to wait," he added.

"She'll love it as much as I do." I leaned forward and hugged my mom. Dad brushed a kiss on the top of my head.

"Remember, it's a secret," Mom said as I broke away from her hug. "Let me help you put it on."

I handed my mother the necklace and pulled my long, brown hair out of the way. Her warm fingers tickled as she fastened the chain around my neck.

"Beautiful!" she said.

I sat up and tucked my chin in; the gold heart hung from its chain and rested on my upper chest. "Don't worry; I can keep a secret for three years."

"We're counting on it," Dad said.

"Okay! I have a birthday party to finish preparing for; you have guests coming in two hours." Mom swept a lock of hair from my face.

"Two hours?" I flung back the blankets. "What time is it?" I wiped at my eyes.

"Ten o'clock," Dad said. "We let you sleep in."

"Don't worry." Mom kissed my forehead. "You have two hours, plenty of time."

"But what about the decorations and everything?" It was my first boy/girl party, and I wanted everything to be perfect.

"We followed your instructions to the letter," Dad said.

I narrowed my eyes. "You found my notes?"

"Of course, right on my desk, open to where you left off. It's where you fell asleep last night, with your cheek pasted to your notebook. I'm surprised the marks are gone." Dad reached over and placed his hand under my chin and turned my head.

"What marks?" I reached up and rubbed my hand over my left cheek.

"The spiral rings from the old notebook left quite an impression. Your mother and I were sure they'd still be there in the morning."

My jaw dropped.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "We both knew," she gave dad a light slap on the arm, "that the marks would be gone. I did take a picture, though." She smiled. "Get ready!" Mom said as she and dad left my room and closed the door behind them.

I rubbed over my cheek a second time and sighed when my fingers traced over smooth, unmarked skin.

I jumped from my bed and stared at my reflection in the mirror above my dresser. I was a teenager. I smiled, and the brown-haired girl with the blue eyes returned the grin. The gold heart nestled close to my chest.

“Bethany!” I heard my mother's voice call through my closed door.

I woke to a dim room, and my hand went to my neck. I removed the necklace from under my nightgown and curled my fingers around the heart. The sound of my parents' voices rang in my ears. Their faces were still a blur, but their voices were as clear as though they'd spoken seconds ago.

Bethany lay in front of me, sound asleep. The memory of her name was as sharp and crisp as if I read it on a piece of paper. I remembered. Her name was Bethany, though sometimes we called her Ben. *Why?* I wondered as I stared at her sleeping face.

The memory of my dream still lingered in my mind. I reached down and searched for the thin blanket at my feet. I found it, pulled it up over my shoulder, and tucked it under my chin. I snuggled and hoped to return to my dream and the memory of my parents.

My right hip ached as it pushed through the thin mat and into the hard floor, but I couldn't roll the other way. I'd remembered my sister's name and facing her made me feel much closer. I closed my eyes and tried not to focus on the pain in my hip, but on my dream instead. If I could return, I believed I would learn more than my sister's name.

My eyelids fluttered open to a much brighter room and an empty mat in front of me. I squinted and grabbed for my sunglasses. A sudden noise behind me caught my attention.

“Bethany!” I bolted upright, and my head spun with my quick and sudden movement. I rested my forehead in my palms and waited for the room to stop spinning.

“Over here.” Her voice called from behind me. “Wait, what did you c-call me?”

I turned around and found her sitting in a chair at a table, eating breakfast. Wide eyes replaced the grin on my face.

“When did that –”

“What did you c-call me?” Bethany said with her mouth full of food.

I stared at my sister. Her left hand held a spoon inches away from her mouth. She had been mid-bite. "I called you, Bethany." I smiled.

Bethany dropped the spoon. It clanked as it fell back into the bowl sitting on the table in front of her. "Why?" She narrowed her eyes. "W-why B-Bethany and not B2?"

"It's your name." I stood up from the mat and walked toward the table. My hand rubbed along the back of the wooden chair in front of me. "Now, when did these get here?" I looked down at my sister. She'd sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest.

"How do you know?" She said.

I sighed and pulled the chair out from under the table before sitting myself down. My muscles relaxed, surprising me at how good it felt to sit in a chair rather than on the floor. "I dreamed it." I shrugged.

"Pfft!" Bethany leaned forward and picked up her spoon from her bowl. She gave the food inside a stir. The warm smell of maple and brown sugar wafted toward my nose, and my mouth watered.

"Is that oatmeal?" I pointed to her bowl.

Bethany nodded and brought another spoonful to her mouth. "It's good, too," she said through the gooey bite.

On the table sat a small, covered tray. I removed the lid, and a warm, comforting smell greeted me. I breathed in deep and reveled in the sweet aroma. "It's true, you know." I picked up the warm bowl and placed it in front of me.

"What?"

"Your name *is* Bethany." I dug into my oatmeal and put the spoon in my mouth. I sucked the warm mush off the spoon and let it sit on my tongue as I savoured the sweetness.

Bethany dropped her spoon in her bowl again and folded her arms. Her nose crinkled and her eyebrows drew together. "It d-doesn't sound right. How d-do you know?"

I sighed; I was about to take another bite but placed the spoon back in the bowl. My stomach growled with anger. If it had hands of its own, it would have helped itself. "I had a dream or a memory. It was my birthday and mom and dad..." I reached up and pulled my

necklace from underneath my nightgown. "Mom and dad gave me this."

Bethany's eyes widened. "D-did you see their faces?"

"Not really, not clear, except for maybe their smiles." I shrugged, unsure. "But I heard their voices, and I still can. I remember exactly what they sounded like."

Bethany dropped her gaze to the floor. Her expression of surprise turned to one of unmistakable sadness. "I wish I remembered," she said.

"You will." I reached over and patted the top of my sister's hand. "Anyway, I heard mom calling for you. She yelled Bethany."

"Did you see me?" Bethany's eyes brightened.

"No, you weren't in my dream, just your name." I remembered the conversation I'd had with my parents, and the promise I had made. That had been six years ago. And though there was no reason to keep the promise, there was also no need to mention it. It was all in the past.

My eyes fixed on the face of my sixteen-year-old sister. Learning we had lost time, was still a shock. I was no longer the thirteen-year-old girl I remembered but a young woman I did not know.

"So, you d-didn't see me?"

I shook my head.

"Then how do you even know it was m-me they were calling?"

"Once I heard it in my dream, I knew it was true."

"I w-wish I remembered." Her voice cracked.

A sudden thought came to my mind. "What about, Ben?"

"What?"

"Ben. Dad and I both called you that in my dream."

"I thought I wasn't in your d-dream." Bethany's brow creased. She drummed her fingers against her folded arms.

"You weren't, but you were mentioned."

"Why?"

"I don't know. You just were." I was getting frustrated. Our conversation wasn't going the way I imagined. I thought she'd be happy that I remembered her name.

"Hmph! Ben does s-sound..."

"Familiar?" I hoped.

She nodded. A smile appeared for a moment then vanished behind a scowl. "Why? Why a boy's n-name?"

I rested my elbows on the table in front of me and rubbed my forehead with the heels of my hands. "I don't know," I groaned.

The clinking of a spoon caused me to raise my head. Bethany filled her mouth with another bite of oatmeal. "Better eat, b-before it gets too c-cold," she sputtered.

We finished our breakfast in silence, lost in our thoughts. Our spoons clinked and scraped the dishes; the sounds echoed around the room.

"Must have been while we slept." Bethany dropped her spoon into her empty bowl and pushed it away.

"What?" Her voice surprised me.

"When J brought this in." She rapped her knuckles on the table. "You think he'll be b-back? W-what about the needles?" Bethany's icy blue gaze concentrated on my face.

I shrugged and shook my head. I'd also wondered about our injections since waking in new surroundings. It had only been a couple of days. And while the drug that kept us in a hypnotic state was not missed, I worried about the vaccine. J had never mentioned what the vaccine protected us from or whether it worked. I made a mental note to ask him the next time he came around, and I hoped it would be soon.

We dressed for the day in the clothing J had brought the night before. I drew the familiar, green dress toward my nose and sniffed the fabric. I closed my eyes and rubbed the soft material against my cheek. As the only piece of clothing, besides my nightclothes, I was glad it was clean. We could not know how long we'd be wearing the same clothes.

I turned my back to Bethany, who was already half naked and pulling her blue dress over her head. I pulled my nightgown off and replaced it with my green frock. It was soft and cool against my skin as I pulled it down. My heart skipped a little; the memory of my drawing came to mind. I would no longer feel it rubbing underneath and poking at my skin. The thought made me a little sad. But as

impossible as it was I held on to the hope it would somehow be found.

I slid both of my hands into the deep pockets and wiggled the fingers on my right hand. Something caught between my middle and ring finger. I wiggled them again; the object dislodged and fell. It burrowed itself deep into the corner of my pocket. My fingers searched, finally finding the smooth and round bit. I pulled it out and found it was a button.

The small object did not match the buttons on my dress or Bethany's. Though roughly the same size, the button I held in my palm was dark brown.

I rubbed it between my finger and thumb before dropping it back into my pocket. For the time being, it would remain hidden from Bethany. Once again I would ask J. The list of questions for him was growing.

I looked around the empty room. "You didn't find anything else?" A part of me was hopeful.

"No. Why?"

I shrugged. "I just thought maybe something to pass the time." I sat back in my chair, placed the dishes under their covers, and pushed them closer to the edge of the table.

Bethany sat across from me and folded her arms. "Unfortunately, what you see is what w-we got."

"How are your eyes?" I jutted my chin toward her; she wasn't wearing her sunglasses.

"Fine. It's not that b-bright in here."

I reached up and pulled the sunglasses from my face. My eyelids fluttered; tears spilled down my cheeks. A few seconds later, they settled.

"Better?" Bethany questioned; her eyebrows rose partway to her hairline.

I nodded. "Yes, I don't think we're going to need these anymore." I poked at the dark glasses on the table.

"Sure we w-will."

I tilted my head to the side. "When?"

Bethany rolled her eyes. "When we g-get out of here."

The small, dirty window drew my attention. Bethany's optimistic words contradicted my thoughts. *If we get out of here, it won't be anytime soon.* Something told me we'd be finding the way out on our own.

"So!"

Bethany's voice startled me. My heart thumped beneath my golden necklace. "What?"

"Why don't you t-tell me all about that crazy dream of yours. And don't leave anything out, especially the part about my n-name." Bethany winked.

I smiled at my sister and nodded. I would tell her my dream, every detail, but one. My promise to our parents would remain a secret. Bethany didn't need to know; it already bothered her that I remembered more than she did. There was no point in making it worse.

The gold heart pressed into my palm through the fabric of my dress. Besides, it wasn't the secret that was important. The dream had revealed much more than that. My sister finally had a name of her own.

Seventeen
Jasper, Cecil, and the Cabinet

Tingles travelled down my forearm and exited my fingertips like pulses of electricity. My right arm had fallen asleep like the rest of me.

I blinked my eyes open only to close them against the brightness that assailed them. I eased them open to tiny slits and allowed the light to filter through my lashes. After a moment my eyes settled, and the light no longer stung.

Sweat had glued my cheek to the table, and I peeled it free. A string of spit extended from my chin to a small puddle of drool. I wiped it away with the heel of my hand. My stiffened neck muscles loosened as I rolled my head and stretched my arms above me. A wide yawn took over my face; my eyes watered. I pushed my chair back from the table; the feet squeaked. But Bethany, who lay sprawled on her mat, did not stir.

The faint creak of the door caught my attention, and I jumped from my chair and spun around. J trudged into the room, his breathing an audible wheeze. His dark sunglasses and a white mask covered his face. His slow movements were enough to show that he was not well. He dropped the cloth bag that he carried and walked further into the room. The tray he held rattled with his steps.

"Sit!" I pointed to the chair where I had been seated.

He shook his head. "I do not want to get too close; I am infected. If the immunization failed..." He set the tray of food on the cart.

"Please," I begged, cutting him off mid-sentence.

J wheezed a sigh and plodded toward the table. I moved around to the other side as he pulled the chair further back before sitting down.

"I have so many questions, and I need to know the answers." I pleaded with my eyes and held his gaze.

J nodded. The action was like a pistol at a starting line and questions spilled from my mouth. "Why are you infected? How are

you sick so fast? Why were you not vaccinated?"

"Did you enjoy your breakfast?" J responded with a question of his own and avoided mine.

"Yes. Why are you sick?" I was not going to give up.

"The virus is spread through close contact and..." A brief coughing fit cut short J's explanation. "The first symptoms appear quickly," he continued, "within a day or two after infection. However, the progression of the illness itself is slow. In the beginning, I received vaccines for each new mutation, but then it was stopped." He shrugged.

"Why?"

"Things changed. I should go." J began to rise from his chair.

"You can't! I have questions, I deserve answers." My hand slammed down on the table. J sat straight in his seat. My action had surprised not only J but myself as well. My pulse raced. I turned and glanced at Bethany; still sound asleep on her mat.

"You do," J coughed. "But I cannot..." He shook his head.

"Why not?" I leaned forward and rested my arms on the table in front of me. My cheeks burned. Bethany rolled over and groaned. "Why I repeated; my voice quieted, but I was on the verge of losing control of my emotions again.

J shook his head. "We are not safe. I cannot risk HIM finding out you know more than you should. It is far too dangerous."

I sat back in my chair and folded my arms; my jaw was tight. J rose and moved to the cart. He gathered the dishes from our last meal and placed them on the tray. They rattled in his trembling hands.

"Where did the button come from, the one in the pocket of my dress? And what is your real name?" I whispered, hoping he would at least grant me answers to less important questions.

"The button was found in the pocket of your pyjamas on the night you were brought back, and my full name is Jasper."

I squinted. There was that word again, 'back'. I had no memories of my arrival or anytime at C.E.C.I.L other than the last several weeks. "Who is 'HIM'?" I tried again to glean a little more information.

Jasper shook his head and turned toward the door. "I will see you later, April."

He struggled as he carried the full tray with one hand and pulled the door open with the other. My exasperation kept me glued to the chair. "Who is 'HIM'?" I yelled as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

"W-what's happened?" Bethany's sleep filled voice came from behind me.

"Nothing, sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

"I don't think so. It m-must be the middle of the day. What's that?"

I turned to look at Bethany and followed her outstretched arm to her pointing finger. It pointed past me and toward the door. I turned back and saw the bag. "I don't know. Jasper brought it in."

"J-Jasper?" Bethany tilted her head to the side as her eyebrows squished together.

"That's J's real name."

"He was here?" Bethany jumped up from her mat and hurried toward the door. She snatched the blue cloth bag up from the floor and joined me at the table. She sat down and set the unopened bag in front of her. "Why didn't you wake me? What did he say?"

"You were sound asleep." I shrugged.

"But what did he s-say?"

"Not much."

"But you h-had questions."

"Yes, I did." I pressed my lips together. My arms were still folded as I sat straight in my chair.

"So what did he s-say?" Bethany's icy blue eyes looked as though they would fall from their sockets if she opened them any further.

I unfolded my arms, and my shoulders dropped. "He wouldn't tell me anything." I slid my hand into the pocket of my dress, found the button, and rubbed it between my thumb and index finger. The fleeting memory of having done that long ago flickered in my mind. "Let's eat and then we'll see what's in that bag." I forced a smile. I

did not want to discuss my conversation, or the lack of, with J any further.

Bethany grinned and dumped the bag. Several books clunked onto the table. They were the last ones we'd received at C.E.C.I.L., and Bethany's face lit up when she spied the one she'd been reading.

Bethany grabbed the book from the pile and headed over to her mat. She lay down on her stomach, bent her legs up behind her and crossed them at the ankles. She flipped the book open to the first page.

"You're starting over?" I said from my spot at the table. I'd moved back to the other chair, preferring the view of the window over the hidden door.

"Ya."

"Why?"

Bethany sighed and looked up at me. "It's a short book, and we didn't get very m-many to pass the time. I'm starting over." She turned back to the book and immersed herself in *Charlotte's Web*.

I nodded; Bethany had a point.

The largest book in the small pile caught my attention. I opened it to the title page and began reading. No word would go unread. As Jasper had fallen ill, I feared the length of our imprisonment would remain undetermined. *If he died...* The sudden thought came to my mind, and I pushed it away. I didn't want to think about what would happen to us if something happened to him. I returned to the book and distracted myself with the words.

"Well look at you, aren't you two a sight for sore eyes? Your noses buried in your books like they were at C.E.C.I.L."

His smooth voice startled me, and I whirled toward the door. He stood in the doorway, dressed in a light blue dress shirt; the sleeves rolled to the elbows in perfect symmetry. A dull sunbeam highlighted a white piece of lint that clung to his black pants. His white hair shone as another sunbeam touched his head. The scent of his cologne wafted through the air. In an instant, I knew who "HIM" was, and I turned back toward my book.

My thoughts raced as I pretended to be as unemotional as I had been the last time I saw him. I glanced over at Bethany before resuming my reading. She fixed her eyes on her book as though she remembered her previous state.

"Oh come now! There's no need to pretend anymore. I know you are aware." There was a sickening sweetness to his voice with a hint of menacing undertones. My skin prickled as a nervous shiver travelled up my body to the top of my head. I continued to focus my attention on the blurred words in front of me.

"What do you want?" Bethany's voice broke the eerie silence that fell over the room. My stomach knotted; my body became more rigid as I turned to look at my sister. My eyes begged her, but she stared past me.

"Ah, B2, is it?"

My head whipped back to look at Cecil. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't hide his threatening tone even with the fake smile he had pasted to his face. He stared over at Bethany; his creepy grin exhibited contempt.

I followed their conversation and turned back toward my sister.

"Bethany," she said. Her grin equalled Cecil's.

I gasped at her tone; she was braver than I thought she was.

"That's right – Bethany." He turned his cold gaze to me. "And you are..."

"April." Despite my attempt at bravery, I couldn't keep the tremor from my voice, and I was sure my heartbeat was visible.

"You know, girls..." Cecil pulled out the chair across from me and angled it so that Bethany was not behind him. He brushed away the piece of lint I'd spotted earlier and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He clasped his hands together in front of him and twiddled his thumbs. He sighed. "I had so many plans, so many plans for us. But that's all gone now." He dropped his voice, and I wasn't sure if he was speaking to us or to himself. "You were my hope for the new world, so smart, so pretty – so talented, the whole package. But now..." He sat back in his chair and raised his hands. "It's all gone, ruined. Everything." He snapped his fingers, and I jumped; the sound echoed in the somewhat empty room. "Poof!

Just like that – gone. And do you know who you can thank for that?” His wild eyes darted between Bethany and me. “Well, do you?” He barked.

Bethany and I shook our heads. Our earlier bravery stifled as the crazed and angered look in Cecil's eyes kept us from saying too much.

Cecil took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Well, you can thank Jasper for that,” he said emotionless.

My jaw dropped.

“Okay, I w-will.” Bethany blurted. She'd found her courage again, and her bold voice interrupted the uncomfortable silence that had fallen over the room.

I glared at her, willing her not to say anything more. I returned my attention to Cecil as the sudden squeaking of his chair alerted me of his movement. He leaned forward again in a casual manner. “Ha,” he chuckled, “I'm sure you will. But...” Cecil rose from his chair, “just remember that his actions will be his downfall – and yours.” He walked toward the door and pulled it open.

“What do you mean?” I said, finding my voice despite the wild beating of my heart.

“Well that, April, is a story for another day.” Cecil pulled open the door and stepped out. The sound of a lock clicking shut on the other side, echoed through the room.

I ran a hand over the back of my neck and exhaled a shaky breath. *What did he mean?*

“Ass!” Bethany's voice interrupted the beginning of my thoughts.

“Bethany!”

“What?” She rolled over onto her side and propped her head up in her hand.

“I just...oh never mind.” I rubbed my hands over my face.

“Well, he is. That and a whole lot m-more.”

I stared down at Bethany and chuckled. “Where did all that come from?” I waved my hand toward her.

She creased her brow. “What?”

“All that bravery and name calling, and... whatever.”

Bethany shrugged. “I don't know, it s-seemed sort of...natural.”

"Maybe you're starting to remember your personality," I suggested.

"Maybe – I hope s-so, this not remembering stuff is...crap."

"Come on." I jumped up from my chair, grabbed Bethany's arm, and pulled her up from the floor.

"What are you d-doing?" she said as she followed me toward the cabinet.

"Plan two."

"What?"

"We're going to find out what's in that cabinet."

We stood in front of the wardrobe and stared up at the lock. Even with the rust, the old, metal bars were solid. Bethany had proved that when she'd used it as a foothold. There was no way we would be able to break it off, but I hoped somehow we could pry the doors open enough to see what was inside.

I grabbed the two small wooden knobs and pulled. The lock rattled, but the doors remained sealed. My hands ran down from the handles along the seam; my fingertips tugged as they searched for a hold. It wasn't until they reached the bottom of the doors that a small hole caught my attention. I tried to wedge my finger inside, but the indentation was too small.

"Was there anything else in that bag besides books?" I said as I straightened up and turned toward Bethany.

She shrugged. "I don't think so."

I sighed; her words erased any idea I had of prying open the doors. I leaned up against the cabinet and eased my way down until I sat in front of it; a few moments later my sister joined me.

"What're you doing?" she said.

"Thinking." My eyes focused on the almost invisible door at the far end. Had I not seen it open, I would never have known it was there. Horizontal boards encircled the room and covered the entrance. With no knobs or latches, the door disappeared into the walls.

I rested my head against the cabinet and closed my eyes. I was determined to find out what was inside.

"Are you still thinking?" Bethany whispered.

I nodded.

"About what?"

"Something to stick in that little hole."

Bethany shuffled beside me. I considered opening my eyes for a moment as her footsteps moved away, but my mind drifted back to Jasper and Cecil. *How long had Cecil been here? Had he been here the whole time? What were their plans?* More questions rolled through my head; I could not make any assumptions. No matter what their intentions, my instincts told me that Bethany and I were on our own. We had to come up with a plan if we wanted to get out.

"What about this?" A short wooden pencil lay in the centre of her hand.

"Where did you find that?" I sat forward, snatched up the pencil, and scooted around to face the wardrobe.

"There was a pocket inside the bag." Bethany pointed over her shoulder in the direction of the table.

"Cross your fingers!" I said as I sat in front of the cabinet. I stuck the pencil into the hole and, using it as a lever, tried to pry open the bottom corner of the door.

"Is it going to work?" Bethany said as she knelt beside me.

"I don't know."

I pushed down a little harder. The wood gave into the pressure, and the pencil snapped. "CRAP!"

"April!"

I rolled my eyes. She was one to talk. "The pencil broke."

"So, now you have two p-pieces. Just stick one end back in the hole."

I held up half of the pencil and pointed to the cabinet. "The other half is stuck inside the hole."

"Oh, crap!" Bethany mimicked.

I groaned and leaned against the closet with my legs stretched out in front of me. My head tapped against the doors, and I closed my eyes. My fists balled at my sides. I inhaled through my nose and let the air escape between my pursed lips. I unclenched my hands

and drummed my fingers on the rough floorboards; a nail head caught my fingernail.

"I have an idea." I jumped to my feet and headed toward the nearest wall as the memory of pacing out the room came to mind. "There's a nail that sticks out; help me find it."

The old walls were rough and full of nails, most sunk deep inside the boards. "Watch out for splinters," I warned Bethany as she ran her fingers over the walls. Cracks and knotholes were everywhere. The holes were rather disturbing as most contained the bodies of dead insects. I jumped back from one particular knothole. A spider crawled out as I peered into it. I was thankful it wasn't big, but it was ugly just the same. The only spider I ever liked was from the book Bethany happened to be reading.

"I wish you could help us," I whispered under my breath. The spider turned around and disappeared back inside its home.

I continued making my way around the room. My eyes and fingers searched the wall with diligence. Finally, they bumped into the nail I'd remembered, and I called Bethany over to help me pull it out. Unfortunately, though it stuck out quite far, it would not budge.

"This isn't going to work. It's in there too tight, and my fingers keep slipping."

"Mine too." Bethany rubbed her fingertips together.

We walked back over toward the wardrobe. I placed my hands on my hips and stared up at the lock; narrowing my eyes.

"Maybe I can try at the top." I looked down in time to see Bethany walking away. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not lifting you. You can s-stand on the t-table if you want to get up there."

I chuckled and helped Bethany with the table. If there was one thing I was relearning about my sister, it was her bold nature. She had a knack for being direct and saying what was on her mind.

We pulled the table up to the cabinet, and I climbed on top. I was able to reach the lock and like before, slid my fingers down along where the doors met. With every inch my fingers inspected, the more my stomach knotted. The doors were solid with no holes

or dents for my fingers to grab hold. I stopped searching when I reached the knobs.

"I wish we had the key or a piece of wire or something." I rose to my feet and stared at the padlock. Once again I heard Bethany's footsteps, but I remained focused on the lock.

"Here, see if this works."

Sitting in the palm of Bethany's outstretched hand was a key.

"Where did you get this?" I plucked the small, black and rust coloured object from her hand.

"Up there." She pointed to the top of the cabinet. "I f-found it when I was climbing down and put it in my pocket."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I stared at the key I was holding between my fingers in disbelief.

"I f-forgot. My head is still a little f-fuzzy sometimes." She shrugged. "Anyway, you kept talking about p-prying the cabinet open, not unlocking it."

I shook my head there was no point in arguing. I faced the cabinet, put the key in the lock and turned it. The padlock fell open.

Eighteen

The Ghosts Inside

I climbed down off the old table, and with Bethany's help, we slid it out of the way.

We stood in front of the cabinet, its presence larger and more foreboding than before. My stomach knotted, and I clenched my fists. The skin on my face tightened as the blood drained from my face. Dread replaced any idea I had about opening the doors.

"What's the m-matter?" Bethany's warm hand touched my arm.

"Nothing." I hesitated for a moment then reached for the handles and pulled the doors open. In an instant, the room filled with the musty smell of old things – secrets, kept locked away from the world.

We stood there and stared at the contents, both of us paralyzed. Shirts and pants, night-clothes, and dresses filled the clothing bar. Stacked in the bottom of the cabinet were shoeboxes. I took a hesitant step forward and reached inside. My fingers brushed the stained and faded pieces of clothing that varied in size and colour. The dresses were similar to the ones Bethany and I were wearing, and I recognized them immediately as C.E.C.I.L attire.

"Whose are th-those?" Bethany's voice questioned from behind me.

"How would I know?"

"That was rhetorical. I d-didn't think you'd know," Bethany said.

"I knew that." I nodded.

I pulled a pale blue dress from the hanger. Its worn fabric was soft under my fingertips. The dress was small, too small for me, but about the right size for Bethany. I turned the dress over in my hands and searched the inside at the back of the collar.

"What are you looking for?" Bethany's voice interrupted.

"An ID number like what we have on our dresses."

"Is there one?"

"If there was, it's been crossed out." I pointed to the faded black line on the inside of the dress' collar.

"Well, at least w-we have some extra clothing. That one l-looks like it'll fit."

I stared down at the dress in my hands, shook my head and sighed. "You're not wearing this dress or any other clothing from this cabinet."

She squeezed her eyes to tiny slits and folded her arms. "And w-why n-not?"

Why not? Because they smell and were worn by some unfortunate person – that's why not. My answer to Bethany's question rolled through my head as I stared at the piece of clothing in my hands. It wasn't like our clothing; it was the same. I eyed some of the other pieces hanging in the cabinet. They were all the same, only different colours, some more worn and stained than others. The pants and shirts were also alike, all some sort of uniform. I rubbed my hand over the back of my neck; my fingers plucked at the collar. Visions of my ID number printed on the cloth came to mind. *What had happened to the residents of C.E.C.I.L who had worn these pieces of clothing?*

I wanted to tell Bethany my suspicions but kept my thoughts to myself. As it turned out, Bethany spotted something undesirable about the dress, herself.

"Ew, w-what's that?" She pointed to the dress hanging from my hands.

I searched the wad of fabric for whatever it was she'd seen. Finally, my eyes spotted a reddish-brown mark that covered the bottom of the dress. The old blood stain caused my stomach to turn.

"Just a stain." I threw the piece of clothing over the bar. "Let's see what's in here. Maybe there's something we can use. And I don't mean any of the clothes." I turned back toward the wardrobe and started pulling out the boxes and setting them on the floor.

"What about th-those pyja...."

I closed my eyes and steadied my voice. "No!" Her loud sigh alerted me of her frustration, and I could sense her glare at the back of my head.

"THOSE PYJAMAS ARE YOURS," she yelled. She had my attention.

I backed away from the cabinet and stood beside her. Bethany pointed straight ahead, and I spotted what she was looking at right away. Stuffed between some clothing was a faded pair of orange pyjamas with yellow flowers.

I gasped. "We can't be sure they're mine. Besides, how can you even remember them?" I said turning away from the cabinet and staring at my sister.

She shrugged and scrunched her forehead; her right hand scratched the top of her head. "I don't know. S-sometimes I remember things, and then I th-think maybe it's a dream. Maybe what I remember isn't real. But those p-pyjamas..." she nodded, "I will never forget those. I think," her eyes rolled up, "I think I hated them." She looked back at me; her eyelids fluttered for a second.

"Hah!" I nodded. "You did hate them."

"Why?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "I have no idea."

"So, they are yours?" She raised her eyebrows.

I turned back to the cabinet and stepped closer. I pulled the top from the wire hanger. The pants were folded and draped over the lower bar. My fingers rubbed the soft fabric.

"What are you looking for?" Bethany whispered.

"Something."

"What?"

I heard her question but didn't answer. My fingers searched the fabric as though they had their own memories. The evidence they looked for, only known to them.

I combed through my memories, searching for the one my fingers had recalled. I lifted the fabric closer to my eyes. They too remembered and began scanning the orange cloth dotted with yellow flowers. My eyes and fingers worked together to find the proof that would confirm their suspicion. My brain was still unsure of what that was. A small, uneven bump caught my fingers' attention. They stopped their search as my eyes examined the fabric. Under

the armpit of the sleeve, near the seam, I spotted the inconsistency of the pattern. I turned the top inside out to have a better look.

The small tear had been sewn quite well given it was triangular in shape. My fingers rubbed over the scar on the underside of the pyjama top. The vision of a needle and thread stitching a hole came to mind. I stuck my finger in my mouth as the image of the needle poking my finger and drawing blood also came back. My skin prickled and rose into tiny bumps. I'd hoped I would not find the proof that they were mine. I returned the top back to its hanger.

"They are yours, aren't they?" Bethany whispered.

I nodded and began removing the small boxes. Seconds later, Bethany joined me, and together we emptied the cabinet in silence.

"Now what?" Bethany said, wiping her hand across her forehead.

We had removed twenty-nine boxes. Some of which were on a shelf at the back of the wardrobe. Bethany had had to crawl in and pass them out to me.

"Open them... I guess."

"All of them?"

A small pile of boxes surrounded us. Some had identifying marks written in pen or marker, others had drawings, and a few had nothing at all.

Bethany picked up one of the cartons with an ID on it and held it in her hands, she squinted. "This looks familiar."

I looked at the box and the identification. It had no meaning to me. "What do you mean?"

"I remember..." she paused and scratched her head. "I did something like this," she looked back up from the box, "before I came to your room."

My thoughts drifted back to C.E.C.I.L. The memory was hazy, but there was a vague feeling that I too, had had such a box. I put my hand into my pocket. The small, brown button nestled in the corner, and I rubbed it between my fingers.

"Do you think these are the s-same? I mean not m-mine or yours, but the same thing? Bethany's eyes widened.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I sort of remember a box, but I don't remember what it was for."

"I drew on mine – a coloured arc, I think."

I raised my eyebrows. "A rainbow?" I took the box from Bethany's hands. "Come on, let's put these back."

"I thought we were going to open them?"

"We will, but maybe one at a time. We don't want him catching us with all this." I waved my hand around at the shoeboxes spread out on the floor and the open cabinet.

"You mean Cecil?" Bethany said.

I nodded. "Yes, him or even Jasper – just in case." I stepped forward; my hand pressed against my aching lower back. I looked up at the bar weighed down by clothing. Standing on tiptoe, I reached up in the centre and pushed the apparel to one side and then the other. The adjustment exposed the shelf at the back, and I wished I'd thought of that earlier. I stepped inside.

"Hand me a box, Beth."

"What d-did you call me?"

I thought for a second. "Sorry...Bethany."

"No, I like that." She smiled. "You can call me Beth." She handed me a couple of the boxes.

I smiled as I set them down on the shelf. A carving on the back wall caught my attention, and I moved in for closer examination. I traced my fingers over the rough indentations – C-2, "Someone's been in here?" I called out. My focus returned to the alphanumeric string gouged in the wood – 0-1-6-0-9-2-7-L.

"What?" Beth's muffled voice came to my ears.

"There's an ID carved into the back wall."

"What does it s-say?"

My finger traced along each letter and number as I called them out to Beth. "Do you remember ever meeting anyone else at C.E.C.I.L?" I called as I stared at the combination of letters and numbers. The smell of wood and old, musty clothing filled my nose as I waited for Beth's answer.

"I don't remember. D-did you meet anyone?"

My hand brushed over the carving again. Unfocused images and visions flooded my brain. Recent memories combined with dreams, old ones mixed with thoughts. I closed my eyes and thought back to

earlier memories of C.E.C.I.L. There weren't many, but a few had begun to creep back. Occasional encounters as I walked down long, white corridors flitted through my mind. "I don't know, maybe."

Another indentation below the ID caught my attention, and I crouched lower in the closet. My fingers traced over the roughly carved letters; the engraving made no sense. "What do you think that says? Is it another ID?" I stepped out of the cabinet and allowed Beth to have a look. A few moments later she crawled out; her nose wrinkled.

"I don't know. It's n-nothing like ours."

I moved back into my place and stared at the group of letters – GOB42L8. I whispered the letters and numbers, hoping that they would somehow begin to make sense. My skin prickled on the third run-through as I whispered the words.

"What? What are you s-saying?" Beth called from behind me.

I moved back from the cabinet and stared at the ID and the carving below. It was a message. It was a warning. I turned and looked at Beth. "Go, before it's too late."

Nineteen
Peanut Butter

"April?"

"Yes."

"Are you s-sleeping?"

I half smiled. "No."

"Why didn't we didn't open up any b-boxes?" Beth yawned.

I put my hand out in front of me and turned it, its outline somewhat visible in the darkness. A small groan escaped my lips as I pulled my legs up and rested my feet flat on the pad. The altered position pressed my lower back into the mat and eased the ache. The thin mattress offered little protection between the hardwood floor and my bones.

"Because. Now go to sleep." The carved letters and numbers danced in the darkness in front of me, and I squeezed my eyelids shut. The warning etched inside the cabinet had confirmed my suspicions about the clothing. I hadn't wanted to deal with any more surprises.

"We should open one t-tomorrow."

"Maybe...if you stop talking and go to sleep."

That was the last I heard from Beth. How I managed to fall asleep myself was a mystery, and when I woke up, the room had begun to lighten.

I sat up and stared at the cabinet, afraid of the secrets it held, but curious at the same time. I threw on my clothing; without thought, my hand dipped into my pocket. The button rested in its corner. A few moments later, I tiptoed toward the large piece of furniture. It drew me with some invisible force, like a small child to the promise of an irresistible treat.

Without hesitation, my hands reached for the handles and tugged. The doors remained shut. I pulled again with a little more force. The lock rattled, and I remembered we'd locked the cabinet back up the day before. My hands fell back to my side; I was both relieved and disappointed.

"Do you want this?"

I gasped and spun around. Beth stood behind me; her outstretched hand held the small key.

I snatched the key from Beth's hand and put it in my pocket. "Not now." I stomped back to my mat and lay down on my sore back. I counted the beams in the ceiling. Each one touched by the light that filtered in through the small window. There were only six, but I knew that already. I had counted them every day since we'd been there.

Bethany's shadow loomed over me. She looked down at me and scowled.

"W-why not?" Beth crossed her arms and glared down at me.

I sighed and sat up. *Why not?* "Sit down, Beth." I patted her mat. Small chunks of foam were missing, and it looked less comfortable than mine. Beth didn't move. "Please?"

Bethany sighed and sat crossed legged in front of me; she kept her arms folded. I wasn't sure what I was going to say to her, but I was certain 'because' was no longer a suitable answer.

I took a deep breath. "We can't –"

"How are my two favourite girls this morning?"

I hadn't heard him come in and jumped at the sound of his voice, though his scent hit my nose at about the same time. Bethany startled too and looked past me to where Cecil stood. It took a moment before I rose and turned around to face him. Bethany joined me at my side, a scowl pasted to her face.

"Where's Jasper?" Beth demanded before I could give her the 'be-careful-what-you-say' look.

"Hmph," Cecil snorted. "I see you haven't changed your attitude much since last time." He ran a hand through his white hair. The sweat stain under his arm was quite visible on his royal blue shirt.

"And why –"

I reached out and placed my hand on Beth's back, interrupting her mid-sentence. "We're concerned," I said. My voice was even. "He didn't look well the last time we saw him."

Cecil's grey eyes fixed on my face. "Concerned? How dare you?" His voice was low and threatening as he sharpened his glare on me.

I swallowed hard in response; my mouth suddenly dry. In the same instant, his gaze softened as he regained his composure. "He's feeling a little...unwell." He shrugged as one corner of his mouth rose in a smug smile.

"We want to s-see him," Beth said through clenched teeth. I pushed my hand against her lower back as a reminder.

"I'm sure you do. Anyway," Cecil clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "I have something for you." He turned on his heel and left the room. A moment later he returned, walking in backwards. I tried to look around him as he pulled something along. For the first time, the door laid all the way open into the room. I took a quiet step to my left. I focused on what was on the other side of the entrance, but all I could see was a darkened hall. I shifted my attention to the open door and the doorknob with a key in the lock. *Was the key always there?*

"I only brought you one," he wheezed breathless.

His raspy voice brought my attention to the folded piece of metal he pushed into the room with a mattress stuffed in the middle. Bethany and I stood by the table as he rolled it towards our mats and unfolded the cot. The worn mattress looked inviting.

He turned and stepped towards us, beads of sweat dripped down the sides of his face. I backed up as he approached and bumped into the table behind me. He stopped inches in front of me and glared down, a sneer fixed to his face. His breath was foul, and I could as much taste it as smell it. He reached up and brushed a lock of hair from my cheek. Goosebumps rose on my skin. Had there been anything in my stomach it would have been all over the floor. Instead, only bile burned at the back of my throat. I swallowed it down and met his grey gaze. I was not going to allow him the satisfaction of knowing my fear.

"I'll let him know you're concerned." He smiled; a small bit of some food had caught between two of his teeth. Before I could respond, a coughing fit racked Cecil's body. Beth and I watched, and it wasn't until he'd regained control that my eyes left his crumpled form. My gaze drifted over to the wide-open door; we'd missed our opportunity to run.

"I have something else for you." He cleared his throat and pulled a folded piece of cloth from the pocket of his beige pants. Then he dabbed at his mouth as he turned toward the door. When he came back, he carried a blue cloth bag, and he set it down on the table. "Your breakfast." He smirked and turned away.

I stared at the bag as the clicking of the door closing behind him echoed in my ears. The food Jasper had brought could not compare with what we'd enjoyed at C.E.C.I.L, but it was edible. I couldn't imagine what he had planned for us. I couldn't help feel like that sack was a bad omen. *What is happening?*

"Are you going t-to open it?" Beth's voice shook me from my thoughts.

I shrugged. I didn't want to open it. I didn't want to accept anything from him. My stomach, however, had its own agenda, and it grumbled with loud complaint. I exhaled and nodded. "You can," I said.

Beth approached the table and untied the handles of the bag. She removed the few items from inside. The smell of overripe bananas permeated the room, and my stomach growled.

"Where'd he get those?" I wondered out loud as I viewed the mostly brown bananas in Beth's hand.

Beth shook her head and placed them on the table. She reached into the sack again and pulled out a bag of bread. The bag was half full and contained an assortment of crusts and slices from different kinds. Finally, she pulled out a large jar of peanut butter.

"It's heavy, it must be f-full," she said.

"Let me see." I took the jar from her outstretched hand. I bounced it in mine and weighed it. My shaking fingers unscrewed the lid, and I removed it from the jar. Paper covered the opening. "It's a new jar." I tilted it toward my sister so she could see the covering that sealed it.

"W-why would he give us an entire jar? Why not a s-sandwich?" Beth questioned. Her voice and narrowed eyes gave away the distrust in what she saw and with good reason.

"It looks like we'll be feeding ourselves for a while." We'd been so accustomed to three prepared meals a day it never occurred to

me that things would be much different. C.E.C.I.L met our needs despite the captivity. Wherever we were, we were on our own, left to fend for ourselves. Only now we had less freedom.

I turned the jar in my hands and read the label. The green paper stood out as being familiar. My mind searched through its storage of memories. A list of thoughts and happenings had grown each day. A small fragment of one memory stood out from the rest. I fixated on the tiny remnant. Like fingernails trying to extract a splinter, I dug until I got hold of the foreign object.

I concentrated on an image in my head. My thoughts focused and sharpened until the memory pulled free.

Peanut butter had been a favourite food of mine until one summer. Our parents had gone away on a trip and left us in the care of a babysitter. If my memory was correct, peanut butter sandwiches were all she had fed us – breakfast, lunch, and supper. After the experience, I never ate one again. I stared at the full jar in my hands; my stomach rolled at the memory.

“So, are you going to s-stare at that all day or are we going to eat?” Beth's eyebrows rose, and she looked annoyed.

“Here.” I thrust the jar toward her. “You can open it.” I wasn't quite sure how my stomach would handle the smell. Beth took the jar from my hand and set it on the table. “Is there anything else in the bag?”

Bethany reached her hand in and pulled out a small, plastic knife. “Like this?” She smiled.

My stomach growled as Bethany peeled the paper from the jar. I wasn't sure the rumble was hunger-driven, and I took a small step back. The fresh aroma of peanuts wafted from the jar the moment she tore the paper free. Beth tilted it towards me before lifting it to her nose. She took a long inhale from the jar and closed her eyes. For a second I thought she'd inhale all the smell from the peanut butter.

Without uttering another word, we sat down. I grabbed a banana and removed the dark brown peel. The fruit inside was soft, and I had to take care not to turn it into mush as I sliced it into small pieces. When I finished, I handed Beth the knife, and she

began to build peanut butter and banana sandwiches. Much of the bread was stale or mouldy, but we managed to find four slices that were good enough to eat. When she finished, she handed one of the sandwiches to me. I inspected the white and brown bread sandwich; the smell of peanut butter and banana not quite as strong as before. My stomach growled again.

"Mmm!" Beth's voice distracted me, and I glanced up at her. She held her food in her hands and licked her lips. She closed her eyes and bit into her creation. She savoured the mouthful like it was her last meal.

I turned my attention toward my food. I brought the sandwich closer to my mouth, hesitated, closed my eyes, and took a bite. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

We ate in silence. Each bite tasted better than the last. I chewed every sticky piece until it dissolved in my mouth. Although there was plenty of peanut butter, I would make sure we weren't as liberal with it the next time we ate. My instinct told me that food was not going to be as abundant as it had been. There was no telling when, or if, Cecil would bring us more. We'd only been there for a few days, and while Jasper had brought food for every meal, we couldn't trust Cecil to do the same. If Jasper was too ill, the peanut butter might be the last food we ever get.

"After b-breakfast...can we open up one of those boxes...p-please?" Beth spoke through sticky peanut butter bites.

I'd forgotten that before the interruption by Cecil I was going to explain why I didn't think we should open any boxes. "Okay." I changed my mind. Maybe there was something in one of those cartons, something that would help us to escape.

Twenty

The Window

"Hurry up!" Bethany tapped her foot and glared at me with impatient eyes. After I'd told her we'd open up a box, she'd gulped down her peanut butter sandwich so fast I was afraid she was going to choke. I looked down at the remaining bit of sandwich in my hand. There were only a few more bites left, and I wanted to savour every last one.

"Why're you taking s-so long?" Bethany whined.

I *was* taking long, stalling even. The thought of opening that cabinet again with all its nasty secrets made my stomach roll. *And what if he catches us? How could we even begin to explain?* I shook at the thought. I didn't want to imagine what he might do.

"Come on, April, before he comes b-back."

I swallowed another piece and looked up at Beth. Her mouth had drawn into a tight line, and there was no doubt she had become annoyed with me. "Back? What do you mean by back?"

"I heard that rumbling noise again. I think it was a..." She closed her eyes, her brow furrowed in concentration. "A truck!" Bethany smiled as the lost word came back to her.

"You think he has a truck? I didn't hear anything." I tilted my head.

"That's because you were too b-busy thinking about chewing." Bethany pointed to the chunk of sandwich still clutched between my thumb and index finger.

I popped the last bite into my mouth and headed toward the wardrobe. My chair dragged behind me as I pulled it along.

"We're opening a b-box, right?"

"Help me!" I ignored Beth and placed the chair beside the cabinet then returned to get the table. I grabbed one end and nodded for her to take the other.

"You know the key is in your p-pocket," Bethany reminded me as we placed the table in front of the cabinet.

"I don't need it." I grabbed the chair and lifted it up onto the table, and then climbed on top. "Hold it steady."

"What're you doing?" Beth grabbed a chair leg in each hand and steadied it on the table.

"I'm going to look out the window."

"W-why?" Her voice rose a little.

"You said you heard a rumbling noise. I want to see if I can see anything."

I knelt on the top of the cabinet and ran a finger through a layer of dust and grime. Some of it already smeared from Beth's earlier visit. The window was still quite dirty even though she had managed to wipe a bit of the dirt away. Her handprint was still visible in the remaining filth.

A small gasp escaped my lips as I checked out my first view of outside. The blue sky, the green trees – everything I caught sight of in that first moment called out to me. My hands clenched into fists, and it took all my control not to pound on the window. Freedom was within reach, and it frustrated me. I rose higher on my knees to get a better view. A light touch on my head pulled me back from the distraction outside, and I looked up. The first rafter was just above the top of the window, and I had brushed my head against it. *That was close.* I ran my hand over the top of my head. The near collision made me aware of the need to be more careful. My awareness prompted thoughts; my thoughts prompted worry. *What if Cecil catches us?*

"Get me something to wipe this window with." I shook my head in an attempt to shift my thoughts from worrying about what might happen to the window in front of me.

"Like what?"

From my perch, the room looked as bleak as it did at ground level. I stuck my hand into my pocket; my fingers grazed over the key. I dug further, found the smooth button, and pinched it between my fingers. My other hand smoothed down the skirt of my dress and snagged the pocket. The square of material ripped down both sides and hung from a few remaining threads along the bottom. A

brighter patch of green showed underneath. I reached down and tore the pocket free.

"Here, put a bit of water on this." I crouched and stretched out my arm. Bethany took the cloth from my hand and moved toward our water bottles. She snatched one from the table and returned to the cabinet.

"How wet?" Her wide icy blue eyes stared up at me.

"Just a little."

Beth placed the cloth over the end and tipped the bottle.

"Here." She stretched her hand up toward me; water, from the damp piece of cloth, dripped down her arm. I reached down and grabbed it.

The wet bit of material moistened the dirt on the window, but with each pass I made, it smeared even more. It wasn't making the window any clearer. If anything, it was worse than it had been before.

"That's not working s-so well," Bethany stated the obvious.

I rolled my eyes. "This isn't big enough," I said as I pulled my dress up to my waist and used the underside of it to clean the window.

"You're getting your dress dirty," Bethany scolded.

"It's already dirty," I said as I wiped away as much filth as I could. When satisfied, I rested the side of my face on the cold and smooth glass. I squished my cheek harder as I tried to get a better look outside. "Uh!" I gasped and withdrew my face away from the glass.

"What?" Bethany said.

"The window moved." I pressed around the edges of the round window and looked for more movement. But I saw nothing. "Get me something." Bethany's hurried footsteps tapped in my ears as I continued to push and pry at the window with my hands.

"What about this?"

I turned and looked down at Bethany. She was holding up the peanut-butter-coated plastic knife. I smiled, crouched down, and stretched out my hand.

“Wait!” Bethany said and licked the knife. “I don't w-want to waste it.” I watched with envy; she'd beaten me to what I'd planned on doing. When she finished, she stretched up her arm and handed me the licked-clean knife.

I picked away at the grey stuff that held the window in place. Some tiny bits flaked off easier than others. After a few moments, I stopped. I wiped a piece of damp hair from my eyes and wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. It was going to take a lot longer than I thought. I sat back on my knees and sighed. We wouldn't be escaping anytime soon.

“Did you get it?” Beth's excited voice came from below.

“No, it's going to take some time.”

“Are you...sure it m-moved?”

I stared at the window. “Yes.” My voice was confident, but in my head, I wondered if it had actually happened.

“Okay, well like you said, it will take time.” Her voice sounded as disappointed as I felt. “Did you see anything?” She regained her earlier excitement.

Bethany's question reminded me of the reason I'd climbed on top of the cabinet. I leaned forward on my knees and peered out the much cleaner window. A mixed forest of tall evergreens and leafy trees stretched out as far as I could see. I also spotted a detail Bethany had failed to mention earlier. Below the window was another roof.

I turned my head to the right and put my cheek against the cold glass. Once again I thought I detected movement, but it didn't raise any more hope. If it had moved, it remained firmly attached.

Greens and browns of varying shades met my eyes as I looked out on the forest that encircled our prison. A flash of movement caught my attention, and a beautiful blue bird flew past. I gasped in awe.

“What!” Bethany called out in alarm.

“Nothing, a bird.”

“Oooh, I shouldn't d-do this – ah!”

I looked over my shoulder and spotted Beth as she climbed onto the chair.

“Beth!”

“I’m coming up, m-move over.” She reached both of her hands towards me, a look of fear and determination in her eyes.

“Fine.” I held on to her arms and steadied her as she pulled herself up to the top of the wardrobe. “Okay?” I said once she settled.

She nodded and gave me a weak smile.

We sat on our knees and took turns peering out the window. We watched as birds flew by and were amazed when the occasional one landed on the roof below. No matter how hard they'd tried to recreate a forest in the large room of C.E.C.I.L., it was nothing compared to the real world.

The tall trees swayed in the invisible breeze. The odd fluffy, white vaporous cloud dotted the bright blue sky. Everything was vibrant and warm as the rays of the sun touched the world outside.

“What's that?” Bethany pulled her sweaty cheek away from the window. She gathered her shoulder length hair in one hand, twisted it, and held it in place on the top of her head. Both of her cheeks had reddened from pressing them against the glass, and I was sure mine looked the same.

I leaned my left cheek on the window. “What?”

“Between the trees, there's an opening like a path or s-something.”

“You're right. It's a road. We must have come here in that truck you keep hearing.” My words reminded me that I'd forgotten to look for signs of some vehicle. My eyes followed along the dirt path from between the trees and traced it back toward the building. There was a road, but I couldn't tell if there was a vehicle parked out front. The roof below the window blocked out the view.

“My t-turn.” Bethany tugged on my dress, and I moved back.

Beth turned her head from left to right and back again. Every few seconds she uttered quiet expressions of delight. I was about to ask her to move over when she sat back from the window.

“It's g-getting dark. It's not night already...is it?” she said with a puzzled look on her face.

I copied her expression. We hadn't been on top of the wardrobe that long. I leaned forward and peered out. The blue sky had turned into different shades of swirling grey. Angry clouds pushed away the white puffs that we had enjoyed looking at minutes before. The tops of the green trees swayed faster as the wind blew them around. A loud rumble shook the rafters.

"What's h-happening?" Beth's voice wavered a little.

I placed an arm around her shoulder. "A storm, I think."

Beth pulled back and looked up at me; her eyes wide. "I think I like storms about as m-much as heights."

"You're right. You don't like storms, but I'm sure it will be over soon. It'll just rain hard for a bit. Don't worry." I patted her back. Beth had no real memory of how much she hated both.

"Rain." Bethany leaned forward and peered out the window. "Rain," she whispered again. "Mad rain."

There was another rumbling, but it didn't come from any storm.

"Is he back?" I said.

Bethany nodded and drew away from the window. We climbed down from the cabinet and carried our table and chair back over to where they belonged. We tiptoed toward our mats.

I looked up at the rain-washed window and placed my hand on my cheek. I could still feel the slight shift of the window. *It had moved.* I assured myself; the doubt withered and died. And though it would take time, hope lived.

Twenty-One

Hidden Secrets

The storm outside kept us huddled together on my mat. Although Beth had begged to sit on the cot, I had no intention of using it no matter how comfortable it looked. Under Beth's protests, we'd folded it up and rolled it into the corner of the room by the door.

Bethany sat beside me, close enough for me to feel her body heat. She drew her knees up to her chest and buried her face into them. Her dark wavy hair fell around her. Her hands rested on top of her head, and she would cover her ears whenever the thunder boomed. While the room was warm, Beth shook like the rafters with each crack of thunder. The rain pounded on the roof, and it was almost deafening. I could scarcely hear my breath. The room darkened as the sky filled with black storm clouds.

"It'll be over soon," I spoke louder than usual. I hoped I was right as there was no sign the raging storm was ending soon. I reached over and rubbed Beth's back. Her blue dress was damp with sweat.

Beth turned her head to the side and looked at me through a lock of her untamed hair. "H-how do y-you know?" A flash of lightning filtered in through the window. An eerie blue glow brightened the room for a second. Beth squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face into her knees. Her hands covered her ears as the thunder rolled seconds later. "Ya, sh-sure it is," she said. Her words were almost lost to the hammering rain.

I cradled my forehead in my palms and covered my eyes with the heels of my hands. "We can," I hesitated, "play a game." Another memory had returned.

"No." Beth shook her head.

"It'll help you know when the storm's almost over."

Beth looked up from her knees and wiped her sweaty face with her hand. "What do you mean?"

I sighed. "We used to do this when we were little. Dad showed us."

Beth furrowed her brow. "T-tell me."

"You'll have to look up at the window."

Beth glanced at the window as another flash of lightning lit it up. She buried her face and covered her ears. "I d-don't think th-that's a g-good idea," she stammered.

"I promise it will help. It always did before." I rested my hand on her shoulder; her body trembled under my touch.

Beth raised her head and stared up at the window. "Okay," she groaned, "what do I do?"

"Next time you see a flash, start counting one, one-thousand, two, one-thou –"

"Okay, okay I g-get it. Th-then what?"

"Stop, when you hear the thunder. The longer the space between the lightening and the thunder –"

"The further the storm," Beth interrupted again. Her voice showed more excitement than fear. Her eyes were wide as she stared at me. "I remember!" She flung her arms around my neck and almost knocked me over.

A loud crack of thunder had her sitting up straight in an instant. Her hands covered her ears, but she didn't close her eyes.

"You remember?" I said. My voice rose over the din.

She nodded. "Just the game, though, n-nothing else."

"Well, it's a start." I smiled.

We stared up at the window, and it wasn't long before lightning flashed; the room lit up in the creepy light.

"One," Beth started. It was as far as she got before thunder rattled the window.

I wrapped an arm around her. "It's okay." The rain pelted against the glass. A dark shape slammed into the pane. The resulting crack echoed through the room, and I hoped whatever it was, that it had broken the glass. Lightning flashed, and Bethany counted again.

My mind drifted between helping Beth count and my hope for escape. Every optimistic thought was rivaled by one of despair. Soon, the impossibilities piled up and drowned out any confidence I had had. By the time the storm ended, I had argued myself out of freedom.

I exhaled as all the tension caused by the storm outside and the one raging in my head released from my body. My shoulders dropped, and I hung my head as a courageous Beth moved back to her mat. The thunder and lightning had moved on, and the room lightened. I plucked at my damp dress that clung to my body.

"Is it over?" Beth said. The rain had eased to a rhythmic tapping, and she spoke in a normal voice.

I nodded. "I think so."

"Me too." She nodded in agreement and wiped a damp piece of hair away from her forehead. She reached behind her, gathered her hair into a ponytail with one hand, and lifted it high off her neck. "I wish I had an elastic or s-something. It's hot in here."

I copied Beth and swept my damp hair away from my neck for a moment. My gaze wandered around the room and settled on the cabinet. I drew my knees toward my chest and hugged my legs. I stared at my feet. *Don't give up*, a small voice whispered.

My head sprung up, and I looked at Beth. She was already lying down on her mat picking away at it. *Could we really escape?* The thought made my heart flutter. I squeezed my eyes shut; the argument in my head was not over. Optimism was pushing back against the pessimist. *What if that window does come free – then what?*

I scrambled to my feet. The memory of the storm and the loud crack against the window came to mind. I tiptoed toward the cabinet. The fear that Cecil would hear movement and wonder what we were up to was real.

"What're you doing? Are we g-going to finally open some boxes?" Bethany's quiet, box-obsessed voice called out from behind me.

"No, I'm checking the window." I stopped in front of the cabinet and looked up; the glass was still intact.

"Is it b-broken?" Bethany's warm hand slipped into mine.

I stood on tiptoe and searched for the smallest crack, though not easy to do from my vantage point. "No."

"Do you w-want to climb up and look?"

"No." I could not pull my gaze from the window.

"Let's open a box." Beth's voice was almost a whisper.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

"You p-promised, April."

I groaned and shook my hand from Beth's grasp. I turned around and headed the few steps back towards our mats. "Are you going to help?" I asked Beth, who hadn't moved. A wide grin spread across her face, and she tiptoed toward me. We picked up the table and carried it over to the enormous closet and placed it in front of its doors.

I reached into the remaining pocket of my dress and pulled out the old key before climbing on top of the table. I unlocked the padlock and pulled the lock from the metal rings then placed it on the top edge of the cabinet.

"We're taking the table back first," I told Bethany as I climbed down from my perch. She nodded, and we put the table back in its place.

I bit my lip and ran my fingers through my tangled hair. My hands smoothed down the skirt of my dress as my eyes fixed on the cabinet's large doors. I placed my hands on the knobs and hesitated for a second. A part of me hoped that Bethany would change her mind and give up on the idea.

My heartbeat echoed in my ears, and I took a deep breath. Beth was silent beside me. I let go of the handles and turned my head to look at her. She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. I sighed and rubbed my hands on my dress again.

"I'll do it." Beth reached out her hand toward the cabinet door; I grabbed her arm.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"Only one."

"Two." She was stubborn.

"Fine, two, but we open them over by our mats, and if he comes you hide the box under your blanket."

Beth nodded and reached back toward the doors again. I moved out of the way as her hands grabbed each knob. She gave a quick

tug, and both doors swung wide open. The musty smell of the old clothing inside stung my nose, and I wrinkled it instinctively.

From the corner of my eye, I caught my old faded pyjama bottoms sitting on top of the boxes. I hadn't bothered hanging them back up and had tossed them inside last time we had it open.

"Hurry up and pick two boxes," I spoke with little enthusiasm.

"Which ones?" Bethany looked at me; her eyebrows rose so high they almost met her hairline.

"I don't care, Beth, any."

Bethany stood still for a moment before reaching into the cabinet and pulling out a box. "This one," she shrugged, "because it has lots of pink flowers on it." She held out the carton. "I'm opening it," she added. Pink, marker-scribbled flowers covered the box; even the stems and leaves were pink.

Bethany reached back into the cabinet, rearranged some of the cartons, and chose the second one. She handed it to me and took the one she'd claimed for herself from my hands. "This one's yours."

I turned the box in my hands. A jumbled mess of multi-coloured lettering covered it. It was almost impossible to pick out any real words. "Beth!" I warned. She had already slid the lid off from the box she held and was peaking inside.

"What?" She replaced the lid and looked at me with innocent eyes. Beth batted her lids for effect. She then turned and headed back toward the mats.

I shook my head, closed the doors of the cabinet and joined her.

Twenty-Two

Secrets Exposed

The moment we'd returned to our mats, Beth already had the box top off. She picked through the contents with care.

"There's not m-much in here," she said in a somewhat disappointed tone, and she pulled her hand out of the box.

"What did you expect?"

Beth's tangled hair hung in front of her face as she stared at the contents of her small carton. After a moment, she shrugged. "I don't know," she mumbled, "something interesting!" She reached in and again stirred the items with her finger.

"Well, I'm hoping for more *useful* than *interesting*."

"Like what?" She whipped her head back, and her icy blue eyes fixed on mine for a moment. Her mouth pulled into a straight line.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Something."

Beth put her box down beside her and reached inside. She pulled out a small, solid object. "This is n-neither interesting nor useful," she said, holding up the small rock in the palm of her hand.

I picked it up and held it between my thumb and index finger. The small grey stone was cold and rough. It reminded me of the day I almost reached out and touched a much larger rock at C.E.C.I.L. *Or fake rock*, I thought. I would never know the boulder's authenticity, but I still wondered. I shook away my thoughts and handed the stone back to her. "What else is in there?"

Beth pulled out another object and grimaced. "Ew!" She wrinkled her nose and held up a lock of hair she pinched between her fingers. A green ribbon dangled from the other end. Then she dropped it back inside and pulled out a crumpled-up piece of paper.

"Here, let me get that." The sight of the paper caused the memory of my drawing to resurface. I reached out for the ball of paper, but Beth put it behind her back.

"It's my box; I'll d-do it."

I was growing impatient as she unfolded the wadded paper. I wanted to reach out and snatch it from her hands, but I resisted.

Finally, she smoothed it out on the floor beside her.

"It's some kind of w-weird drawing," she said as she placed it in front of me.

I picked up the wrinkled sheet and turned it around. A dizzying pattern of blue and yellow circles and swirls covered the page. I turned it slowly; the curved lines appeared to move along with the paper. I squinted and focused on the centre. Inside the pattern was something more intelligible.

A stick figure family peered out; forever trapped inside a strange hypnotic swirl. I concentrated on the focal point. The longer I stared at it, the more the curved lines seemed to disappear. Eventually, the stick figures became clearer.

Three larger forms stood close together with a smaller one standing off to one side. The artist had paid close attention to the lone stick person and had added more details. The figure had long yellow hair, and large blue tears fell from the eyes. The other figures were faceless.

I drew a deep breath. My lungs expanded and relieved the tightness that suddenly came over me as I stared at the sad picture in my hands. I started to give it back to Beth when another detail caught my eye. I brought the paper closer. Small green ribbons hung from the ends of the long, blond hair – much like the lock Beth had pulled from the box.

I shuddered and closed my eyes for a moment. "Is there anything else?"

"Ya, one more thing." Bethany pulled out a small, blue-velvety bag with yellow cords. "What do you th-think's in here?" Her eyes widened.

Before I could answer her, Beth began untying the strings that held the bag closed. When she had it untied, she dumped the contents into her hand.

"Oh!" She picked up the golden bracelet and held it up in front of her. A small heart shaped charm swung back and forth. She reached up and steadied it with her other hand. "It's almost like your heart."

The tiny solid charm was smooth; the one on my necklace was larger and flatter. I pulled my chain out from under my dress and

pressed my chin to my chest to get a better look. But, it wasn't easy to see, and for the second time since discovering it, I removed the chain and held the heart in my hand.

"I g-guess it's not like yours," Beth's voice broke through my thoughts. She placed the bracelet in my hand and aligned the two hearts. The only similarity was the shape. "I like yours m-more. It's bigger and has a butterfly on it." She picked up my charm and held it close to her eyes, turning and inspecting it from every angle.

I sucked my lips inward as the urge to tell her she had one too was strong. But I stopped myself. Telling her would not make it happen.

"Yours also h-has this really thin line, almost like a crack around the edge, except for here." She pointed to an area on the side of the heart, but her finger was in the way.

"This is a very special heart," dad said, and he held up my necklace in front of me. Mom had left my room to see where Benny was.

"What do you mean?" I said, staring at the dangling piece of jewelry. It glinted in the sunlight streaming in through my window.

"It holds secrets."

My eyes widened. "It does."

Dad nodded. "Hmm. You just have to open your heart, Av."

My face scrunched. "What do you mean?"

"Oh! I better go help your mother, before I get into trouble. Happy birthday, sweetheart." He rose from my bed and kissed the top of my head.

"Give it to me," I snapped at Bethany.

"Hey! You don't h-have to be rude." Bethany's eyes became slits as she handed back my necklace.

"Sorry," I said in a quieter tone. "I want to look at something." I traded the bracelet for my necklace.

I turned the heart in my hands, as Beth had. The thin line around the edge of the charm did not go all the way around. I ran a fingernail along the narrow groove.

"What are you doing?" Beth sat in front of me with her arms crossed.

"I think this opens," I said and continued to try and open the tiny heart.

After several frustrating moments, I gave up. "Maybe I'm wrong." I sighed. The necklace dangled from my hand as I rested my forehead in my palms.

"Can I try?" Beth said.

Without looking up, I handed her the chain. I stared at the wooden floor in front of my crossed legs and poked at a nail head.

Beth grumbled. "Here."

I took the piece of jewelry from her hand.

"M-maybe it doesn't open," she said.

Her words made my heart sink a little more. I wanted to be right; I wanted the heart to open. Because if it did open, maybe there would be something inside, something that would remind us of our family.

"Put the stuff back in your box," I said. I stood up and stretched my arms over my head; each tiny vertebra snapped and moved back into place.

"Wait, what about your box?" Bethany pointed to the carton on my mat. "You promised," she added before I could argue the point of not looking inside another shoebox.

"Fine," I huffed and plunked myself back down, pulled the lid from the box, and dumped the contents on the floor.

Another crayon drawing of a sad child lay in front of us. I folded it up not wanting to look at the image any longer than I had to. A gnawed pencil rolled on the floor. I imagined the owner had been so hungry she'd resorted to chewing on it, and another rock, this one white.

"There are m-more things in your box," Bethany spoke in a quiet voice. "What's that?" She pointed to a small, round object that had rolled from the box and had stopped when it hit the edge of her mat.

"It's a...a marble." I said as I picked up the smooth coloured object, "Dad showed me one once." The memory popped into my

head.

Beth scrunched her face.

"It's a kind of a toy," I tried to explain. I didn't quite know how one played with it, but I knew what it was.

"Looks kind of like a s-stupid toy."

"Yes," I agreed and tossed the marble back into the box along with the pencil and the folded drawing. Three more items remained on the floor in front of us.

"And that?" Bethany pointed to a flat piece of rough metal with a point on one end and a plastic handle on the other.

I picked it up and turned it around in my hands. The flat piece of metal was thin and bendy. I ran my finger over its surface. It scratched up the skin on my finger and left a white powder residue behind. I brought it closer to my eyes and turned it over again.

"I think it's..." I paused and searched for the correct word. The tip of my finger pressed down on the point. "I think it's a nail file." I ran it over my short fingernails and watched as tiny bits of dust floated to the floor. "Mom had one. Not like this, though." A vague memory of her painting my nails came to mind. I closed my eyes and stopped the memory from going any further. I slid the file under my mat.

"What're you doing?" Bethany said.

I shrugged. "We might be able to use it on the window instead of that plastic knife."

There were two objects left, a white feather and a soft blue bag. I picked up the feather, raised it above my head and let it go. It floated down with grace and landed back inside the box.

"Are you going to open the little b-bag?" Bethany said as she picked up the small sack and dangled it from its strings.

"No."

"Can I?"

I shrugged, and she untied the cords. When she had the bag open, she dumped the contents out into her hand. A small tooth landed in her palm. Bethany yelped and dropped it on the floor.

Twenty-Three

Come to me my Children

It was not a dream; the floor creaked as someone shuffled across it. I held my breath and peeked through the half-open eyelid of one eye. A pale, yellow glow illuminated Bethany's sleeping form, and I knew the door was open behind me.

I lay quiet. My ears pricked to the sound of footsteps and a stifled cough. Every muscle in my body twitched, urging me to roll over. I was desperate to know if the late-night visitor was Jasper. But my imagination proved stronger than my desire, and I did not move. *It might just as well be Cecil*, a little voice inside my head warned. In the same moment, a familiar smell wafted toward me, and I was glad I'd stayed still. The pointy nail file I'd slid under my mat came to mind.

My fingers searched under the edge of the foam pad and brushed against the cold, metal object. I slid it out and held it close to my body. Sweat trickled down my forehead as my imagination took over. Thoughts of Cecil attacking us in the night invaded my brain. I planned our self-defence and waited for his approach. With each creaking of the floorboards, my heart quickened.

"How dare you?" His voice whispered inside my head.

I gripped the nail file tighter. I did dare.

I opened one eye and then the other. Soft sunlight illuminated the small window and lightened the room. Beth's sleeping form faced me, her quiet breaths a sign that she slept peaceful and sound. I looked down at my left hand and the nail file clutched inside. A moment later, I was both relieved and disappointed. Cecil hadn't approached, and I hadn't gotten the chance to show him how much I dared.

I shook the thought away. My action cleared my head and reminded me of the main purpose I had for the tool. I pushed back the thin sheet that covered me and sat up; my attention focused on the window.

It wasn't heavy but awkward as I managed to carry the table over to the cabinet. Once in place, I snuck back and picked up my chair.

Standing on top of the chair was a little more daunting without Bethany securing it on the top of the table. But somehow I managed and didn't cause too much of a ruckus. My sister slept as I climbed on top of the wardrobe.

Somewhere the sun had risen above the horizon, and fiery hues painted the sky. For me, the horizon was the treetops, and the early morning sun had only begun to lighten the sky above them. A single star twinkled, a stubborn remnant of the night.

I caught a glimpse of red taillights off in the distance. I leaned my cheek against the cold window and watched as his old truck drove down the road. I stabbed the old nail file into the rubbery stuff around the window and began the process of trying to remove it.

"What're you doing?" Beth's sleepy voice behind me caused me to jump and almost drop the nail file.

"Trying..." I jabbed the point of the file back into the rubbery gunk. It was tougher than I thought, and in the time I'd been digging not much progress had been made. With my free hand, I wiped away a bit of sweat that had trickled down my forehead. "To. Get. Us. Out." I punctuated each word with a jab into the gunk.

"Is it working?" Beth said.

I sat back on my knees, closed my eyes, and shook my head.

"Try harder."

I grumbled. "It's not going to work." A sense of defeat came over me as the words I'd been thinking came from my lips.

"Don't g-give up," Bethany pleaded.

I didn't want to give up; there wasn't anything more important than getting Bethany and myself out of there. We could not trust Cecil, and Jasper was too sick to help. It wasn't clear if our imprisonment was one of determined length or if our release was anytime soon. Our freedom relied upon escape and every cell in my body understood that to be true.

"Can I t-try?" Bethany's voice broke through my thoughts.

"No."

"Why?"

I sat back on my knees and shrugged. "There's no point. It's too hard."

"You can do it, April." Beth's voice whispered behind me.

I turned around and sat on the top of the cabinet with my legs hanging down over the edge. I swung my feet and banged my heels into the closet doors. The cold, metal bar pressed into my calves, and the doors rattled with each strike. I did not care about the noise I made. "What makes you so sure?"

Beth reached up and wrapped a hand around each of my ankles. I stopped. She shrugged. "I don't know. I j-just think you can."

"Hmph!"

"I remembered s-something." She looked up at me with wide, icy blue eyes.

"What?" I leaned forward and looked down at Beth; she had my full attention.

"It isn't much." She squeezed my foot. "You made me feel better when I was s-sick."

I squinted and rubbed my forehead with my fingertips.

"It's true."

"I don't remember. When?"

Beth closed her eyes. "I was little and had a stomach ache. You s-sang to me." Beth looked at me and smiled.

"What did I sing?" I questioned. There was the tiniest bit of something, a tune, but it was too far away to reach.

Beth sat down on the floor, squeezed her eyes shut, and she began to hum. Quiet and stilted at first and then she found the rhythm. I shut my eyes and focused on the sound, the tune was familiar and the same one I'd struggled with at C.E.C.I.L.

Beth's voice was pleasant, and when she sang her stutter disappeared. She inserted the occasional word between strings of humming. The song became more defined as she repeated the same verse. The tune was pretty, and after the fifth time through, I found my voice and sang along. Occasionally, I filled in hums with a word.

"I remember it," I said interrupting another chorus. "What's it called?"

Beth looked up at me and shrugged. "I don't r-remember."

"Keep singing." I concentrated on the tune and Beth's voice.

She sang the words and hummed the tune. Every so often I interrupted with a new word and corrected when I thought the lyrics were wrong. With each new addition or correction, Beth began again.

"We'll start anew hmm hmm – "

"It's 'We'll start anew, my children'." I blurted.

Beth folded her arms and scowled at me. "Either you w-want me to sing or n-not?"

"I want you to sing."

"Then STOP interrupting."

I held out my hands and conceded.

Beth started over, and I kept quiet. The end of one verse prompted the memory of another. The humming and filling in the blanks continued.

"Go on," I urged when Beth stopped again.

"We'll start anew..." She looked at me.

"What?"

"What's next?"

"I thought you didn't want to be interrupted?"

Beth shrugged. "It's harder when you're n-not helping."

I rolled my eyes and helped. When we grew tired, we had three partially completed versus.

We were silent. Beth lay back on the floor and covered her face with her arm. The song and its broken lyrics rolled through my head, permanently etched.

"I remember the whole song," she said. "It seems a lot more..." She sat up and scratched her head, "sinister." We caught each other's gaze.

"Sing it, Beth. I won't interrupt."

Beth closed her eyes. "Come to me my children, and safe you will be. We're all that's left in this world, only you and me. We'll start anew my children, a world we will embrace. Only smart and

special ones will live in this place. Listen to me my children, so happy you will be. And when it's time to start afresh we will all..."

"Be free," I whispered. I climbed down onto the chair and table. When I reached the floor, I wrapped my arms around Beth.

"Do you th-think he wrote it?" Beth pulled away and looked at me. Her icy blue eyes stared through me.

"Who?"

"Cecil. I think he wrote that s-song."

"But I sang it to you when we were kids, before any of this." I waved my hand around our prison. "Besides, we didn't know him then. He didn't know us."

Beth shook her head. "Didn't we? How do we even know that the m-memories we have are real? Maybe they're n-not ours. Maybe they are p-planted in our heads."

"No, they're real."

"How do you know?" Bethany's voice shook. "How can you b-be so sure?"

I pulled the necklace free from my dress and rubbed the heart between my fingers. "Because of this." I held it up to Beth.

"How do you know th-that wasn't placed around your n-neck just to make the memories seem real?"

My stomach clenched – *it had to be real*. "It's real, I'm sure." I tucked the heart back underneath my dress.

"What about the song?"

I shrugged. "Maybe we've known it for so long because..."

I narrowed my eyes as an incredulous thought stirred in my mind. "Because someone knew that we would be at C.E.C.I.L someday? Because someone planned all this from the beginning or at least part of it? It's all too crazy."

"And who are we s-supposed to listen to? Cecil?" Beth's question made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

The memory of Jasper's words whispered in my ear. "*His voice would be the only one to elicit that sort of response. I overheard once that it had something to do with a song.*" I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Will we b-be free?"

My gaze fell on the entrance to the room. "No, I don't think so." I looked back at Beth. "I don't think things worked out the way they were supposed to."

She shook her head. "I don't think so either." Beth crossed her arms. "So, are you g-going to try again?" She flicked her head back and pointed her chin in the direction of the window.

I looked over at the round piece of glass. "Maybe later, let's see what's inside those first." I pointed to the five large containers sitting in the corner at the other end of the room. It must have been what he had been doing, the noise of sliding boxes across the floor that had woken me. And in the opposite corner, the unused cot was pushed up against the wall.

"Got any idea?" Bethany pointed at the containers.

I gave each one a little shove; some moved easier than others. "Not a clue. Here, help me with this one." I put my hands on a large carton; and with Beth's help, we pulled it away from the wall. I withdrew the file from my pocket and used it to break through the tape that held it closed.

"More books!" Beth said as we opened the flaps of the box. She reached inside and, one at a time, removed the books, piling them on the floor.

"These look like every –"

"Book w-we had at C.E.C.I.L." Beth finished my sentence.

I pulled out the last and turned the text over in my hands. "Except for one, my history book." I set the text on top of the pile on the floor.

The next box I opened was much smaller and lighter. Inside were numerous sheets of paper covered with drawings. Apart from my or Beth's ID written somewhere on the page, they were unrecognizable.

"Do you remember doing these?" I held up an illustration in each hand with Beth's ID scribbled on the back. She squinted, shook her head, and returned to the pile of books.

I sat on the floor beside Beth and sorted through the box. I was anxious to find the one picture I remembered creating. That tiny spark of hope I clung to reignited. As I sifted through the last few

pieces, my throat tightened, and I swallowed the pain. The Illustration was nowhere in sight. The only clue I had to some buried memory was lost. I had to douse whatever hope I had of finding it.

I dug back through the images and pulled out a colourful and well-drawn picture of a family of four. I studied the illustration, losing myself in the detail of a happy family enjoying a picnic. Two brown haired, little girls played with a ball while their parents watched, smiles pasted on their faces. The father sat behind the mother. His hands wrapped around her middle and rested on her protruding belly. The drawing was unrecognizable to me, and if it weren't for my ID written in the bottom corner, I would never have known it was mine.

"I see you've found your things."

His unexpected voice caused me to jump, and Beth squealed. We were so enraptured with our pictures and books we never heard him enter. I grabbed Beth's arm, and we both jumped to our feet and turned to face him.

"You should choose some of your most favourite things and place them in these," he sneered. He held up two small boxes, one in each hand. Colourful drawings, scribbles, letters, and numbers decorated the cartons – one was somewhat familiar.

A bead of sweat trickled from his temple and down his cheek. It travelled along the sharp angle of his jaw and disappeared underneath. It reappeared again and rolled down his neck, soaking into the collar of his purple shirt. His sneer evaporated as a coughing fit caught him off guard. When he recovered, he dropped the two boxes on the floor, turned, and left the room without uttering another word. The distinctive sound of a turning lock interrupted the quiet - it was a sound we were growing used to.

I stared at the shoeboxes he'd dropped on the floor and kicked them up against the wall. *What does he expect us to put in these?* I reached up and touched my upper chest feeling the heart pendant underneath my dress.

"Do you think we'll ever see J-Jasper again?" Beth said from beside me.

"I don't know. I hope so." I turned and walked away.

"Don't you w-want to see what's in the other boxes?" Bethany's voice called behind me as I moved toward the cabinet.

"No."

"What are you doing?"

I turned around and faced my sister. "I'm working on the window." I stabbed the air over my shoulder with the nail file.

Beth smiled.

It was much easier climbing up on top of the cabinet with Bethany steadying the table. Within seconds, I was digging into the stuff that sealed the window into place. The point of the file drove into the rubbery substance, and I pulled up on it. A tiny piece loosened. I stabbed again in the same spot, forcing the nail file deeper. I wiggled it, and a small piece broke free and fell onto the cabinet. I jabbed again and finally succeeded in breaking off a chunk. It wasn't much, but it gave me hope as I sunk the file in again.

"Do you think he noticed?" Bethany's voice came from below.

"Noticed what?" I stabbed into the thick and hard gunk again.

"The table and chair."

I stopped. Bile rose up my throat, and my stomach rolled. We hadn't put them back when we'd decided to investigate the boxes. My head spun with questions. *What if he did see it? What is he going to do? Why didn't he say anything? Maybe he didn't notice.* I tried to allay my fears. *Did he even look over at the cabinet? No,* I convinced myself.

"He didn't notice." I stabbed the point in and worked at another loosened piece.

"How do you know?"

"Cause, I do," I snapped, stabbing at the rubbery gunk. I missed and the point of the file sunk into the wood. I sat back on my knees and closed my eyes. My heart thumped in my ears.

"April?"

"Yes," I sighed.

"Are you sure?"

It took me some time to answer, and I knew when I did, it wasn't going to be what Beth wanted to hear.

I pulled the file from the wood before ramming it in as hard as I could into the sealant.

"No."

Twenty-Four

Unexpected Visitor

I'd found another use for the file besides picking at the window and using it to open boxes.

Underneath my mat, I had begun to scratch small marks into the floorboards. The idea was to keep track of how long we'd been in the room, but it wasn't easy as each day blended into the next. There were sixteen small scratches in the floor, though I wasn't sure if I had missed any.

"Are you g-going work at the w-window t-today?" Beth said in her sleepy morning voice as I finished scratching the seventeenth mark into the floor. Beth was almost invisible in the dim light of the room, and her question surprised me. She hadn't asked about the window in days.

I tucked my file under my mat and rolled over onto my back. I stared up at the wooden beams. It had been more than a week since I'd last tried. I lay quiet, and I listened to the world around us; Bethany's breathing, the gentle rain on the roof, and the deep growl that came from our stomachs. Sometimes it was hard to tell whose stomach growled louder.

"I'm eating." Bethany rose from her mat and walked over to the table, while I remained still, flat on my back.

"How much is left?" I said though I already knew the answer.

"N-not m-much," Bethany faltered. Her stutter had become more noticeable the past couple of days.

We'd had no bread for a week and nothing more than a spoonful of peanut butter and a few sips of water at each meal over the past five days. Water was about all Cecil brought us anymore, that and the occasional rotted fruit. The box of stale cereal was long gone – we were starving.

I got up and made my way to the table for my spoonful of peanut butter. Bethany was right there wasn't much left, not enough to finish the day.

We sat in silence at the table and listened to the rain. Neither of us had the energy to read or even flip through the books we had. Our decorated shoeboxes sat in the corner of the room – untouched.

My thoughts turned to the other cartons in the cabinet. We'd only opened two despite Beth's urging to open more, but she'd given up asking for that too. The contents of the two boxes had me convinced that their owners had not survived.

A rumble interrupted my dark thoughts. "Was that thunder?" I said.

Bethany looked at me. Her icy blue eyes had dulled in the last several days. She shook her head, the movement almost unnoticeable. She closed her eyes as though the slight motion made her dizzy. "His t-truck, I think."

I got up from my chair but had to sit back down again as the quick movement made my head spin. After a moment, I rose again, and made my way over toward the cabinet, dragging my chair behind me.

"Do you n-need the t-table?" Beth's monotone voice called after me.

"No, just the key."

Once the cabinet doors were open, I pulled boxes out and threw them on the floor.

"W-what're you d-doing?"

Bethany stood behind me with her arms crossed. She tapped her bare foot. Boxes surrounded her. Some tipped over on their sides with their lids lifted, a few had their contents spilled out on the floor, while others remained sealed.

"We're going through these."

"All of th-them?" She sounded surprised but also a little happy.

"Yes, all of them."

We sat on the floor and searched the boxes, careful to return the contents when we'd finished. We were surprised that many held the same things. From drawings and toys to rocks and feathers, few had anything of importance.

"W-what are we l-looking for?" Beth said as she repacked another box.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Something we can use, like the nail file."

"Oh." Bethany grabbed another box from the few we had yet to check.

"What about this?" She held up a piece of wire.

"Yes, maybe, put it here." I had a small assortment of items I thought might be useful.

When we finished, we had twenty-nine boxes stacked up around us. A small collection of handy items, two pieces of wire, a pen, some string, and a smaller nail file, piled between the mats.

"We forgot that shelf." Bethany pointed behind me, and I followed her finger to the bottom of the empty cabinet.

The small shelf that stretched across the back of the closet was empty. "Where?"

Bethany walked over to the wardrobe and shoved over a bunch of clothing from the left-hand side. In the back was a small corner shelf and on it sat another box standing on its end.

"How did you..."

Beth shrugged. "I th-thought I could s-see something." She plucked the box off the shelf and held it out to me. "It's heavy," she said.

I took the box and turned it in my hands. I looked over toward the cabinet and the rough carvings inside.

"It's his, isn't it?" she said, pointing to the ID on the box and the one scratched inside the large wardrobe.

I nodded.

I placed the box down on the floor in front of me, and we stared at it. Finally, Bethany reached over and pulled off the lid.

"What's in it?" I leaned forward to get a better look.

Bethany reached inside and pulled out a small, brown teddy bear. I gasped, not expecting the stuffed toy.

"Oh, he's cute!" Bethany gave the little bear a cuddle, before laying it down beside her. Her hand dipped into the box again and

pulled out a heavy metal object. "W-what about this?" she smiled as she held it out to me.

I took the object and turned it over. My head swivelled back in the direction of the cabinet. "This is what he used, I'm sure of it."

I pulled on one of the many implements and out sprang a knife blade. My fingers pulled on another part, and a small file popped out from the other side. I tugged again on another section; a corkscrew sprang forth. A smile crept across my face as my hands pushed the pieces back into place. "Now this is something we can use." I placed the pearl-handled, pocket knife inside my remaining dress pocket. My fingers made sure the button was still resting in the corner before my hand withdrew. "Anything else?"

Beth tipped the box upside down, and a small feather drifted out. "Nope."

"We better put everything back." I stood up, feeling the weight of the new tool in my pocket and began returning boxes to the cabinet.

It wasn't long before we had everything tucked inside the wardrobe, and I had the lock back in place. Back on my mat, I slipped the objects we'd found underneath, except for the knife. The new tool had given me new hope, and I was set to start working on the window again. I stood to begin my work when the door to our room opened.

He stood in the doorway; his hands rested on either side of the doorjamb. His head, with its thick mass of dark brown hair, hung down. His rounded shoulders rose and fell with each weary breath. I stared at him with my mouth wide open, unable to speak or move.

After a few moments, he painstakingly lifted his head. His familiar brown eyes bored into my blue ones. He no longer wore the mask that had once concealed his face. His golden-brown skin had taken on more of an ash grey tone. The royal blue t-shirt he wore was wet in spots with his sweat. He removed one hand from the doorjamb and wiped the back of it across his forehead. He took an unsteady step forward and stopped; he grabbed onto the doorjamb again.

"Jasper!" I called, finally finding my voice. Beth and I moved toward the door.

"No!" His voice cracked, and he held up his one hand, while the other pulled the door shut behind him. "I can walk on my own."

Beth and I stayed on either side of him. We led him toward the table where he sat down on one of the chairs. Beth grabbed one of a few remaining water bottles and set it down in front of him. He looked up at her and smiled before turning his attention back to me. I sat in the other chair across from him, and Beth sat down on the floor.

"We thought you were –" I stopped myself as I tried to find the appropriate word.

"Dead," Beth blurted.

I glared a warning at Beth. She rolled her eyes and shrugged. "We thought you were too sick to visit," I said correcting my sister's blunt statement.

"No, not dead," Jasper paused, "not yet," he finished. He took a deep breath and wheezed.

"Is he taking care of you?" I reached over and placed my hand on top of his. His hot hand tensed, and I thought he was about to withdraw it, but then he relaxed.

"Who?" His soft brown eyes narrowed.

"Cecil."

"Ha," he let out a choked laugh. "Well, he does occasionally bring me food and water, but that is about all." Jasper closed his eyes as though the words he'd spoken had drained him.

"Where does he g-go?" Beth questioned.

My gaze shifted from my sister and fell back on Jasper. I was curious about that too and waited for his answer.

Jasper inhaled, his lungs rattled, and his throat whined as the air passed through. "To find others. To look for food - secrets." He shrugged.

My eyes widened. "Others?"

"Those who escaped that night." Jasper reached for the bottle of water with one shaky hand, while the other tried to turn the lid.

After a second, I reached over and unscrewed it for him. His mouth twitched as though trying to smile. "Thank you," he whispered.

"What happened that night?" I squeezed his hand gently.

"Yes, what happened?" Beth repeated.

I glared at her.

"What?" She shrugged and glared back. Had her icy blue eyes not dulled in the last few days, it would have appeared more intimidating.

I turned back to Jasper and once again waited for his response.

"There was a fire in the forest...simulation room," he wheezed as a sudden fit of coughing shook his body. When he finished, he wiped his mouth with the bottom of his t-shirt. "Sorry."

I shook my head. He had no reason to apologize.

"How did it start?" I said.

"It was me." He looked down at the table. "It had to end; I needed to save you – from him." He closed his eyes again. "I must go." Jasper moved as though to stand up.

"Wait!" I squeezed his hand. Jasper's body relaxed in the chair, and he wheezed.

"Why different vaccines? Why boosters?"

He shook his head. "With each new vaccine, we had to give a booster or several. Some vaccines were given in small doses over the course of a few days." He took another deep rattled breath. "They were constantly trying new ones. When one did not work they would create another, which you and the others would then receive." Jasper bent his head and rested his chin on his chest as though he'd fallen asleep. I gave a gentle shake to his hand.

"How did they know it didn't work?"

"Yes, how – "

"Sh!" I interrupted Beth from her echoed question.

"It was tested."

My eyes narrowed. "How?"

Jasper's shoulders slouched more. "They would bring some of the less promising children here. Let them play outside, expose them to the mosquitos."

Mosquitos? The word was familiar, but I couldn't remember what it meant. I was about to ask when another thought interrupted, and I glanced at the cabinet. I pictured the clothing hanging inside. "What happened?" I stared at Jasper's closed eyes.

"They died – all of them. With each death came a new vaccine." His eyes popped open, but they did not look at me. They stared off into some distant place or memory.

"Every s-single one?" Beth's quiet voice asked.

Jasper nodded. "All but one, with the last vaccine."

"Who?" My voice squeaked.

Jasper shook his head and stared at me. "He may have died. We do not know. He escaped. He got away."

"When?" My mind flashed to the carving inside the cabinet. I pressed my lips together. I wanted to tell Jasper about what we'd found, but I couldn't take the chance that Cecil would somehow find out.

Jasper rubbed his chin and took a moment before he answered. "A couple of weeks, maybe even a month, before I brought you here." He pushed his chair back. "He will be back soon. I must go." Jasper rose in slow motion from his chair, and I didn't stop him. Beth jumped to her feet.

"Wait! Is he sick? Is Cecil sick? He's always coughing," I said.

He shook his head. "No, allergies."

"How do you know all this?" I folded my arms.

Jasper sighed. "Because I worked with him."

"You mean for him," I corrected.

"No, I meant with. I was part of his team until I found out he wanted to do more than just save the world – he wanted to run it. When I disagreed with his methods, I suddenly went from being on top to becoming your nurse." Jasper turned and walked toward the door. Beth and I remained by the table.

"How long were you my nurse?"

Jasper shrugged. "Only about the last two years, when Cecil..." he paused for a moment as if to search for the right words. "He decided I couldn't be trusted with his plan. It was at the same time when everything changed and humanity really was in great peril."

The first three years at C.E.C.I.L was merely planning and preparation. We built our supply stores so that we could become self-sufficient while we worked on a solution." He inhaled and closed his eyes. "By the time the world was sick. C.E.C.I.L was sustainable. It was its own small world within another." Jasper leaned back against the door and rested. His breaths were short and wheezy.

I closed my eyes for a moment as his words sunk in, things like food supplies finally made sense. "He's not letting us out, is he?" I said, speaking my thoughts and worries out loud.

Jasper turned around. "If I find a way before it is too late, I will let you out."

"Let us go now!" My heart pounded with my words as my feet carried me closer to Jasper; Beth followed along behind.

"I cannot. You will not stand a chance. He will have you before you even have an opportunity to hide."

"We will not stand a chance in here," Beth spoke through clenched teeth. Her hands balled into fists at her side.

He shook his head. "Step back...please."

I reached out and grabbed Beth's arm pulling her back with me. My gaze fixed on Jasper's eyes for a moment before he turned and faced the door. He reached into his pocket, pulled something out and in seconds pushed the door open.

"Ah!" Beth yelled. I grabbed her arm as she moved toward him, but my grip slipped. She reached the door as it closed behind him. Beth pounded the hidden entrance with her fists. "Let. Us. Out!" she yelled. After a moment, she turned around, red faced. "We could have grabbed him and pushed him out of the way. We could have been out. Why did you stop me?" She wiped her eyes with her hands before any liquid could spill down her cheeks.

I stared at her, unable to answer her question. We could have gotten out. Even in our weakened state, together we were stronger than Jasper. But I couldn't do that to him. I shook my head. The distant rumble of his truck touched my ears. "Jasper was right. He would have caught us." I turned and grabbed the table.

"What're you doing?" Beth's quivering voice asked from behind me.

I turned and looked at my sister leaning against the door. "I'm going to work on the window; you keep an ear to the door. If you hear him, let me know." I managed a weak smile. Working on the window was the least I could do; I'd already ruined our first real chance of escape.

Twenty-Five Games of Torment

"April," Bethany's voice whispered in the dark.

"Hmmm."

"Do you think he'll come t-tonight?"

"What?"

"Do you think he'll c-come into the room t-tonight?"

I sat up at her words. The darkness of the room made my eyes feel like they were still closed, and I blinked to be sure.

"You mean Cecil? Why would he come tonight?" My voice shook a little with the thought.

The sound of Bethany shuffling told me that she too sat up.

"I m-mean do you think he'll s-sneak in and l-leave s-stuff?"

"I don't know, Beth, go to sleep." I lay back down on my mat and covered myself with the sheet. It was a warm night, and the sheet wasn't necessary, but it comforted me and made me feel safe.

My muscles relaxed one by one as thoughts and images disappeared from my mind.

"April?"

"Yes." Her voice started me awake

"Do you th-think Jasper will help somehow? I mean, if he c-can."

Her question took me by surprise. I didn't answer right away; instead, I rolled away from her and faced the door. "Yes...if he can."

"Even though he t-told us he works with him?" Her hand rested on my back.

"Used to. Now go to sleep, Bethany," I whispered; questions and uncertainty rolled through my head.

The sound of rustling woke me. My heart skipped and then sped up. Under the cover of the sheet, my fingers searched the underside of the mat for one of the hidden tools. Panic rose as I felt only the rough wood floor beneath my mat. My sleepy confusion cleared, and I remembered I faced the door and not Beth. My tools hid under the edge behind me.

I peeked through a half-open eyelid and saw an out of focus figure near the table. I rubbed away the blurriness. Bethany's seated form came into view.

"What are you doing?" My morning voice sounded scratchier than usual.

"F-food." She did not look my way but continued rummaging through cloth bags on the table in front of her.

"What?" I sat up.

Beth glanced away from the bag she was looking in. "He b-brought us f-food."

I jumped up. The combination of my quick movement and hunger brought me back down hard. The thin mat offered little protection.

My slow and cautious steps finally brought me to the table. "Let me see." I reached for the bag in Beth's hands, but she snatched it away.

"Sorry," she said, before handing the bag back to me. "I'm j-just hungry."

I reached into the sack and pulled out cans of food; peaches, orange slices, beans, tomatoes. "Did he leave anything to open these with?"

"You m-mean this." She held out a well-rusted can opener before laying it down on the table. It didn't look like it would work.

"What's in the other two bags?" I pointed with my chin as I pulled them toward me and opened them up. My eyes answered my question for me; it was more of the same.

"He also left a jug of w-water." Beth heaved a large plastic bottle off the floor and set it on the table.

Despite the new delivery of food, Beth wasn't her usual excited self over the gifts. Her voice was flat, and she showed no emotion as she stared at the bags and their contents.

"What's the matter?" I said, looking at the dark circles under her eyes.

Her chin quivered. "I w-want t-to g-go home," she stammered. She pressed her lips together. Her face tinged pink and she wiped at her eyes. In almost the same instant she pulled her shoulders back,

sniffed, and cleared her throat. Apart from her still glistening eyes, all signs of her sudden emotion disintegrated. In all the days and weeks we'd been there, Beth had never mentioned going home.

"Do you mean C.E.C.I.L? You heard Jasper say it burned."

Beth shook her head. "N-no, home-home – I remember stuff, n-not everything, but some. I want to g-get out and go h-home."

I reached out and wrapped my arms around her; her smaller body nestled against me. I kissed the top of her head. The smell of his cologne burned my nose, causing me to pull away and gag. I held onto Beth's shoulders keeping her at arm's length.

"Bethany, did...did he come near you?" My voice wavered.

She wrinkled her brow and shook her head. "N-no."

"Are you sure?" I stared into her eyes.

"Yes." She looked at me. "W-why?"

"Because your hair smells like him."

"What?" Beth grabbed a lock of her hair, brought it toward her and sniffed. Her nose wrinkled. "Eww! Why?" She dropped her hair and stared at me wide-eyed.

"You didn't see him?"

Beth looked at me, a puzzled look in her eyes. "N-no. I was asleep."

I went over to our mats and got down on my hands and knees.

"What are you looking for?" Beth stood above me with her hands on her hips.

I sat back on my knees and shook my head. "I don't know - a reason your hair smells like him?" My response came out sounding a little more irritated than I expected.

Beth shrugged and ignored my tone. "Forget it; he's trying to s-scare us. C-can we eat n-now?"

I pressed my lips together. I didn't trust Cecil, and I was sure he was capable of anything. He'd already proven that tormenting was one of his favourite games.

I'd been right about the can opener; it was useless. However, the pocket knife had the tool we needed, and we were successful at opening a couple of cans. We filled our growling stomachs before

returning to our mats for a nap. Awhile later, the drumming of rain and the rumbling of Cecil's truck woke us. He was leaving again, searching for others we hoped he wouldn't find. With renewed strength, we hurried to work on the window.

"I think it's loosening," I called down to her as I jabbed the knife into the rubbery seal and picked out a large chunk.

Beth gave the thumbs-up, her face brighter since having eaten. "Do you think J-Jasper will be back?" She said turning her head in the direction of the invisible door.

"I don't. Think. So." I grunted as I jabbed the knife in again.

"I w-was just hoping m-maybe..." her voice trailed.

I sat back on my knees and wiped the sweat from my forehead. "We won't see him again." I swallowed down the sudden tightness in my throat.

"I know." Beth's voice was quiet.

I leaned forward and picked away at the window again, resolute in my work. The focus drove Jasper from my thoughts.

"When you get all that s-stuff out, what are you going to d-do?" Beth said. Her voice startled me a bit, and my heart skipped.

I stared up at the sky. "Remove the window."

"Then what?"

A loud, frustrating sigh escaped from my lips. My plan hadn't extended beyond removing the window. "I think that's enough for today. He'll be back soon." I folded the knife and put it in my pocket before climbing down from the cabinet. Beth followed behind me in silence.

We returned the table and chair, grabbed a couple of books from our small collection, and settled on our mats.

I opened my book to where I'd left off days ago, but Beth's questions and my own wouldn't leave me alone.

She was right, *what do we do once we get the window out? How much time would we have to get out and climb down to the roof before he came back? And then where do we go?*

I'd only given a passing thought to those same questions when I first got the idea to escape. But now I realized those questions

needed answering before we went any further. There was no point in working at that window until the plan was solid.

I scratched another mark in the floor.

Twenty-Six
Not much of a List

"I wan' oo go 'ome," I cried. My lifeless tongue lay still in the bottom of my mouth. Tight bindings fastened my wrists and ankles to a strange bed, and no amount of wriggling was going to set me free. Blurred faces floated over me. Each breath came faster than the last, and my head spun. Incoherent voices whispered as a sharp point pierced my shoulder. My eyelids grew heavy.

"Sure, A2, but not today." His smooth voice whispered in my ear. My eyelids fluttered back open; his blurred face hovered above mine. I blinked and for a moment the fog cleared. He stared down his long pointed nose; his grey eyes focused on mine, and an overpowering scent stung my nostrils.

I sat up shivering and shook the remnants of my nightmare away. My damp hair clung to my neck and face. I swept it up and piled it on the top of my head. The room was hot and the air thick as I gasped for air. My ears tuned in to Bethany's slow and even breaths. I focused on the sound and matched each inhale and exhale, it calmed me, and soon my breathing slowed.

The room was brighter than usual, and at first, I thought it was morning. I soon understood it was a different kind of light.

I rose from my mat, eased the table, then the chair, over to the cabinet and climbed on top.

I sat cross-legged; my elbow rested on one knee, and I cradled my chin in my palm as I stared out the window. A full moon hovered above the trees and lit up the sky. It looked as though it were smiling down at me and seemed so close; like I could almost touch it if no barrier stood in my way. But I knew it was so far away – an unimaginable distance.

As my eyes adjusted to the moonlight, it appeared that there was about as much to see at night as there was during the day. Small black shapes dipped and dove through the air, and I understood at once that they were bats catching their dinner.

Miniature lights flashed in the shadows of the trees. I knew they were insects, but the name for the tiny luminous creatures escaped me. *Fireflies*, the word popped into my head.

Hoo, hoo! The faint and strange call caught my attention, and I leaned closer to the window. No matter how hard I tried, I could not imagine what made the noise. I shuddered at the eerie sound.

At the edge of the woods, eyes glowed as the moonlight reflected off of them. Shadows of four-legged creatures crawled amid the trees. The night was as alive as the day, not everything slept. We would not leave at night; I shook my head.

“What are you doing up there? April, w-wake up!”

I opened my eyes and found I was staring at a wall, curled up in a tight ball – I'd fallen asleep on the top of the cabinet.

Sitting up, I stretched and peered out the window. It was quiet outside, sometime between when the creatures of the night go to sleep and those of the day begin to wake. *Would this be the right time of day to break out?* No sooner did the thought occur to me that in the same instant I realized it would not be possible. Cecil would still be here, no doubt asleep, but still here. Our escape would have to happen when he left.

“Do we have paper?” I asked Beth as I climbed down from the cabinet. She looked at me with a confused look on her face. “I need to make notes,” I explained. I took the chair off the table and carried it over to its usual spot.

Beth rummaged through one of the boxes, and I sat down in my chair. After a few seconds, she found what she was looking for and approached the table. She pulled out the other chair across from me and sat down handing me a crumpled piece of paper and a green crayon.

“Thanks.” I began to write.

“What're you d-doing?”

“Writing out a list.” I kept my eyes focused on the paper as I thought about my recent observations.

“What list?”

“What we need to do to get out of here.”

"Oh."

"See," I explained. "Number one, we leave when he goes searching – once we have the window loose that is."

"Really?" A hint of sarcasm tinged her tone.

I rolled my eyes and continued. "Number two, it won't be at night, even if he leaves at night."

"Why?"

"Because it's dark and who knows what's out there."

"F-fine. What else?"

She had me. Other than what I'd written down, I had no idea what more information we needed to execute our escape. My list had only two items, and it seemed silly. Then I thought of something else.

"We need to know how long we have."

Beth scrunched her forehead.

"The time between when he leaves and when he comes back. We don't want to get caught."

Beth shrugged. "How? It's not like we have a..." she paused, "a clock." She waved her hand around the room.

"We'll have to count." I wrote down number three.

"Ha! YOU can count." Beth folded her arms and rocked back a little in her chair.

"You know, you're going to fall over tipping your chair like that."

"Pfft! You s-sound like mom!"

I dropped my crayon and stared at Beth. "What did you say?"

"I said, you sound like..." Her eyes grew wide.

"You remembered something?"

She nodded. "Mom, she didn't like it when I leaned b-back in my chair." Beth sat forward; the chair's front feet clunked on the floor.

"Anything else?"

Beth shook her head. "No."

"You will. It took me awhile. There's still a lot I don't remember." I folded up my list and placed it in my pocket with the hope that I would have more to add to it later.

We grew bored and anxious. It had been days since Cecil had left in his truck, and he made a habit of surprising us with visits instead. Sometimes he would poke his head in through the door, say nothing, and leave. Other times he made himself comfortable on the cot we weren't using; he'd stay for minutes or hours. And if he popped by in the morning, it didn't mean he wasn't coming back later in the day. The lack of consistency kept us from working on our escape plan. Without that, we had nothing left to do but read and re-read our books. Despite our boredom, the decorated shoeboxes remained untouched. We had no intention of doing what he'd asked even when he checked the boxes whenever he stepped into the room.

The two small cartons were still up against the wall where I'd kicked them. Somehow placing anything inside would be a clear sign that we'd given up any hope of escaping. For the moment it was still our plan.

"We could s-search the cabinet again," Beth suggested early one morning while we were eating our small breakfast. After the first initial canned meal, we were eating much smaller portions from the tins. We never knew if or when Cecil would bring us any more food.

"No." I shook my head. "Besides, he could walk through that door at any time." There was no way we were opening that cabinet again; there were far too many ghosts inside.

"He wasn't here yesterday, and the d-day before that, only once."

"No!"

We finished eating in silence then returned to our mats. I lay down on my back and stared at the rafters. Every detail of the wood beams was so ingrained in my memory that I could draw our prison with my eyes closed.

"We can play a g-game," Beth suggested.

"No."

Beth exhaled loudly. "I've got to go." She rose to her feet. The floorboards underneath me squeaked a little with her sudden movement.

"Put the lid back on, you forgot last time."

We'd discovered that on one of Cecil's middle-of-the-night visits, he'd taken away one of our two buckets. He had also not replenished our diminishing box of tissues.

I raised my eyebrows as Bethany returned to her mat.

She caught my questioning look. "Yes, I did." She rolled her eyes. "Can we play a g-game?"

I sighed. "What game? I don't know any."

"The 'What if' game," Beth said. "That was always a good one."

"Another memory?" I closed my eyes trying to recall the game myself.

"I guess so. It sort of popped into my head."

"I don't suppose you remember how it's played?" I reached up and scratched my head. My hair hadn't met water or shampoo in weeks.

The room fell silent for a moment except for Beth's occasional whisper to herself. "I got it! I'll start!"

"Wouldn't it help if I knew the rules?" I pressed my lips together somewhat annoyed.

"You'll remember."

"Fine." I opened my eyes again.

"What if..." Bethany paused, "What if you had p-purple hair?"

"Purple hair?" I pressed my fingertips to my forehead.

"Answer the question." She was serious about her game.

I thought about my answer, and as I did, the faint memory of the game peaked out from the crevices in my brain. "I'd wear a hat so my head wouldn't be mistaken for a grape." I rolled my head to the side and looked at Beth. "Good enough?"

"Not surprising."

"Was it supposed to be?"

"That's the p-point. Anyway, your turn." She looked at me; her folded hands rested on her stomach.

I looked back up at the rafters. "What if we run out of tissue?"

"I'll use the pages from our books."

"You would?" Her answer surprised me, and I rolled over onto my side. I bent my arm and tucked it under my head; a moment

later Beth rolled over and faced me.

"Ya, I would."

"You love those books."

She smiled. "I like having a clean and dry butt more."

I laughed and rolled back onto my back.

"April?"

"It's your turn, Beth."

She sighed. "What if... we don't g-get out of here."

"We will."

"But w-what if – "

"We. Will."

"But – "

"Sh!"

"April – "

I cut her short again and sat up. "Sh! I hear something."

"It's thunder."

"No, it's his truck." I jumped up and grabbed the table, and Bethany followed behind me with the chair. Once they were in place, I scrambled to the top of the cabinet and pressed my cheek against the window. The red tail lights glowed in the shadows of the trees. He was leaving.

"One, two, three..."

Twenty-Seven Tread Carefully

I sat on top of the cabinet, picking at the window and counting. It was much harder than I thought. Several times a loss of focus caused me to forget where I was, and I started over. The task was proving difficult, and then I noticed the sky. It had lightened since he'd left, though the sun had yet to peek over the treetops. At that moment I remembered how its position could measure time. I shook my head, wishing I would have thought of the sun sooner.

I climbed down from the wardrobe, annoyed by my stupidity. "That was a waste of time." I plunked down on my mat.

Beth looked up from her book. "Is he back? That was f-fast."

I shook my head. "Counting – all I had to do was notice the position of the sun. Stupid," I called myself under my breath.

Beth put down her reading material. "No, not s-stupid, still waking up." She smiled. "Our brains aren't there yet." She tapped on her head with her finger.

"I don't know about that."

"Of course you d-do. Why else have w-we been so..." She waved her hand and dismissed her thought. "Anyway, you weren't up there too long."

When we finally heard the rumble of his truck, I climbed back up onto the cabinet and took note that the sun was high in the sky.

I scrambled back down, and with Bethany's help, returned the table and chair to their place.

Sitting at the table, I filled in list item number three, though it would require further observation. But for the moment and from what I remembered from his previous trips, it seemed that Cecil most often left at dawn. He returned much later when the sun was high overhead. *Would that be enough time?* I tapped my fingers on my forehead. It would have to be.

I stared at the strategy that was beginning to take shape; the only question left was – *where do we go?* I'd read enough stories to

know that heading into the forest was not a good idea. We would have to follow the road. Though the thought of walking down a road was scary too, *what if we met someone that wasn't about to help?*

I folded up my list. Until the way out was clear, there was no point in planning anything further. I joined Beth on the mats and tucked the list underneath mine.

"So?" she said, closing her book.

"What?" I questioned back.

"When are w-we leaving?"

I shrugged. "When we can."

"Are you going to work on it some more today?" Beth's voice was hopeful as she pointed at the window.

"No! He's still here. We'll have to wait."

"For him to l-leave again?"

"No." I shook my head. "I'm going to have to do it at night. The next time he leaves might be our only chance to escape."

Beth nodded.

I pulled out all the tools from underneath my mat and the knife from my pocket and laid them on the floor. I inspected each item. I was going to have to get serious digging out the window, and only the best tools would do.

There was no squeaking, no sound of his footsteps outside the door, nothing to warn us. One look at Beth's face and I knew that Cecil had entered the room and was standing somewhere behind me. I slid the tools under my mat, praying he wasn't close enough to see the small pile of objects.

"Well, hello, girls, what are you two up to today?" his raspy voice questioned behind me.

Beth jumped up, covering one of the tools with her foot as she did. It was the pocket knife, with one of its implements still extended. She winced, but she didn't cry out.

"What's wrong with you?" he scowled at Beth.

"N-nothing, p-pins and needles from s-sitting on my f-foot," she said with a half-smile.

"Hmph."

Bethany's foot hadn't completely covered the pocket knife, and part of it stuck out from underneath. I sprang to my feet and turned to face him, standing in front of Bethany and hiding her injured foot and the knife behind mine.

"And what about you? Pins and needles too?" He'd taken his grey eyes off Beth and glared at me.

"No."

"Hmph," he snarled again. His eyes fixed on mine, but I refused to give him the pleasure of looking away first. My heart raced. After several seconds he averted his gaze and stared over the top of my head. A small grin of satisfaction tugged at the corners of my mouth. The feeling was brief as dread replaced triumph. His gaze concentrated on the window behind us.

"Well now, what have we got here?" He walked around us and headed toward the cabinet.

I held my breath as I turned and stared at his back.

"Looks like someone has been doing some cleaning. Are you hoping for a little more daylight?" He sneered.

I stepped forward to put myself between Cecil and Bethany. I was still trying to hide her injured foot and the knife she covered.

"It was dirty." My cheeks warmed as I worked to keep my voice steady.

"Yes, it was...still is, really. I can fix that," he whispered more to himself than to us. He glanced over at the cot in the corner of the room. "Still not using the cot? It would be a lot more comfortable than those," he said. His chin pointed in the direction of the mats on the floor.

I shook my head.

"Hmph." He started coughing but managed to gain control before speaking again. "Well, if you're not going to use it..." he let his voice trail off as he walked back toward the front of the room. I turned and once again placed myself in a position of hiding Beth's foot.

He glared at me for a moment before focusing on Beth.

I took a step forward, remembering the cologne that he had somehow managed to put in her hair. "Leave her alone." My fists

clenched at my sides.

He whipped his head in my direction. His wide eyes turned to narrow slits and then settled into a look of amusement as he laughed. His laughter evolved into a coughing spasm that racked his body. Unable to regain control, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. The sound of the lock was louder than ever.

Bethany crumpled to the floor, whimpering and grabbing at her injured foot.

"Here, let me see."

She pulled her hands away from her foot, and I lifted it off the floor. The pocket knife came up with it. She'd managed to step on the point of the corkscrew tool. It pierced her thin skin and hung from the bottom of her foot.

"What h-happened?" Bethany cried.

I tugged on the pocket knife, and the corkscrew came free. The injury wasn't as bad as it looked. "It's okay," I said, "it's just a small hole."

Her eyebrows shot up. "A h-hole?"

"You stepped on this." I picked up the knife and showed her the curly piece of metal. On close inspection, a small drop of blood tinged the tip. "It went into your foot a bit, but not too deep."

"Ew!" Beth screwed up her face. "It hurts."

"Hang on." I left Beth for a moment and returned from our pitiful store of supplies with a nearly empty bottle of water. "I couldn't find the cloth." I unscrewed the lid.

"Use a piece of my d-dress," she said.

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yes."

I used the pocket knife to cut away a small piece of blue fabric from the hem of her dress. I dampened it with water and washed her foot. The bottom of which was dirtier than I thought as the skin around the injury brightened.

"What do you s-suppose he meant when he said he could fix that?" Beth said as I finished cleaning her foot.

"Fix what?"

"He s-said he'd fix the dirty window."

"I don't know, clean it?"

Beth cocked her head to one side. "Do you really th-think so?"
Her question sounded skeptical.

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. "No." Cecil wasn't about to make our living conditions pleasant.

Twenty-Eight

Caught in the Act

The days passed. We had no contact with Cecil or Jasper, and we did not hear the rumble of the truck. The only sign that Cecil, or someone, had stopped by was about four days after Cecil's last known visit. We had woken to find a replenished stockpile of food and water. He'd left us a flashlight, a few more books, and an old board game, with a mismatch of elements from various other games. He'd even emptied our waste pail and returned the second one. Unfortunately, he hadn't provided any more tissue. The shredding of books had become a possibility.

I'd insisted smelling Beth's hair the moment I noticed our increased stores. She had been reluctant, but I persuaded her. My anxiety eased when all I smelled was sweat and dirt and not the lingering scent of his putrid cologne.

Since Cecil's last visit, Beth's foot healed with no further issues. The pocket knife stayed tucked under my mat with the rest of my tools. The window remained untouched. I had been too afraid that should he come back to 'fix it', he'd notice the missing bits of grey sealant.

"Are you working on the window today?" Beth said. She spread jam from a half-eaten jar on a stale piece of bread. She had asked that question every day since the last time I'd worked on the window. Every day I had answered the same way. Bethany would sigh and shrug before moving on to something else.

"No." I shook my head and took a bite of my pitiful breakfast.

"C-can I?" She crossed her arms and glared at me. Her body language conflicted with the glint of fear in her eyes.

"No."

"WHY. NOT?" she said through clenched teeth. Her change in tone took me by surprise.

"What if today is the day he decides to fix it?" I questioned back, laying my half-eaten piece of bread down on the table and glaring

back at her.

She shrugged and took a large bite of her food.

"Why do you have to eat like that?" I covered my ears with my hands and closed my eyes. It was gross.

"Be...uz...it....ugs....ou."

"What?" I dropped my hands.

Bethany chewed some more before swallowing and then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Because. It. Bugs. You." She smiled.

I shook my head and chuckled. There was no point in arguing with her. We finished eating in silence, and I was relieved Beth had given up pestering me.

I found myself staring up at the window, drawn toward it like metal to a magnet. A few seconds later, Beth stood by my side; her warm hand rested on my arm.

"Do you think he's s-still alive?" she whispered.

"Who?" Jasper's face flashed in my mind.

"Jasper. Cecil," she paused, "anyone!"

I patted her hand. "I don't know."

"We're going to g-get out of here."

I turned and smiled. "Come on; help me with the table."

It was a beautiful sunny day. The sunlight was comforting as I picked and pulled out bits of hard, rubbery material. Some chunks were dry and brittle, others stretchy. The work was slow, but I made progress. After some time, I finally had a small spot where I'd managed to pull out all the sealant. "Go to the door!" I said to Beth.

"What? Why?"

"Just listen for him."

Beth rose from the table and went to the invisible door. "What are you d-doing?"

"Trying something." I lay down on my back on the top of the cabinet. I wiggled around and hugged my knees to my chest, my hair hung down the front of the wardrobe.

"What the hell!" Beth said.

"Got a good piece out. Going to see if I can kick this thing loose."

"Be careful."

"Just listen for him." I spread my knees and looked at the window between them, then stretched out my legs until my feet made contact. There wouldn't be a lot of power in my thrust as my knees were still bent, but I had to try. I pulled back my legs, squeezed my eyes shut, and pushed away the thought of my bare feet smacking the edge of the window.

"Wait!" Beth called.

My knees dropped back toward my chest. "What?"

My nightgown and Beth's came flying over and landed on my face before I could catch them.

"Wrap them around your f-feet," Beth said as I heard her footsteps tap away from the wardrobe.

I smiled and wrapped a nightgown around each foot. *At least it won't hurt as much.* I readied myself and thrust my legs forward.

There wasn't a lot of time between the thrust of my legs and the landing of my feet. There wasn't a lot of time between the thud against the window and the jarring pain. It travelled up my legs and into my lower back. I groaned, re-positioned myself, and tried again. The second time did not hurt as much, but it was just as futile. *Third time's the charm,* a voice whispered in my head, and I knew it was my father's.

Sweat dripped down from my temples and soaked into my hair. I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath. My knees folded against my chest. I counted to three in my head and let my legs go like they were spring loaded.

Dust and dirt from the rafters coated my sweat soaked face as my wrapped feet made contact with the window. The thud was louder than the previous two times. The pain in my body was worse than the first time. I rolled over onto my side into a ball.

"Are you okay!" Bethany's worried voice called from below the cabinet.

"Yes," I groaned and hung my arm over the edge, waving her away as the pain subsided. After a few more moments I sat up and looked to see if I had accomplished anything.

With the eye alone the window looked intact and fixed in place. My hands pressed along the edge where my feet had landed and detected slight movement. I pushed harder.

"Whoop!" I yelled and covered my mouth with my hand in almost the same instant. The movement was not only felt but also seen.

"You got it?" Beth's excited voice cried out.

"Almost! Finish what you were doing; I'll be down in a bit." I wiped the sweat from my forehead and sat back against the window. Beth returned to building her board game.

Tiny flecks of dust danced in the sunbeam that shone over my shoulders. I moved my hands through the air, and the specks swirled around. I lost myself in the dancing and falling of each little particle. I pretended they were alive as they moved and floated through the air. The sun warmed the back of my head, and it felt nice. I closed my eyes and imagined sitting on a tree stump as I heard the faint sound of birds singing outside.

"Well, what have we here?" His voice sang.

My eyes sprung open. My heart gave a sudden jolt, thumping as though it were trying to break free from my chest. I was speechless. Bethany sat at the table only feet away from him. Her mouth was open, and it was obvious from her reaction that she hadn't heard him come in either. He stepped another foot into the room. Beth remained at the table, while I froze in place on the top of the cabinet.

"What's the matter?" he wheezed as he stared over at Beth. "You aren't usually at a loss for words." His wrinkled purple shirt clung to him with sweat.

Beth jumped to her feet and folded her arms. "I," she began.

"Beth!" I warned and scrambled down from the cabinet. In my haste, the chair shifted a bit, and I almost fell. I regained my balance as I found my way to the floor.

"Tsk, tsk." Cecil clicked his tongue and ran a hand through his sweaty white hair.

Bethany had returned to her mat, and I moved in beside her. Her eyes narrowed, and her cheeks had taken on a pink glow.

He looked past us and up at the window, before settling his grey glare back on me.

"I...I just wanted to feel the s-sun." I stammered. My heart thumped. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves.

He smiled. "Hmph! Is that all? Sounded a little noisy. Anyway," his mood improved, "I did say I was going to fix it." He turned and headed back to the door. "Oh!" He spun around; his sudden movement startled me. "I brought you something." He held up one finger gesturing a moment and walked out the door. A second later he rolled in another cot. "I thought you might want one too," he said to Bethany.

"I thought you only had one," Beth said.

Cecil shrugged. "I did, but...Well, I might have told a little lie." He held up his thumb and index finger and pinched them together. "I don't think we'll need this one anymore." He smirked.

My stomach knotted. "How's Jasper?" My question sounded desperate.

Cecil's grey eyes flicked over to me, and he smirked. "Still alive, but not for long." He coughed and left the room.

Both Bethany and I exhaled as the sound of the lock filled our ears. Once again, I was thankful for his nasty cough. It always sent him running from the room and managed to save us from further torment.

"I don't get what he m-means by 'fix it'," Beth said turning back to look up at the window, "it's n-not broken."

"It sort of is – now."

"Maybe he'll clean it f-from outside."

"As long as he doesn't push on it too hard."

Beth shrugged. "He won't notice. How about that board game?" She changed the subject and pointed to the game set up on the table.

"Might as well. There's nothing else to do."

We sat down, and while Beth finished setting up the last little pieces, I glanced over at the window. It was dirty, but plenty of light shone through. My stomach tightened, I didn't think cleaning the window was what he intended to do.

Twenty-Nine

Sleep on it

I'd spent at least half of the night awake, tossing and turning between my back and my right side. My hip ached as my bones pressed through the mat and into the hard floor. I wanted to lie the other way and give my hip a break, but facing the door wasn't an option. The last time I had, I woke and felt quite disoriented. It sent me into a panic as I thought Cecil was in the room. Beth slept every which way, though she believed otherwise. She insisted because she fell asleep and woke on her left side that she had spent the entire night in the same position. I tried to tell her, but she would not consider it. After a few silly arguments on the subject, I stopped trying to convince her.

Morning announced its arrival through the window; the long night had come to an end. I sat up and stretched my arms above my head, feeling my bones crack under my skin. I pulled on my dirty, green dress and tiptoed over to the corner that housed our waste buckets. The cots had finally become useful. We used both of them in their folded positions as half walls, which gave us a little privacy.

I didn't notice the change when I'd walked over to our makeshift bathroom. I wasn't sure if it was because in my peripheral vision the space was still occupied. Or the dim light hadn't allowed me to see what was missing. Whatever the reason, I saw it on my return. Two small stools and a large cardboard box turned upside down, had replaced our table and chairs.

"Beth, wake up." I stared at our newest pieces of furniture. It was evident that my night hadn't been as sleepless as I'd thought. Cecil had managed to sneak in and made the switch.

"What?" Beth yawned and cleared her throat as she joined me.

"Look." I pointed.

Beth rubbed her eyes. "When?"

I shook my head and shrugged. I had hoped she'd heard something.

"I never heard," she whispered, answering my unasked question.

"Good morning, girls!" Startled, we spun around to find him standing in the doorway. It took all I had not to rush toward him and knock him out of the way. I was angry. "Admiring your new furniture, I see." A cough cut short his evil chuckle, and I hoped he'd choke and fall to the ground. I imagined running up and kicking him as hard as I could before escaping from the room. "What do you think?" he said, getting his cough under control and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His question brought me back from my daydream.

"Why?" Bethany said. She folded her arms and scowled.

"Your sister could have hurt herself when she climbed down from the cabinet. We wouldn't want that." His eyebrows rose, but his intonation suggested he didn't care. "Still," he said more to himself than to us as he turned and looked up at the window, "I should fix that." He turned back to us and smirked again. "This damn cough really makes me feel like not doing much of anything." He looked at me, and then shifted his gaze towards Beth.

"How's Jasper?" I blurted.

He looked back at me with a crooked grin. "Wouldn't you like to know," he said, then turned and walked back out the door without another word.

My throat tightened. I took a deep breath and stomped over to my mat. I imagined Cecil laughing as he heard my footsteps. I pulled the pocket knife from its hiding place and dropped it into my pocket. I heard the faint click as it settled at the bottom and made contact with the brown button. "Come on." I grabbed Beth's arm.

"What are w-we doing?" she said as we walked over to the cots.

"Back to work."

"How? Are you b-boosting me up? I'll do it...if you w-want."

"We'll use these. Take the other end." Not wanting Cecil to hear them roll across the floor, we carried each cot over to the cabinet. We placed one in front of the other and pushed them up against the doors.

"I *can* do it," Bethany said.

"I know, but I'll try it first. I'm not sure how easy this is going to be."

Beth shrugged. "Whatever." But the relief I saw in her eyes was clear.

The top of the folded cots came just above my waist, a little too high for me to step onto from the floor. The bottom metal slat would give me the boost I needed.

"Ready?"

Beth nodded and pressed her back into the folded beds, pushing them together. She extended her legs out in front of her. I turned the metal slat on its springs and lay my foot on the flat side. The thin metal bent a little with my weight. I reached across both beds and steadied myself as I pushed off the floor with my other foot. The second all my weight was on the cot, it began to fall forward. I quickly put my foot back on the floor.

"Hold them still, Beth."

She rolled her eyes. "I am. They keep rolling."

"Hang on." I bent down and looked at the wheels. A small metal piece stuck out above each wheel, and I pushed them down, locking them into place. "They shouldn't roll now." I got into position again. "Okay?"

Beth nodded and leaned into the cots again.

I shoved off the floor with one foot. The metal slat bent under my weight as I drew up my knee and placed it on top of the cots. My arms pulled me forward. Beth huffed as she steadied the beds. A sharp sting propelled me to the top as the edge of the thin metal slat sliced the underside of my foot. I sucked air in through my teeth as the thin skin parted.

"What happened?"

I sat on top of the cots and leaned against the cabinet doors. Both hands held the bottom of my left foot; blood seeped between my fingers. "How bad?" I grunted. My stomach turned.

"M-move your hands."

I shook my head. "I don't want to." Throbbing replaced the initial sting.

"Looks like it's b-bleeding good."

"Don't tell me that," I said.

Beth sighed and folded her arms. Her icy eyes glared at me.

"Fine." I moved one hand at a time.

Beth leaned forward. "Bad news, it's b-bleeding and about this long." She held up her thumb and index finger to show about a one-inch length gash. "G-good news, you'll live. Unless it g-gets infected. Which it won't." She straightened herself. "But it might." She walked away and came back a few seconds later with water and a few tissues from our dwindling supplies.

"Ow! That stings!" I pulled my foot back from Beth's care.

"Imagine if I had s-something like alcohol instead of w-water. Give it b-back."

I allowed my sister to finish cleaning up my injury the best she could with what we had. With the blood washed away, Beth saw that the cut was clean and shallow. It was not the type that would have needed stitches. She cut away another piece from the hem of her dress and tied it around the bottom of my foot.

"There, all f-fixed." She looked up at me and handed me back the knife.

"Thanks."

"Anytime." She smiled.

"Okay, I've wasted enough time. Hold those things steady."

Beth turned and pressed her back into the cots once again. "You w-want me to do it? You're hurt."

I shook my head. "I'm up this far." I turned around and stretched my arms across the top of the cabinet. The table and chair were taller but not by much. I jumped off my good foot. I wiggled and pulled; my legs banged against the cabinet. And then I was on top.

"Are you up yet?" Beth called. She still stood with her back pushed against the folded beds.

"What do you think?"

She turned and smiled when she saw me on top of the wardrobe. "Go sit in front of the door and listen for him; if you hear anything knock on the floor, and I'll come down."

"What about the cots?" Beth said.

"I'll have to move them back quickly."

I worked feverishly, digging the knife deep into the sealant. Small grey chunks came free and littered the top of the cabinet, but I could not clear an area like I had the last time. After several minutes, I stopped. Hunger and exhaustion interfered with my concentration. My fingers ached from gripping my knife, and my neck and shoulders burned. The pain in my foot became a faint memory. I climbed back down, and with Beth's help, returned the folded beds to serve as bathroom walls once again.

We sat at our crude table and ate our first meal of the day. Despite having replaced our table and chairs, Cecil had supplied us with more food. We discovered a new cloth bag contained several cans of food and a half-eaten box of stale cereal.

My eyelids grew heavy, and it became difficult to keep them open as I finished the last of my meal.

"You need a n-nap." Beth tilted her head to the side and gave me a half smile. Her icy blue eyes filled with concern.

I shook my head and rubbed both eyes with my fingertips. "I'm fine." Beth was right, but the thought of lying down on the thin mat with my aching body was enough to keep me awake.

"You can hardly s-stay awake. You almost f-fell asleep eating."

"I'll rest here." I folded my arms on top of the cardboard table and rested my head. It was uncomfortable but painless. Through the haze of half-sleep, I heard Beth shuffle around.

"Come on," she whispered a few moments later.

I resisted the light tug on my arm and stayed seated on my stool. Another stronger tug and my body rose sleepily from my seat.

"No," I whispered in my semi-conscious state.

"You need a good s-sleep."

Too tired to argue, I allowed her to help me lie down. The soft mattress of the cot cradled my body as I settled and sunk into blissful sleep.

Thirty
Easy come, easy go

"I know what you're up to." His cruel voice whispered in my ear. His warm, stinking breath made my eyes water.

"W-what do you mean?" I stammered. His finger jabbed my arm. I was sure it was going to bruise.

"Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about. You're trying to escape." His grey eyes glared at me.

"No, we're not!" My legs buckled, and if it weren't for the wall he'd backed me against, I would have fallen to the floor.

"Well, you've got that right. You're staying here until you rot."

I bolted upright; my eyes searched for whispering shadows as they adjusted to the dark. Beth's breathing and my pounding heart were the only sounds in the room.

"You're wrong," I whispered back. I lay back down on my cot and waited for the return of sleep. I would work on our escape when morning arrived.

"April, April, w-wake up!" Beth's urgent voice buzzed in my ear; I rolled away. "Come on, get up." She persisted and shook my shoulder.

"Leave me alone," I whined, wanting to sleep more.

"But he's gone!"

Her words woke me, and I rolled toward Bethany. "Are you sure?"

"I heard his truck!" She scrunched her forehead.

I sat up and stretched. My body still ached, but it felt better than it had in weeks. Beth had already made me a breakfast of stale bread and jam, and she held it out to me the second I finished yawning.

"Eat!"

I saluted and took the piece of bread from her outstretched hand.

Despite my injured foot, I was able to climb to the top of the cabinet faster than the last time. I nudged the window, its slight movement gave me inspiration, and I set to work. The memory of my nightmare was still on my mind.

“So?” Beth said, a few minutes into my digging.

“What?” I kept working.

“Are you getting any m-more out?”

“Yes, but only a bit at a time. There's a lot of this stuff, and it's thick in places.” I sunk the knife in and pulled up a large piece. I grabbed it with my fingers and ripped it free. I held it up to show Beth and smiled. It was almost half the length of my arm – the biggest piece yet.

“Yes! Does that make another empty s-spot?”

I inspected the area and shook my head. “Left a good hole but I can still see some. It's layered in pretty thick. Maybe a bit more will clean it out.”

I had been so busy working I'd forgotten to watch for his return. The sudden arrival of his truck as it pulled up to the house surprised me.

“Beth, hold the cots,” I called. “Hurry, he's back.”

Beth hurried over and pressed her back against the beds as I scrambled down. We carried each one back to their spot, afraid the rolling wheels would alert him. When everything was back in place, we grabbed our books and lay down to read. My foot throbbed a little as I tucked it under my sheet. A few minutes later he stood in the doorway.

“How are my favourite girls today? Well, look at you two using those cots!”

I sat up and pulled the sheet over my bandaged foot, keeping it hidden from his view. He stood in the doorway, a grin pasted on his sweaty face. Though the smell of his cologne was faint, it was still strong enough to make my nose wrinkle.

“My back was sore.” I shrugged.

“Well, don't get too used to them. I might need them back.”

“What – why?” I could not endure the thin mat again.

He shrugged. “In case you get any brilliant ideas. You know like using them to climb onto the cabinet like you did with your table. Now hold on a minute,” he tapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I’ve just gone and given you the idea. Come on, up you get.” He glared at Beth as he approached. Their eyes locked in a staring match.

With his attention elsewhere, I yanked the strip of cloth from my foot and hid it in my pocket. His distraction was temporary, and he redirected his focus as he stood in front of my cot.

“Please don’t take them.” I stood up and touched his forearm. His rolled shirt sleeves exposed his skin, and it was warm and damp under my hand. He shook his arm; the violent motion sent me back onto my bed.

“Get up,” he growled as he brushed a hand through his messy grey hair.

Bethany and I stood over to one side as he reached down and grabbed the edge of my cot. He shook the mattress and the foam mat from the frame. I held my breath as they fell to the floor, afraid he’d find my tools sandwiched between them. Luckily the mat stuck to the bottom, and they fell together. Bethany’s cot was next, and she gasped as he dumped her mattress and blanket on the floor. The exertion sent him into a fit of coughs, and when he regained control, he was bright red. Sweat and tears trickled down his face. He folded the bed frames and pulled them out of the room, locking the door behind him.

I rushed to my mattress and peeled the mat free; my tools were still safely in place.

“What are you doing?” I said as I craned my neck to look around Beth. She was in the midst of gathering the few things Cecil had dumped on the floor. Her actions looked more suspicious than that of someone trying to be tidy.

“N-nothing.” She kept her back toward me. Her tone heightened my suspicion.

“Beth?”

"Fine," Beth huffed and turned around. Tucked between her two hands was the small brown teddy bear she'd pulled from one of the boxes in the cabinet.

My jaw dropped. "How did you get that?" I pointed to the pitiful looking toy.

Beth shrugged. "Took it the day we found it."

"But you put it back. I saw you."

"No, you didn't see. I started p-putting stuff back in the box while you worked on the cabinet. I stuffed him under my d-dress until I could hide him under my blanket." A mischievous grin spread on her face.

"What if he'd have found it?" I hissed; warmth filled my cheeks at the thought. "He would have known we were in the cabinet." My gaze drifted toward the little bear, and he appeared to wink at me.

"Pfft!" Beth dismissed my comment with a wave of her hand. Her cheeks were as pink as I imagined my own to be. "He had no m-more a chance finding my bear than he d-did finding your knife and other stuff. I'm pretty sure he'd have m-more of a p-problem with those." She turned away and went back to making her bed.

The tools lay on the bottom of my mattress. I covered them with the thin mat and flipped the whole thing over. Beth had a point. Her teddy bear was nothing compared to the small arsenal of sharp objects I kept hidden.

"Where's my knife?" A quick search of the floor around me provided no answer. I turned my attention to Beth; she was straightening her things but stopped long enough to shrug.

It didn't matter that my pocket was not weighed down. I stuck my hand inside it anyway. My fingers entangled in the strip of cloth and grazed over the button. A sweat broke out on my forehead at the thought of the loss of my best tool. *But how could it be? I'd only just used it.* My memory shifted to the cabinet; I'd left it on top in my haste to climb down.

"Did you find it?" Bethany said as she stood beside me.

I nodded.

"Where?"

I pointed to the top of the cabinet and looked at Beth. There was only one way we were going to get that knife back. We tiptoed over to the large piece of furniture, and I laced my fingers together for her. She hesitated for a moment then placed her foot in my hand. A tense few seconds later and she'd climbed on top.

"Is it there?" I stood back from the cabinet.

Beth sat with her back to the window and held up the knife
"Yup!"

"Okay, come down." The tension in my body eased.

"I w-want to look out first."

"Sure?"

Beth pressed her lips together in determination and nodded.

"Don't be long."

Beth moved with care and faced the window. "Uh!" she gasped.

"What's the matter?"

"H-he's out there," she whispered

My heart raced. "Get down before he sees you." I panicked.

"I th-think...I think he d-did."

Thirty-One

Shadows and Dark Shapes

Two days had passed before he surprised us with another visit. And if he had seen Beth looking out the window, he kept it to himself. He brought us more books, more food – more anxiety. He had shown up again the next day, and the day after that. Each time the door opened, I held my breath. He had become unpredictable, and so once again, we stopped working on our escape.

His visits were quick and, for the most part, silent. He'd walk into the room and look around, his survey always ending at the window. He'd chuckle under his breath and grin at some inside joke. Then he would leave.

His appearance had changed as well. His once bright white hair had dulled with dirt. He no longer changed his shirts and wore only the purple one stained with sweat and whatever else he'd spilled on it. His personal scent replaced his cologne. Gone were his bright, grey eyes that had shone with whatever plans he had had for the future. They had dulled and became the eyes of a man who purely existed. The well-groomed man we'd remembered from C.E.C.I.L. had turned into a dishevelled and dirty mess.

We had feared him before, but this quieter Cecil was one we feared even more. His words had once been a window into his mind, but now his silence cloaked his thoughts. He had something planned, and my body was in a constant state of tension as we waited for its enactment.

The floor beneath my mattress had become well etched with marks for each day of our captivity. Each new scratch had spurred the need for escape, fear and turmoil prevented our progress.

After one brief visit, Cecil had left with our stools. He'd come into our room empty handed, stared up at the window, and then took the remaining furnishings. The action brought about a renewed interest in working on our only escape route. Unfortunately, with no other way to reach the top of the cabinet, Beth would have to take over the work. I would listen for Cecil.

Every morning at dawn, I helped Beth to the top of the wardrobe. She worked in the dim light until the sun peaked over the trees. The progress was slow, but she worked hard. The desperate situation had kept her fear of heights suppressed as she dug out the sealant. She stuffed each chunk she removed down the back of the cabinet and shoved on the window every few minutes.

One morning, after his truck had rumbled away, Beth threw a can of food at the glass. We had hoped it would crack, but it only bounced off with a loud rattle. Hot and frustrated she had climbed back down. She returned in the early evening before the sun had set and fought the window again. She would not give up.

I sat up in the dark, sweat soaked. The sound of rain pounding on the roof resonated throughout the dark room. A smile spread across my face; it had been some time since it had rained. The sound was soothing, and I hoped it would cool the air.

In the darkness, I could make out Bethany's sleeping body beside me, her breathing slow and easy. I was envious of her but happy at the same time. At least one of us could enjoy sound sleep. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept without waking, though I suspected it was while under Cecil's drugs.

I touched Beth's arm. Her skin was cool, and she lay quiet and still. I pulled my hand away and searched at the head of my mattress for the flashlight. I turned it on while keeping my hand over the lens. Blue-white light filtered through my fingers, casting ominous shadows on the overhead beams. I lowered the light to the floor and searched Beth's mattress.

The small, brown teddy bear lay in the crook of her arm. I reached over and gently tugged it free. Beth snorted and rolled away from me.

I inspected the small stuffed toy I held in my left hand, while my right held onto the flashlight. I flipped the old bear over onto his front. There were some worn patches in his fur, and the seam down his back looked like it had been hand stitched. He was a rather ordinary bear, bedraggled, but well loved. I flipped him back over and poked him in his little belly; I snickered at myself for the

impromptu action. The teddy had a kind smile. The black on his nose had worn away in spots so that it looked more brown than black. My finger trailed along his nose to the spot between his winking eyes. And then I saw for the first time he wasn't winking, he was missing an eye. My finger rubbed over his one brown eye and then to the place where the other was missing. There was a tiny hole where it had once been.

I lay down and turned away from Beth, bringing the bear and the flashlight with me. I tucked the flashlight up against my body. Its light shone across the floor and up the hidden door. I placed the bear in front and moved him back and forth. The teddy's shadow grew and shrunk with the movement. I sighed and closed my eyes. Is this it? Is watching the shadow of a stuffed bear going to be my only entertainment? The flashlight flickered and dimmed. I shut it off to preserve whatever battery power was left and returned it to the spot above my head. I tucked the little bear up against my stomach as my eyes stared in the dark toward the invisible door.

A chink of light appeared under the door and along the edge. I gasped and tucked the teddy under my nightgown. The door swung open, and light flowed into the room. For a brief moment I caught sight of his black silhouette standing in the doorway, and I closed my eyes.

I lay motionless. I sensed he stood beside me; near enough that if I reached out with my hand, I would feel his foot. It took all my strength to keep my breathing slow and steady despite my thumping heart. After a few seconds, his feet carried him away as they shuffled and creaked along the floorboards. I waited and fought my body's attempt to panic. And when he finally left, I exhaled the breath I had been holding. My body shook, and tears streamed from my eyes. The weeks of fear and frustration released like a thundercloud bursting with rain.

"What's going on?" A sleepy voice whispered behind me.

"Nothing." I wiped the tears from my face and exhaled a shaky breath. I was still facing the door – paralyzed.

Beth's warm hand rested on my shoulder. "Was he here?" Her voice sounded a little more awake.

"Yes," I said.

"What did he w-want?"

What had he wanted? "I don't know...to stare at us." I wrinkled my face as I spoke the words. It was strange, but I never heard any sound other than his walking towards us and then walking away.

"Did he?"

The sense of his standing so close came to mind. "Yes." I rolled over onto my back, pulled my sheet up to my chin, and shivered. It was still warm in the room, but he'd left a cold chill behind.

Beth yawned. "Goodnight," she said.

I stared up at the darkened ceiling, remembering the bear as I did. I pulled it out from underneath my nightgown. I held it at arms-length and rocked it in the dark. His winking face crossed my mind as my arms dropped back down, and my eyelids grew heavy.

The weight of my body pressed into the mattress. Sleep crept in. I fought it, but I couldn't stop its advance. I only hoped it wouldn't bring him back with it.

With each exhale, I drifted closer to unconsciousness. As the final moment of awareness drifted away, my ears picked up a light tapping overhead. Soon there would only be the sound of our even breathing and the rain drumming on the roof.

Thirty-Two

Beggars can't be Choosers

I stretched my arms over my head and yawned before opening my still sleepy eyes. Beth's empty bed lay in front of me. My heart skipped for a moment until I heard her humming the only tune she remembered. I cringed at the memory of the song that had once been a childhood favourite but was now surrounded by mystery. I rubbed the remaining sleep from my eyes. The room was still dark, and I could just make out Beth rooting through something on our cardboard table.

"Food?" I said at the sound of clanging tin cans. I picked up the flashlight before rising.

"Ya." She didn't bother to look at me as she continued searching through the cloth bag. The memory of his late night visit returned. I had been so sure that he'd done nothing but watch us sleep.

My back cracked as I stretched my arms over my head again and rolled my neck. It felt good to no longer feel achy upon waking like I had when I slept on the thin mat. I yawned again and made my way over to Beth; my eyes watered.

"You're up early." The sky outside the window was still dark though I suspected dawn would arrive soon.

Beth pulled a few cans of food from the bag. She shrugged. "I couldn't sleep anymore."

The flashlight flickered with the click of the switch. I reached for one of the cans on the table and turned it in my hand. The dull beam of light was just bright enough.

Like the rest of the food, the best before date was either near its expiry or had just past. Some cans had no date, and I could only assume that they were still good. What I didn't understand, was where it came from. *Was it food rescued from C.E.C.I.L or was he getting it from some other source?* I placed the can back on the table as the door of the room swung open and caught us by surprise. We stood still and stared at him.

"Why are you here?" I snapped, much to mine and Beth's surprise, as his. Visiting us at dawn was not something he had a habit of doing. I was glad Beth wasn't working on the window. I set the still illuminated flashlight in the centre of the cardboard box. The beam pointed at the ceiling.

He sneered and approached the table. A stray lock of dirty, white hair hung over his one eye, but he didn't bother to brush it away. "I was wondering where I'd left that bag," he said.

Beth's eyes narrowed, and her knuckles whitened as she gripped the bag's handles tighter.

Cecil's eyes roamed over the top of our cardboard box table. "Why don't you put those cans back in the bag for me?" He smiled at Beth. "I left it here by mistake."

"Too bad!" Beth shrugged and glared at him.

Cecil raised his eyebrows and snorted with contempt. "Yes, it is too bad, for you." He reached over and snatched the bag from her hands.

Beth cried out, pulled her hands up to her face, and inspected her fingers.

"Give me those," he commanded as he pointed his chin in the direction of the few cans lying on the cardboard box.

I picked up the cans one-by-one and tossed them into the bag he held open. "Is that all you came for?" I snapped again. My stomach muscles tightened as he glared at me with threatening eyes.

"You know, I was going to let you keep a can or two, but now," he wagged his finger at me, "now I'm not so sure either of you deserves it." He spun around.

"Wait!" I closed my eyes as my mouth spoke before my brain had a chance to protest.

Beth grabbed my arm. "What are you d-doing?" she whispered through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry." Beth's grip tightened on my arm. "I didn't mean to, please." My stomach rumbled.

Cecil stood still with his back to us for a moment before turning. He smiled. "Now that's better. This doesn't have to be difficult," he

said, finally brushing the errant lock of hair from his eyes.

"Can we...can we please have one can." I cringed as I heard myself beg. Beth huffed and released her grip.

Cecil dropped his chin and raised his eyebrows. "Are you begging?"

I nodded.

"Hmm, I suppose I could leave you something." He reached into the bag and pulled out a can. I held my breath as it was one that had yet to expire. "Perhaps not this one," he said and placed it back in the bag. He pulled out another; my shoulders dropped. "How about this? Do you like beans? Well, I suppose that doesn't really matter, does it?" He waved his hand through the air dismissing his question. "That was a stupid question." He held the can out toward me. "Take it!" he snapped.

I reached out and took the can.

"Anything else?" he said.

The tip of my tongue poked out from between my lips, and I licked them. "Can we have another?" My heart raced. If he said no, I wasn't going to beg anymore.

He stared at me for a moment, his dull grey eyes brightening a little as I gazed back. "One more," he said and pulled out another can. "I don't like peaches anyway."

I grabbed the can before he could change his mind. He turned to leave, but again my mouth stopped him before my brain registered. "Wait!" I called.

"This is really getting annoying," Cecil said as he turned to face me. "I can easily take those back." His eyes darted between the can I held in each hand.

"Where did these come from?" I held up the food.

Cecil narrowed his eyes for a moment as though he didn't quite understand my question. But then they brightened a little as it registered. "For years, we stockpiled and stored cans at C.E.C.I.L. for emergencies. We didn't need them as we grew our own fresh food and farmed our own meat. You always had the best and freshest of food."

"And now?" I said.

"Now, it's an emergency. I took as much as I could before C.E.C.I.L. burned and of course, we had a good supply here as well. However, there isn't enough for all of us." He turned and headed back to the door.

"Let us go!" I yelled.

He stopped once again and hesitated before turning around.

"Ya, let us go." Beth's voice chimed in as she stepped up beside me.

"Hmph! You'd like that, but I don't think so. Not until I have what I want."

My brow creased. "What do you want?"

"Well, you see, my dear. Someone has something of mine and until I get it back, I have something of theirs." He pulled open the door and walked out.

Beth and I stood there and stared at the invisible door as the lock clicked. The light flickered.

"What the hell d-does that mean?" Beth clicked off the switch on the dying flashlight.

"Beth!" I stared at my sister.

She shrugged. "What? I used to say that and w-worse all the t-time."

"More memories?"

She nodded and smiled.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't have a clue what that means," I said answering Beth's question.

"Let's eat! You can't th-think properly on an empty stomach."

"Beth!"

"What?" She stared at me wide-eyed.

"Dad used to say that all the time."

"I know." She smiled and grabbed the can opener from the top of our cardboard table.

We sat down on our mattresses and ate small bites from the can of beans he'd left. While we still had a few remaining tins from previous visits, the beans were the oldest. We hoped the protein would help keep up our strength. They didn't taste the greatest. I

didn't know if it was because of the flavour or the expiry, but they kept our stomachs from complaining too much.

"What do you th-think he was talking about?" Beth said as she lay on her back and played with the small bear, holding it high above her as I had done the night before.

"I don't know." I lay down on my back and stared up at the beams.

"I th-think he's gone c-crazy."

I nodded in agreement and closed my eyes. My mind replayed Cecil's visit and his words. *Who could have something he wants and what does he have?* I squeezed my eyelids tighter. Little white specks floated underneath like far away stars in the night sky. *What does Cecil have?* I questioned again.

I listed the most obvious things, the house, or whatever our prison was, the truck, Jasper – if he was still alive. My stomach tightened at the thought, and I shook my head not wanting to believe the worst. He had food, but by his account, there wasn't much. Whatever other artifacts or treasures lay behind the closed door, was a mystery. My hand absently reached down the front of my dress, and I pulled out the locket and rubbed it between my fingers.

My eyes sprung open. "He has us," I whispered.

"What?"

Beth's voice made me jump as I'd forgotten she was lying beside me. I rolled over and faced her, propping my head up on my hand.

"He has us," I said louder, convinced that *we* were whatever someone was looking for.

Beth rolled over and mirrored me, dropping the bear on the floor between us. "What are you t-talking about?" She scrunched her nose.

"Cecil said 'someone has something he wants and he has something of theirs.'" I widened my eyes as Beth narrowed hers again. Her icy gaze brightened as my words registered.

"Who?" Beth said.

I shook my head. A thought came to mind, and my heart skipped a beat. "Mom and dad!"

"Do you r-really think so?" Beth's eyes couldn't get any wider.

"I don't know, but I can hope." I looked away from Beth and up at the window. Dawn had arrived and another day was about to begin.

Thirty-Three

Tit for Tat

"I'm hungry," Beth whined. Her growling stomach made her point.

"I know, I am too."

"When the hell is he c-coming back?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"You w-want me to." Beth held up her fist.

"No, it's my turn." I stood in front of the hidden door and took a deep breath. "Hey, hey...can you hear me?" My fist pounded. Despite taking turns throughout the day, it was sore from the banging yesterday and the day before that. A dark bruise had begun to form over the tender spot.

It had been several days since we'd last seen him and though he'd left us more food, he hadn't brought much that was edible. We had even become sick, and we agreed it was the meat he'd given us for breakfast the morning we saw him last. We thought it had tasted fine, but then we did not know how it should have tasted.

It had been a treat, but a treat that came back to haunt us much later that day. We were lucky he'd also emptied our bathroom buckets and returned both of them. After that, we didn't trust anything else he had given us. We examined every can and its contents. We didn't touch any bent or rusted tins. If the food smelled, tasted or looked bad, we placed it in a bag with other spoiled food. For days, we lived on the bottles of water he'd provided and a few cans of fruit and beans.

"I don't think he hears us...or cares," I said, turning away from the door and rubbing my sore hand. Beth still sat on her mattress but had changed out of her nightgown and was back in her dirty, blue dress.

"He isn't going to b-bring us any more f-food." Her voice wavered with emotion. Her eyes glistened with the threat of tears, but she sniffed them away before any could fall. Her body became rigid as though she'd told herself to toughen up.

"He'll bring us food, don't worry. He's taken a long time before." I hoped I sounded more convincing than I believed.

Beth seemed to think my words over for a moment before shaking her head. "It's different th-this t-time. H-he doesn't know w-we haven't eaten most of it."

She was right; he'd likely assumed we'd eat whatever he'd given us. But several cans remained untouched, their contents questionable. And if he didn't bring something else soon, hunger would drive us to take the risk.

"You should get dressed, just in case," Beth said pointing at my worn nightgown.

My soiled, green dress lay flat on top of a box. It had been a couple of days since I'd been well enough to change, though even now I didn't see the point.

I barely had the dress pulled over my head when I heard the click of the lock. "He's here," I called to Beth, my voice not much louder than a whisper. Bethany jumped up and joined me by our pile of boxes. We stared at the door and waited for him to enter.

"Good morning, girls." His smile faded, and he scrunched his face. "What the hell is that smell?" he said as he looked around the room.

"We were sick," I told him.

"What?"

"We were sick...the f-food was bad." Beth crossed her arms and glared at him with her slightly sunken icy eyes.

"Well, it stinks in here." He looked around again as if to find the source of the smell.

"The buckets are full...and we need more food...and water."

"Hmph." He turned around and headed out the door.

"Wait!" I called, but the door closed behind him.

Beth and I returned to our mattresses and lay down. She'd been right, he wasn't going to bring us any more food, and we were going to starve to death in that room.

The sound of creaking floorboards woke us from our light sleep, and we sat up. A damp piece of hair stuck to my forehead, and I wiped

it away. I furrowed my brow; I was confused and didn't know how long we'd slept. I wiped a hand over my sweat-soaked face. Beth wouldn't be working on the window, at least not until evening; it was much too hot in the room.

He didn't say a word but walked over to our cardboard box table with two cloth bags and a case of water tucked under his arm. He set them on the floor. My stomach rumbled at the thought of food, and it took everything I had not to jump up to see what he had brought.

"Eat it sparingly." He coughed a few times and wiped sweat from his face. "I brought you three clean buckets too, but you're going to have to trade."

I was puzzled. *What did he mean...trade?* I looked at our measly belongings. We had nothing to trade.

"What?" I shrugged.

He smiled. "Information." He tilted his head to the side, and a greasy white lock of hair fell into his eyes before he brushed it away.

I squinted. "What do you mean?"

"What do you remember?" He lowered himself to the floor and leaned against the wall behind him. The door to his left was open but not enough to allow me to see out into the hall.

"About what?" Beth chimed in and crawled from her mattress over to mine. She crossed her legs in front of her and pulled the edge of my sheet over her lap.

"Anything." He shrugged.

"Not much," I said.

"Really? Well now, I find that hard to believe. The effects of the memory blocker should be out of your system now. While many years of subjection can erase most, if not all, your memory, Jasper assured me you hadn't received a full dose for several months. So. What. Do. You. Remember?"

"Mostly," I began, "just some stuff when I was younger. I still can't see our parents' faces." I turned to look at Beth who nodded in agreement.

"I remember that st-stupid song." Beth folded her arms and glared at Cecil.

Cecil raised his eyebrows. "Oh! And what song is that?"

"You know the one."

"No, really I don't. Enlighten me." Cecil folded his arms and crossed his legs at the ankles. Their eyes locked in battle.

Beth sang the first line, and Cecil smiled. "You do remember. I'm pleased."

"I'm not," Beth scowled. "I can't get it out of m-my fucking head."

"Beth!" I warned.

"Sorry, but it's t-true." She looked at me.

Cecil slapped his leg and snickered. "Ha! Wonderful!"

Beth growled under her breath, but I was pretty sure it was still loud enough for Cecil to hear.

"And you?" Cecil turned his attention back to me. "Is it stuck in your head?"

I shook my head. It was the truth. Beth hummed the tune almost every day. On occasion, she would sing the words in her sleep, a fact I did not mention to her. While I remembered the lyrics in their entirety, I wasn't compelled to sing or hum the song. And though I would never forget it, it wasn't a constant in my brain. Unlike Beth, I was able to turn it off. "No."

"Well, one out of two isn't bad," he sneered.

"So you did teach it to us. It's your song?" I said.

Cecil nodded. "Yes, April, it's mine."

"How do we know it?"

Cecil unfolded his arms and looked down at his stained purple shirt. His fingers plucked at some tiny remnant before flicking the offending piece away. He smoothed his hands down the legs of his wrinkled black pants. He uncrossed and crossed his ankles. "Well – "

"He t-taught it to us," Beth interrupted.

My head whipped in her direction. She did not move; her sunken, icy blue eyes fixed on Cecil.

Cecil laughed. "Bravo, Bethany." He clapped. The sound echoed through the rafters. "Any other memories? Perhaps of your parents?"

Things they might have told you?"

Beth shook her head and shut her eyes for a moment. "I d-don't remember anything about them at all," she whispered.

"What about you, April? You said you can't see their faces, but do you remember their words?"

Don't tell your sister. It'll be a surprise. Someday, April, you will need this. It opens, see? Special memories, hidden secrets, whatever you want. Hide it. Be careful. Echoes of their voices filled my head, phrases and words that I did not understand. "No." I rubbed the back of my neck.

Cecil sighed. "Well, I guess that's all for now." He grunted a little as he pulled himself up off the floor and wiped at the seat of his pants.

"Oh, yes, your buckets." His nose wrinkled as he sniffed the air. "I'm afraid I'm still going to need something in trade. Unfortunately, your answers didn't provide me with any pertinent information."

We have nothing. What could he possibly take? At that thought, I looked down at the floor and the mattress I sat on. My hand rubbed across the top of my bed.

I'd never wanted them when he'd first brought in the cots, but they were now the only comfort we had. My stomach knotted at the thought of him taking them.

He read my mind. "You can keep your mattresses."

What else did we have to give?

"I think I will take your books. I'm sure you are sick of the same stories by now."

He didn't wait for either of us to respond; instead, he headed over to our pile of boxes. Luckily for him, we always put them back, and so it was just a matter of picking up the cartons and taking them out of the room. We sat there and watched, too disappointed to move, too afraid to stop him.

On his last trip, he returned with the three buckets he promised and took away the full ones.

"You should be set for a good while now." He sneered at us from the doorway. I could see the pile of boxes in the hallway and wondered if he'd move them downstairs or just leave them there.

"Before I forget." His eyes were no longer focused on me but on Beth, who had yet to move the slightest as she watched him. "You could hurt yourself up on that cabinet, so stay down... understand?"

Beth's face turned almost as white as Cecil's hair, and her back stiffened.

"I really should do something about that," he said to himself as he looked over our heads and up at the window. He turned around and walked out the door.

"I guess that answers the question of whether he s-saw me or not." Beth lay down.

We stayed on our mattresses for a while until our stomachs growled. Then we rose and made our way toward the cardboard table to see what he had left behind.

"Can you get me my plan?" I asked Beth as I finished repacking the cans of food.

"Why?" she said, handing me the last tin of fruit.

"We need to come up with a meal plan."

"Why?" My sister's sunken eyes gazed into mine.

"Because I have a feeling he won't be back for a while."

Thirty-Four

All Hope is Lost

I rolled over onto my back; a slow smile spread across my face. I hadn't forgotten where we were, but it had been so long since I'd had a sound and peaceful sleep. And I could only attribute it to having a full belly. Although I'd told Beth we'd have to be careful with our new supply of food; we had eaten until our stomachs could hold no more. Afraid some of the food would spoil, we made sure we ate it first – we had some catching up to do.

Darkness filled my eyes, and my belief I'd slept a long and peaceful night came to an abrupt end. It was far too dark in the room to be early morning. I blinked and waited for them to adjust to the smallest amount of light, but there was nothing. I couldn't even see my outstretched hands waving in front of me. The stormiest and darkest of nights had never sunk the room in such blackness.

Much like that first dark night, Beth's movement alerted me to her waking.

"What time is it?" Her sleep filled voice whispered. I was still trying to focus on my hands stretched out in front of me. "It's really d-dark in here," Beth added before I could answer her question.

"Yes, it is." I squinted. My ears sharpened on a familiar sound. "Sh!" I said before Beth could say anything. "Do you hear that?" I focused my attention on the chirps and tweets of songbirds.

"Singing birds," Beth stated; her tone was flat.

"In the middle of the night?" It was what I assumed; it was too dark to be anything else. I rose and tiptoed toward the cabinet. Once again it reminded me of the first night we'd woken in the dark room only it had been to the sound of rain on the roof.

The cool and smooth surface of the cabinet doors met my hands. I tilted my head up toward the window. It was black, and I couldn't see even the smallest pinprick of light from a distant star. I blinked.

"It's just a d-dark, cloudy, moonless night – or early morning," Bethany said.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. Besides, I saw the moonlight when we went to bed. No, this is not normal, there's always some sort of light, even on cloudy dark mornings. This is just black."

"We haven't s-somehow...gone..." She paused as though she searched for the word, "blind?" Beth spoke with uncertainty.

I rubbed my open eyes; my heart rate spiked. *Was there something in the food that caused blindness?* I shook my head; the idea was absurd. "I don't think so. It's something else." My hands stretched up the cabinet. The cool wood pleased my skin in comparison to the stuffy warm air of the room. I put my cheek against the door and closed my eyes. I exhaled a shaky breath as my thoughts turned to darkness.

As panic grabbed hold of me, the blackness behind my eyelids brightened, and I spun around. A dark figure stood in the doorway. I couldn't see his face in the shadows, but I heard the smile in his voice.

"I fixed your window. It really was broken, moved a little when I touched it," Cecil said. "You're going to need this now." He set a table lamp down on the floor. "It's plugged in out in the hall, so be careful you don't pull it too far from the door." He closed the door behind him. Once again, I stood in the dark.

"W-what does he mean, he f-fixed it?" Beth whispered from her mattress.

I looked in the direction of the window. He'd shaded the round piece of glass that had given us the first glimpse we'd had in years of real sunlight. He'd sealed the escape hatch that had shown us the world and had been our hope for freedom.

"He means he covered it over." As I said the words, all the hope we had for escaping drained from my body. I was numb – lifeless.

It took me a moment to get my feet to shuffle back towards Beth. I asked her to talk to me so I wouldn't step on her in the dark. I worked my way around both of our mattresses and walked towards the door.

My foot found the lamp first. I knelt down and waved my hands in the air as they searched for the shade. They made contact seconds later. I held onto the shade with one hand, while my other searched underneath for the switch. The click echoed in the room.

The sudden burst of light blinded me, and for a moment a dark green spot blocked my vision. I blinked it away and stared at the old lamp. Tiny holes dotted the pleated paper shade, and a cobweb crisscrossed the open top. Dents and scratches riddled the rusted, brass coloured base.

The room looked different in the yellow glow of the old lamp. In one day, it had changed. It was no longer a place where we found hope, as the sun shone through the window. Instead, it had become a room with darkened corners where anything or anyone could hide. I shook at the thought as I glanced around the nearly empty room. The only place my eyes didn't search was the locked door behind me; it only served to remind me of how trapped we were.

"Shit!" Beth whispered. She looked up at me from her mattress; the lamp on the floor caused a much larger shadow of her to appear on the back wall.

I nudged the light with my foot. Its tattered and yellowed shade shook a little, and the cobweb strands undulated. I pulled it as far away from the entrance as I could; the black cord stretched out from underneath the door.

Silence enveloped the room. It was as if the lamp drained all our energy to use for itself as both Beth and I remained frozen in our places.

"How are we ever going to g-get out n-now?"

I stared across the room at the covered window, concentrating my focus. Through blurred eyes, I spotted the tiniest sliver of light, and my heart skipped. I rubbed the stinging from my eyes and blinked. I wasn't seeing things.

"What are you staring at?" Beth said. She sounded defeated, but I hoped my discovery would make her feel a little better.

I pointed to the window. "There's light."

Beth turned her head and followed my outstretched finger.

"I d-don't see anything," she said. Her head swiveled back and forth as she searched for what I could see.

"Come over here."

Beth rose from her mattress and moved to my side. "I still don't see where."

I guided her and placed her in front of me. I pointed over her shoulder. "Right there."

"I...Oh!" she said, finally spying what my eyes saw.

"Come on." I caught her hand and pulled her over to the cabinet. It was a little darker at the other end of the room. The lamp's wispy yellow beams of light stretched across and just reached the wardrobe. "Climb up." I laced my fingers like so many times before. Beth placed her foot in my hand, and I pushed her up. A moment later she pulled herself on top. She had become quite skilled at climbing. "What do you see?" I said when she gathered herself up and rested on her knees.

Beth searched for the sliver of light we'd seen from the far side of the room. Her shadow warped around the rafters overhead. "Hold on." Beth shifted closer to the window.

"Well?" My fists clenched at my sides as my frustration grew. That tiny sliver of light had not been imagined. We'd seen it.

I stepped back from the cabinet and stood on tiptoe as Beth crouched lower and then finally lay down on her side. "It's here," she mumbled.

I let out a breath. "What is it?"

"Light."

"I know, but how?"

"It l-looks like it's not covered all the way."

"Can you tell what he used?"

After a moment Beth spoke again. "It's hard to tell, but it looks like it's covered with wood."

My muscles tensed. I had hoped something a little less permanent had covered the window, like a plastic sheet. Discovering he'd used boards hindered my plan for removing the window. And Boards meant he'd used nails or some other fastener.

The idea of nails and fasteners stirred a memory. The sound I'd heard in my sleep that I'd thought had been part of some strange dream. I closed my eyes and recalled the noise and understood that it was not from any dream. It related directly to the boarded up window.

"You can come down now." I dropped my shoulders as hopelessness washed over me. There was no point in Beth being up there any longer. We were not escaping from that window. At that moment, every desire for freedom and every breath of survival flowed out of me like blood from a cut.

Beth dangled from her fingertips and let herself drop to the floor with a thump. Neither of us cared about the noise she'd made. I imagined him looking up at his ceiling below and smiling with victory. We trudged towards the centre of the room; the yellow light shone up at us from the floor. I didn't have to turn around to know that our shadows lumbered along behind us.

The day passed slowly. The yellow light had become an agonizing reminder that it would be our only light. The joy of sunlight, moonlight and even flashes of lightning, had been stripped from our lives. We ate little, we talked even less, and we slept a lot. Our light had been extinguished – we felt hopeless.

As the first few days went by, the little sliver of light became our guide. It was a beacon, though small; and it informed us whether it was day or night. But as each day passed, we grew weary, and it became impossible to care about that shard of light anymore.

Eventually, all time melted together, and we forgot about the hope we'd had as we slipped in and out of our reality. I no longer scratched the passing days into the floor. Our games for filling time between daily routines became unnecessary. The food supply shrunk to a pitiful amount. There was no need to discuss our situation. Both Bethany and I realized that the room was transforming into our tomb.

Thirty-Five

A Guiding Light

Day or night, trapped or free, breathe in or breathe out; nothing mattered. There was no joy, no sadness, no anything, only existence. Bethany and I just '*were*', and I couldn't help but hope it wouldn't be for much longer.

He, I no longer thought of him as someone deserving of a name, had finally brought more food and water. It was just enough to keep us alive; to keep us suffering for a while longer. It was a cruel amount. And while the thought of not eating crossed my mind, my body's will for survival was still strong. Food managed to find its way into my mouth.

He had wandered into our space, and though he tried to ask his questions about what we remembered, we didn't answer. We had returned to our previous state of silence. We watched with unblinking eyes as he placed a bag of food beside the old lamp on the floor. Then he took our almost full buckets and returned with only one - again.

I couldn't help but wonder what we'd done to deserve such horrible treatment. We had been treated better at C.E.C.I.L. We always had plenty to eat, things to do, and water to bathe with. Now we were nothing more than caged animals or worse. Jasper was to blame, and a small part of me hoped he'd suffered a long death.

Our conversations dwindled. I tried talking about things – memories; it was the only thing that drowned out the screaming in my head. As each day passed we spoke only when it was necessary, and necessary wasn't often. Beth's words faded until her only responses to my questions became grunts. After a time, my own voice irritated my ears, and I gave up talking too. The screaming inside my head quieted to murmurs.

I lived within myself for a short while – remembering, imagining, thinking, and counting. I counted everything I could, rafters on the ceiling, boards on the floor, nails in the walls, and then I stopped.

Thinking drove me crazy as I tried to make sense of everything that had happened to us and the reasons why. My last real thought was convincing myself that having the window boarded up was a good thing. Without the sunlight shining through, the space didn't feel quite as hot. Without that sunlight, we no longer worried about getting out. No more up and down feelings, the highs of believing we were going to escape to the lows of thinking we weren't. I finally understood where it was all going to end.

Imagining made me anxious – and it didn't matter if my daydreams were happy or sad. Every fantasy reminded me of our imprisonment, and I could no longer deal with the stress.

Remembering was cruel. Whether it was remembering our lives before, or remembering everything after. My brain quieted. The silence inside my head seemed like I was dying from the inside out. If it was death, I welcomed it.

The worst was watching Bethany slip away. I would spend hours observing her while she slept. I'd listen in on the private conversations she'd have with whoever was in her dreams. None of it ever made sense. When she was awake, she'd spend her time staring at the ceiling and drawing imaginary pictures with her finger. Sometimes, she would reach under her mattress and pull out the little brown bear with the one winking eye. And sometimes she would hum that unbearable tune.

The moments passed – empty. Not even the sound of birds singing outside was enjoyable; it only reminded us of what we were missing. Strangely enough, there was one thing we looked forward to, one thing that would drag us from our heads and bring us back to the room – rain. The sound of rain drumming on the roof overhead was soothing, cooling, and even though we couldn't see it or feel it, that sound still meant life.

“Av?” Beth's voice startled me awake. It was strange and for a moment unrecognizable. She hadn't called me that in weeks.

“What?” My voice scratched.

“Rain.”

I listened and finally, my ears picked up the faintest sound of small drops hitting the roof. I sat up, concentrating on that one thing that brought me to life. I heard Beth moving beside me and knew that she too was now sitting up and listening. After several more minutes, the rain drummed harder. I smiled.

"I love that s-sound," Beth said.

"Me too."

We sat there quietly listening, absorbing the sound. Its rhythmic pounding drove through my body like the blood rushing through my veins. Every once in a while it would slow, and I found myself holding my breath, hoping it wasn't over. Then just as it sounded like it was about to stop, another downpour of pounding, deafening rain began. It. Was. Freeing.

"Av?" Beth whispered.

"Yes?"

"Why don't we hear the truck anymore?"

I turned to look at Beth, her face darkened by my shadow, though not enough to hide the worry I could see in her sunken eyes.

"I don't know." My eyes narrowed as I thought about her question. I'd wondered too, but then stopped, I didn't want to think. But it was true. We no longer heard the sound of his truck rumbling away.

"Shit! Do you think he's g-gone?" she said, wide-eyed, speaking my worry out loud.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"He better not be," she whispered and crossed her arms. A hint of her old impetuous self made a brief appearance.

"Hmph!" They were the most words we'd spoken in days, maybe even a week. I wasn't sure how long.

I sat in the yellow light, listening to the rain. My eyelids grew heavy from the hypnotic rhythm. I lay down on my back and stared at the ceiling, waiting for them to close. Beth had already lain down beside me.

"April?"

"Uhuh!"

"Can we s-switch?"

“Switch?” I rolled over onto my right side and faced her.

“Switch s-sides. I'm getting tired of s-sleeping this way.” She still thought she spent all her time facing me while she slept.

I sat up as Bethany crawled onto my mattress. For a moment, I thought about my knife and the other tools I kept hidden. But then it occurred to me they were no longer needed – not for the window, not for protection.

I crawled onto Beth's mattress and watched as she settled herself down on mine.

She yawned. “Goodnight.”

The yellow light burned behind her, but I was too lazy to crawl over and switch it off. It wouldn't be the first time it stayed on while we slept.

Beth's bear lay on the mattress in front of her. I picked it up and held it above my head. It cast an ominous shadow on the ceiling. I danced the shadow across the rafters and down the cabinet to the beat of the pounding rain. After several moments, my arms and my eyelids grew heavy, and I placed the bear back down on the mattress beside Beth.

A yawn stretched across my face. I reached down and felt the heart-shaped lump underneath my green dress. Then I slipped my hand inside the remaining pocket. My fingers searched the corners, and I pulled out the brown button. Like the bear, I held the button above my face and stared at it through sleepy eyes. My fingers turned it slowly; its brown plastic shone in the yellow light.

Another sudden yawn surprised me again, and I dropped my arm to my side. The button slipped from between my fingers and rolled across the floor. My eyes fluttered open, and my stomach sunk. I crawled along the floor and searched the area between the mattress and the cabinet.

“What are you doing?” Beth's sleepy voice called from behind me.

“Nothing.”

“It doesn't look like n-nothing,” she said. Her voice sounded a little cranky.

"Go back to sleep." I inched forward; my knees began to ache from the hardwood floor underneath.

Beth sighed and grumbled something under her breath. I waited a moment for her to settle down before continuing my search.

I crawled toward the cabinet and crouched down low. There was a small space beneath it that was no more than half an inch from the floor. It was large enough for me to poke a finger underneath. I stretched out flat on my stomach with my cheek pressed tightly to the floor and gasped.

"Beth!" I whispered. The sound of her quiet snoring met my ears. "Beth!" I called a little louder, her only response – a snort. "BETH!"

"What?" She said angrily. But she wasn't half as angry as I was.

"Why. Didn't. You. Say. Anything." I spoke through clenched teeth.

"About. What?" she mocked.

"The light."

"W-what light?"

"The light under the cabinet." I blinked my eyes to be sure. A shard of yellow light shone from under the closet.

Thirty-Six Ghost of a Chance

Beth crawled over to the wardrobe and lay down in front of it. The tops of our heads touched as we peered through a finger-width space. The light shone in our eyes.

Had it always been there? Where did it come from? My brain came back to life, bombarding me with questions as we stared in silence.

I sat up and crossed my legs in front of me; the light disappeared. "You never saw it before?" I said to Beth, who still lay on the floor and poked her finger underneath the cabinet.

"No," she whispered.

"Come back to the mattresses," I said. For the moment the button was forgotten. I crawled toward the lamp before Beth could respond and turned it off. When I returned to my bed, I lay on my side and faced the cabinet; the yellow light glowed from underneath. A moment later, Bethany's hand touched me as she reached out in the dark.

"We switched, remember." She sounded disappointed that she was back on her mattress.

"Yes, now lie down and face me." The moment she did, the light disappeared. "Face the cabinet." I heard her shuffle over onto her other side. "Can you see it?" I said.

"Ya."

"Switch." I moved back to Beth's mattress, feeling my way so we didn't knock heads. I lay down again on my back and stared at the darkness overhead. "What about now?"

"You're in the w-way."

"I'm in the way." I said it more to myself than to Beth. "I wonder if that light's always on. Are you sure you never saw it?" I rolled onto my side.

"Pretty sure I would have t-told you. Besides, I only sleep on my left s-side. How could I have s-seen it behind me?"

I rolled my eyes and whispered under my breath.

"What?" Beth did not hide the irritation from her voice.

"Nothing. Go to sleep." I yawned, unable to keep my eyes open any longer.

"Are you serious? We have to do s-something!" Beth said.

The last seconds of my consciousness had faded, and I woke with a start as Beth spoke. My heart raced. She had sounded so much louder than normal.

"I s-said –"

"I heard what you said," I interrupted. "Go to sleep."

"But –"

I groaned. "Tomorrow." I rolled over, away from Beth and faced the cabinet; the yellow shard of light became visible once again. Retrieving the brown button was no longer a priority. I stared at the light until my heavy eyelids closed. The click of the lamp switch resounded in my ears. Ideas flickered like the flames of a candle until surrounding darkness snuffed it out.

I remembered the light the moment I awoke. My heart quickened as the glow met my eyes; it was still there. The plans that had formed before I fell asleep returned, and I was anxious to begin.

I tiptoed toward the door with my arms outstretched and counted my steps in my head. It had been days since we'd looked for the speck of light that shone through the tiny uncovered portion of the window. Yet, in mere hours, that bit of sunlight had regained its importance.

My foot brushed against the base of the lamp, and I took a step over to the left. I shuffled with my arms stretched out in front of me. A few steps later, my hands touched the rough wall. I turned around and pressed my back against it. I searched the dark, but I could see no point of light. We were somewhere between night and day.

"Is it morning?" Beth's sleepy voice came out of the darkness.

"No," I said, confident in my answer. "Soon, though." I bent down and felt for the lamp. When my hand touched the cool, metal base, I ran it up the post and searched for the switch. The lightbulb

glowed. I shielded my eyes from the brightness then slowly spread my fingers and allowed them to adjust.

Back on my bed, I focused my attention on the wardrobe. The cabinet held many secrets, memories, and ghosts of past C.E.C.I.L residents. Yet, slivers of light shone both above and below it – slivers of hope.

Bethany crawled in beside me and rested her head on my shoulder. We sat like that for a long time, quiet and still. Thoughts and ideas were the only things that raced around. They bounced off the walls in my head; they wanted to escape and become real.

The last thing I wanted to do was to open the cabinet and let out all those ghosts, but I had no other choice. I reached into my tattered pocket and pulled out the key.

The lock on the wardrobe taunted me. “You have to do it,” I called back to Bethany, the key in my grasp, and my eyes fixed on the padlock.

“How?”

Beth startled me, and my hand flew to my chest as though to keep my heart inside. I took a deep breath. “Here.” I handed her the key and crouched down. “Sit on my shoulders, and I’ll hold you up.”

My hands rested on the floor in front of me. Beth straddled my neck. I swept a lock of hair away from my eyes, knocked there by her leg as she moved into position.

“Okay,” she called.

I wrapped my arms around her legs and prepared myself to stand.

The idea sounded like a good one, but my body did not want to cooperate with my brain. The meager amounts of food had weakened me, and Beth was heavier than I thought. Each time I tried to move from a crouch into a standing position my legs shook, and I feared we would fall.

“This isn’t going to work,” I huffed. A bead of sweat dripped into my eye. I closed it quickly, but it stung anyway.

"Can you reach the cabinet with your hands?" Beth said. Her legs were hot against my neck.

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Me too. Use the cabinet to help you stand, and I will p-press my hands against it to help steady myself."

I reached out until my palms rested against the smooth wood. Then I walked them up the doors as my legs straightened. My knees wobbled. My thighs shook under the pressure, but I rose and stood.

I stepped closer and rested my forehead against the cabinet door. The cool surface comforted me, and I closed my eyes. Drops of sweat ran down my cheek and tickled my hot skin, but I did nothing to wipe them away.

"I've got it." Beth's mumbled voice reached my ears at the same time as the metal bar creaked open. "Okay, put me down."

My legs crumpled in a controlled manner, and Beth climbed away from my shoulders. I stood up straight, one hand pressed into the small of my back while the other rubbed my sweaty neck.

"I'm not that h-heavy. Look at me!" Beth held open her arms and looked down at her skinny self; the lock was still in her hand.

I gave her a half smile, turned and faced the wardrobe; Beth stood at my side. We stared at it as though we waited for the other to pull open the doors.

After a few moments, I reached for the handles and closed my eyes. I was ready to set free an idea from my head and the ghosts from the cabinet.

I pulled the doors open, sure that as I did, the air around me moved and the ghosts were once again set free.

"What are we going to do?" Beth whispered.

I stared at her; even in the yellow light, her skin looked pale. I glanced at her much thinner body and the lock hanging from her pocket. "Empty it," I whispered back.

"W-why?"

"So we can move it." My voice sounded convincing as my gaze fell on the large piece of furniture, but I wasn't so sure we could do it.

"W-why?" Beth repeated.

I didn't have to face her to know that she was glaring at me.
"Because we're getting out of here."

Thirty-Seven

Lightening the Load

We worked as fast as we could, pulling out boxes and piling them on the floor. The meager portions of food we'd had weakened us, and we took many breaks. When the cabinet was empty of the small cartons, we stood back and stared at the clothing that hung from the bar. My skin prickled. The thought of touching all those stained and worn items made my stomach roll.

I took a deep breath and stepped toward the wardrobe, reaching up to grab the first hanger. I stood on tiptoes and lifted the dress off the bar. It smelled of dust and some faint, unpleasant odour unfamiliar to my nose. Bethany reached out her hand to take it from me, but I shook my head. I didn't want her to touch it; it was bad enough I had to. As long as my hand only held on to the hanger, I would manage. I laid the dress with care on top of some of the boxes. As one of the few things that remained from a resident of C.E.C.I.L., it deserved respect. I returned to the cabinet and grabbed the next piece.

"Let me h-help." Beth stepped in front of me before I could stop her. She reached up and grabbed a hanger of her own. Her quick movements dislodged the lock that still hung from the pocket of her blue dress, and it crashed to the floor.

We stood still; our ears tuned in to the sound of his approach.

After several moments, I went to the door and listened. Seconds turned to minutes, and there was no sign of him. I turned my ear away and leaned my forehead against the door, closing my eyes. He wasn't coming.

He wasn't coming, not now and not later. His absence confirmed my thoughts and fears. He was gone. He had driven off and left us to rot.

I stomped over towards Beth, not caring as my feet hit the floor. She stared wide-eyed.

"Come on." I found new energy in my anger. I reached inside the cabinet, grabbed three hangers in my hand, and yanked them from

the closet.

"Take them." I held them out to Beth. "Take them!" I shook the clothing. In the yellow light, the freed dust floated to the ground. Without a word, Beth took the clothing from my hand.

We worked in that manner for several minutes until all that remained were my old orange pyjamas. The ones I had been wearing the night our lives changed.

"Why only yours?" Beth said as I handed them to her. "I don't think anything here was mine." She waved her hand over the pile of clothing strewn over boxes and on the floor. Our earlier care for the items had been short lived.

"I don't know," I shrugged.

"N-now what?" Beth said.

"Now the hard part."

Beth nodded, and together we moved toward the empty cabinet.

Sweat covered my forehead and ran down my neck. My cheeks burned with heat. We panted as we took yet another break and sat down inside the empty wardrobe. We sipped small drops from the water bottle we shared. In the length of time we'd worked, we had only managed to push it about a fist-width away from the wall. The bottom of the wardrobe had not moved easily over the wood floor.

"This isn't going to w-work," Beth said. Her once pale face had taken on a tinge of red. She leaned against the inside wall of the closet and closed her eyes.

"It will," I smiled at her, but behind my smile, I shared her thoughts. "Let's try again."

"N-no." Beth shook her head. She rose and stepped from the cabinet.

"Don't give up." But as I said the words, I knew they weren't enough. Beth walked away.

It was over before I knew what had happened. One second, Bethany was taking steps towards our mattresses, and in the next, she lay flat on the floor. It took me another few seconds to jump up and move to her side.

"Are you okay?" I said. Beth made strange gasping noises. "Beth?" She did not answer, and my concern turned to fear. I lay my hand on her shaking shoulder; her arm lay across her face and hid her from my view. "Bethany!" I called. I tried to pull her arm away; her gasps grew louder. Finally, her arm dropped from her face; the yellow light reflected on tears streaming down her cheeks. "Beth, are you hurt?" My body tensed as I stared at my sister lying on the floor.

Bethany shook her head; her gasping appeared to be laughter.

I raised my eyebrows and bit my lip. "You're not crying?"

She shook her head again and after another moment sat up. "I'm...I'm f-fine," she said between fits of giggles.

"You're not hurt?"

"N-no." She inhaled and caught her breath. "I was laughing." She wiped her glistening eyes.

"You scared me. What happened?" I exhaled a breath of relief.

"I don't know, I s-stepped on something and s-slipped."

"What?" I searched the littered floor.

Beth looked around. "That!" She pointed to the lone yellow shirt lying on the floor in a crumpled mess. She had placed it further away from the others as it was the only one that didn't have the same faint horrible smell.

"This?" I picked up the shirt and held it out to Beth. The material was smoother compared to some of the other articles of clothing.

She nodded.

"Help me." When I turned around, Beth still stood where I'd left her; her arms folded over her chest. "Please!"

"Fine!" she huffed and joined me.

"You'll see. It'll be easier." I smiled, though I wasn't sure I wasn't also trying to convince myself. But if nothing else, my idea was worth a try. *You have nothing to lose*; our father whispered inside my head.

"Well?" Beth tapped her foot as she waited for me to explain.

"We're going to stuff clothing underneath the edges of the cabinet and slide it."

"How?" Beth unfolded her arms and dropped them to her side. I had her attention.

"I'll tip it back, and you push the shirt underneath." My plan had to work.

Beth groaned. "Fine." She took the yellow piece of clothing from my hand. "But not this one." She laid the shirt down and grabbed clothing from a pile on the floor, peeling them from their hangers

"Why not that one?" I narrowed my eyes.

She shrugged. "It reminds me of something, but I don't know what. These are good enough." She held the dirty, smelly clothes out towards me and lightly shook them.

My nose crumpled, and I cringed. "You should have left them on the hangers."

"Just tip the cabinet," Beth said, lying down on the floor.

I stood in front of the wardrobe and pushed on the closed doors. The cabinet was heavy. It took all my strength, but I managed to tip it a bit. Beth worked an article of clothing under the front corners.

"Can you t-tip it back a bit more?" Beth said. "I can't work these under far enough."

"It's heavy, you know."

"Try from the s-side," Beth mumbled from her position on the floor. She held a hanger in one hand and was using it to push the clothing underneath.

I moved to the side where Beth lay on her stomach and placed a foot on either side of her. I crouched low, my feet flat on the floor, and leaned my back against the cabinet. My legs straightened as I shoved off of the floor; my back pushed against the wardrobe. It lifted. Seconds later Beth slid the clothing underneath the edge of the cabinet. We moved to the other side and within moments had two more pieces wedged underneath.

I stood back and smiled, confident in my plan. Sweat trickled down my face, and I wiped it away; it was time to start the second phase of my idea.

We stood on opposite sides of the wardrobe, each of us with one hand on the back and the other on the side. At the count of three, we pushed and wiggled the closet. The small space at the back that

we'd created earlier grew as the cabinet slid. When it was wide enough, we squeezed in behind. Rubber-like chunks of gunk stuck to the bottoms of my bare feet and wedged between my toes.

"Press your back into the wall and push the cabinet forward!" My heart raced with anticipation. "Ready?" I placed my hands flat on the back of the wardrobe.

"Ya."

"Push!" The cabinet moved, and my arms straightened as the wardrobe slid further away from us. "Stop!" I panted. I bent forward and cleared the chunks of rubbery goo from between my toes. "Can you push some more," I asked Beth between heavy breaths.

She was busy checking her own feet. "I think so," Beth gasped and returned to her position. I counted to three, and we pushed. The cabinet slid a little and stopped. "Push again!" I closed my eyes for a moment, inhaled deeply, and as I slowly let out the air, I pushed into the wardrobe with all that I had left. My arms burned. It moved a little, stalled, and then finally it slid again. With outstretched arms, I placed one hand on the wall and the other on the back of the cabinet.

"We did it!" I smiled at my sister.

Beth shook her head. "No, we have to p-push it sideways, now."

The smile faded from my face; I was too tired to push anymore.

I tilted my head to the side, my eyes squinted. I was also too tired to think and had no idea what she meant.

Beth sighed. "It's too dark back here; we need light."

I nodded. Of course, she was right. Without saying anything more I joined Beth. Together we wiggled the cabinet back and forth until it moved.

"That's good," Beth said, taking a deep breath.

"You're sure?"

"Come see." She stood directly under the boarded window; the yellow light from the lamp across the room lit up her face.

The floor where the cabinet once stood looked nothing like the rest of it. Somewhat newer pieces replaced what had been there before. The replacement boards covered over an opening in the flooring.

I knelt down to get a better look. Wedged between the newer boards was a circular piece of wood, slightly larger than my head. It was far from a perfect fit as a pinky-width gap ran all the way around, and a faint light shone from below. I didn't want to get my hopes up, or Beth's, but I was sure we were closer to freedom than ever before.

Thirty-Eight

Within an Arm's Reach

As much as I wanted to start ripping up the floorboards, the energy had drained from my body. My stomach complained, and my head spun with hunger, exhaustion, and excitement.

Beth and I crossed the room to the small amount of food and water we had remaining. We ate almost everything we had left and filled our stomachs. I was determined we were getting out; we no longer needed to ration food. If for some reason we weren't able to free ourselves, then it didn't matter, it was over anyway. We were going to starve, sooner or later – I preferred sooner.

The mattresses on the floor were inviting. They pulled both Beth and me toward them and beckoned for us to lie down. There was no need for conversation; the moment for escape was near. I closed my eyes and allowed my growing memories of home to fill my brain until it felt like they would pour out my ears. Then I slipped into peaceful unconsciousness.

I shook Beth's shoulders, trying to rouse her from her sleep. My heart thumped, and I wiped the sweat from my brow. I inhaled and exhaled, filling my lungs each time as I calmed myself and my fears. Beth groaned and rolled away from me.

"Beth." I shook her again with a bit more vigour. There was no telling what time of day it was, and I hoped we hadn't missed our opportunity of escaping during daylight hours.

My eyes searched the back wall. The lamp's dim yellow light did not reach the old wood. I continued to shake a still sleeping Beth. Finally, I spotted what I was searching for, and my body eased.

A thread of light found its way through the gap. I strained my eyes, concentrating on the glow. Bits of dust danced and fell as the little beam pointed to the floor.

I shook Beth again.

"For frig sakes, April. I'm t-trying to sleep." Beth had returned to her grumpy self.

I smiled. "Let's get to work." I jutted my chin in the direction of our new escape route and reached under my mattress. I pulled out the pocket knife along with the rest of my collection. The floor was our last chance.

The knife blade slid into the narrow space between the circular inset and the floorboards. I worked all the way around, twisting and lifting. The few nails that held the round piece of wood in place squeaked and popped as they pulled free. With one final pop, the entire round patch loosened. I grabbed the edge with my fingers and wiggled the piece back and forth. Finally, I pulled it out from the opening it sealed. Using the handle of the knife, I hammered on the thin piece of wood attached to the underside of the hole. After a few strikes, it fell.

Daylight filtered through the opening and brought with it a faint putrid smell. It was an unpleasant, yet rather familiar odour, though I could not identify it. I wrinkled my nose and rubbed my aching fingertips.

"Pew! That s-stinks!"

"You can smell that?"

The look on Beth's face suggested she wasn't going to respond with a verbal answer.

I leaned forward and looked down into the hole before stretching out onto my stomach. The floor below was also repaired in the same crude manner. Light filtered through the gap around another ill-fitting, circular piece of wood. The round wood patch was fixed to a plank. The sharp rusty ends of the nails poked up through the board like spikes in a pit.

I stuck my arm through the opening, careful to miss the nails and rested my hand flat on the boards below. The depth was the distance between the palm of my hand and my elbow.

"Find me something heavy," I called to Beth, turning my head just enough to see her.

She sat beside me with her arms wrapped around her drawn legs, her forehead pressed to her knees. She looked up, her brow red from the pressure. "Like what?" We d-don't have anything."

I gathered myself up and sat cross-legged in front of the hole in the floor. We did not have much, and in my head, I could see our sparse belongings. "What about one of those cans we didn't open?" We'd eaten almost all the food we had left, except for the stuff that looked undesirable.

Beth jumped to her feet and moved toward our small cache. A few moments later, she returned with one of the remaining cans.

I plucked the tin from her hand and carefully hammered on the nail points sticking up through the plank. After several well-placed strikes, one of the nails pierced the can, and it began to leak.

"That's not going to work," I said, placing the leaking can on the floor beside me. I wiped my wet and sticky hands on my dress and looked back down the hole. While my hammering hadn't removed the nails, it did push some of them back through the plank a little. I was going to need something heavier. I scanned the room and my eyes settled on the only other thing I could use.

"The lamp."

Beth raised her eyebrows. "I'll h-have to unplug it."

I nodded. "I know."

Beth plodded toward the lamp. "Are you sure?" She picked it up in her hands.

"We have no other choice. Anyway, if it doesn't work, there's enough light coming up through the floor."

"And the flashlight." Beth pointed at one of the boxes. The batteries were dying but then so were we if we didn't find a way out.

I hadn't realized how much I hated that yellow light until Beth pulled on the cord from under the door and snuffed it out. I exhaled, and the tension released from my body. In the darkened room, the thread of light piercing through the gap combined with the daylight shining up from the floor. Dust particles danced in its glow – it was the only light that mattered.

Beth sat down beside me and handed over the lamp. I yanked off the dirty shade and lowered it through the opening until the base made contact with the nails. Then I raised it high and brought it down hard, smashing it against the sharp points. The metal nails

scraped on the base; it sounded as though the lamp screamed. I raised it up again and shoved it onto the nails. I brought it down harder and faster each time, enjoying the feeling as I took out all my anger on the ugly lamp.

"Stop!" Beth called above the smashing and scraping of metal.

I stared at her with wide eyes. "Why?"

"It's done," she said, pointing.

I held the lamp up and looked down through the hole. Nails no longer poked through the board and the circular piece of wood was no longer attached. More daylight and stronger odour drifted up through the hole. Beth reached into the opening and pulled out the plank. I lowered the lamp through the hole and allowed it to fall and smash on the floor below.

"Why did you do th-that?" Beth said.

I shrugged and smiled. "We don't need it. Can you fit through there?" The look on Beth's face made me laugh.

"You're joking?"

"No." I shook my head. "You're smaller."

"What if he's s-still here?"

I tilted my head. "Really? After all that noise you think he's still here?"

"What if I get s-stuck?" Beth ignored my question.

"You won't get stuck." I put my foot down through the opening in the floor and pushed down on the ceiling between the floor beams. I was sure it wasn't made of wood and hoped it would give way. After a few carefully placed stomps, the material broke apart. It wasn't long before there was a much wider space between the beams. Bethany looked down through the opening in the floor to the mess below.

"Ew!" she wrinkled her nose. "What *is* that smell?"

"I don't know. I've smelled it before, though, only not as strong."

"You go down, it stinks." Beth sat back on her knees and folded her arms.

"It can't smell any worse than it does up here." I looked over toward the corner, with our one, full bucket. "Here." I grabbed a dress from the pile and brought it back over to Beth. "I'll rip a strip

off the bottom of this dress, and you can wrap it around your nose." I ripped the worn cloth and held out a strip. Bethany had no time to protest.

"What if I don't fit through that first hole?" She pointed to the one in our floor as she brought the piece of cloth to her face, ready for me to tie on. "Shit!" she cried and dropped the piece of cloth. "That smells like whatever is wafting up through the f-floor." She pointed toward the opening.

I picked up the piece of material and held it to my nose. The smell was faint, but it was the same odour that drifted up from the hole in the floor.

I retrieved my orange and yellow pyjamas from the top of a small pile of boxes. I put it to my nose and inhaled. It smelled of dust and long-ago sweat, but nothing like any of the other pieces of clothing.

"We'll use these." I sat back down on the floor and pulled out the scissor tool from the pocket knife. I cut two strips from the faded pyjama bottoms and loosely tied one around Beth's nose. "Ready?"

Beth leaned over and put her head through the hole in the floor. She sighed. "I'm not going to get my shoulders through the f-floor." She sat back onto her knees.

I measured the width of Beth's shoulders with my hands and then compared it to the opening. She was right; her shoulders would never fit. We would have to make the opening in the floor wider.

Thirty-Nine

Free Fall

I stared down at the hole in the floor and pressed my fingertips to my forehead. I leaned forward, grabbed the edge of the floorboard and pulled. The rough edges of the wood scraped the skin on my fingers, but I didn't stop. The board moved up and down; the rusty nails squeaked with each pull. But my strength alone wasn't enough to free the board from the floor.

I caught sight of the piece we'd removed from inside the hole. *I wonder*, my mind questioned as I picked up the plank and placed it inside the opening. I angled it so that one end was underneath the floorboard and the other stuck out from the hole. I stepped on the protruding end and using my full weight, bounced on the makeshift lever.

After a couple of attempts, the plank slipped, and I almost fell back into the cabinet behind me. I tried again, but like the last time, found myself losing my balance after only a few bounces. Sweat trickled down my cheeks; my frustration grew. I had no intention of giving up. We were so close to freedom. The only thing that would make me quit was death.

"Help me." I wiped my hand across my forehead before the sweat could sting my eyes. It was the fifth time I'd fallen off the chunk of wood.

"I was w-wondering when you were going to ask." Beth rose from the floor; the strip of my old orange pyjamas still hung around her neck.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. "Stand beside me."

Once again I moved the plank into position and stood on it. I placed my hand on Beth's shoulder to steady myself. After a few tries, it slipped from the hole. I yelled in frustration; my voice echoed in the empty room.

"Place it on that side." Beth pointed to the opening.

"Why?" I snapped. My lips pressed together in a tight line.

"That floorboard is wider. M-maybe your lever won't slip out so easily."

I stared down at the flooring under my feet and then at the other side of the hole. I tilted my head; Beth was right.

"Okay." I nodded and picked up the plank as we moved across to the other side of the opening.

As before, Beth took up her position at my side and steadied me. With each bounce, the floorboard groaned as nails scraped against wood.

"Let's see if we can pull it up now." Beth and I stood at opposite sides of the hole. We wiggled the loosened flooring back and forth, but it wouldn't pull free.

"Hang on." I grabbed the plank and sat down on the floor across from the loosened floorboard and placed it inside the hole. I manoeuvred it so that I was able to hit the flooring from underneath like a hammer. It wasn't easy, and there wasn't a lot of room for movement, but the floorboard jumped with each whack. When it looked as though it was loose enough, I stopped my hammering.

"Do you want help?" Beth said.

"No...I...think...it's...ooff!" The floorboard suddenly popped free. The momentum sent me backwards, and I almost hit myself with the piece of wood I was still clutching. Beth's hand flew up to her mouth. "Are you okay?" Her eyes were wide as she hurried to my side.

"Yes. Now, do you think you'll fit?" I said, pointing to the much larger opening in the floor.

Beth gazed at the space and sighed. "I g-guess I will now."

We crouched and looked through the hole, down into the room below. Pieces of the ceiling and the old lamp littered the floor.

"It still looks f-far down." Beth looked at me with wide sparkling eyes.

"The glass elevator!" I cried out when the sudden return of a memory of a much younger Beth came to mind. We were riding in a glass elevator, and while the view amazed me, I could not say the same for Beth. She had buried her face into our mother's hip while

her arms wrapped tightly around her legs. Her muffled cries had been almost as loud as the music inside the elevator. She never got over her fear of heights.

"What?" Beth scrunched her face.

"The reason you're afraid of heights." I smiled.

"Damn right." Beth folded her arms and nodded. The diffused light shining up through the floor highlighted her pale face.

"You managed the top of the cabinet. This will be fine too. We'll tie the sheets together, and I'll lower you down. It's not that high." I smiled at my sister.

Beth shook her head, but her mouth agreed. "Fine." She turned on her heel and walked toward our mattresses before I had a chance to move. "I hope these are l-long enough," she said holding up both of the sheets.

"They are." I took the sheets from her hands and tied the ends together.

"Grab this." I handed Beth one end of the sheet. We backed away from each other and tugged on our improvised rope. The knot tightened; the sheets remained attached.

"Good." I smiled reassuringly. Beth widened her icy gaze. "You'll be fine."

"I better be." She bunched up her end of the sheet.

"When you get down, come up and let me out." I ignored the frown on her face.

Beth rolled her eyes and plodded over to the opening. She looked down the hole. "You should do it."

I sighed. "I'm heavier than you; you can't hold me. You can do this, Beth."

"Fine. Hurry up and t-tie that around me before I change my m-mind." Beth tossed the end of her sheet at me and raised her arms in the air. I wrapped a part of the sheet around her a couple of times and ended up with both ends in my hands. It looked as though she sat on a swing. I tugged, making sure the sheets would hold.

Beth sat down on the floor in front of the hole with her legs dangling through the opening. "Don't let go," she said as she pulled

the orange piece of my old pyjamas up over her nose.

She manoeuvred herself onto her stomach and wrapped her arms around the sheets. I gripped the ends. The knuckles on both of her hands had gone white with tension.

"I won't. I promise." I held the sheets tightly and placed a foot on either side of the hole, bracing myself. "Okay, I've got you. Start climbing down."

Beth wiggled and shimmied herself down through the hole. My arms jerked as she hung freely below. My biceps tensed and shook as her weight pulled on the sheets wrapped around my arms for support. Sweat beaded on my forehead; my feet pressed into the floor, and my legs ached.

The sheet tightened around my arms. My hands tingled. I panted and slowly loosened my grip, allowing the sheets to slip through my hands and over my arms. My skin burned; my lower back ached.

"Are you almost there?" My voice strained. Beth's muffled voice called back, and I let go. The sheets slid through my hands and across my arms. A loud thump rose from below, and I crouched down and looked through the hole.

Beth sat on the floor in ceiling remains. She looked up at me with bulging, icy eyes; her pale skin glowed in the bright light. "I said, NO!" she yelled through her orange mask.

I folded my lips under as a snicker tried to escape. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Beth stood up and wiped white powder and tiny bits of ceiling off of her blue dress. "What the hell did you drop me for?" She called up, her hands on her hips as she waited for her answer.

"Sorry, I couldn't hear what you'd said." I rubbed my chafed hands over the impressions in my arms left behind by the sheets.

"Hmph," Beth snorted.

"Be careful, and let me out."

Beth turned and disappeared.

I straightened up and rubbed away the remaining pain from my lower back as I walked over to the door. My heart pounded; I rubbed my hands together as I waited.

"Come on," I whispered, tapping my foot on the floor. As each second went by, my stomach knotted. I put my ear to the door and closed my eyes. I was sure I would hear her soon.

As the moments passed, terrible thoughts ran through my mind, and I imagined the worst. *Was he still here waiting for us? Did he know our plan? What did I do?*

"Oh, Beth," I whispered and leaned my forehead against the sealed entrance. Tears burned behind my closed lids, but before they could ooze through my eyelashes, a noise reached my ears. My eyes sprung open.

"B-Beth?" I called. My hands shook as I placed them on the door and put my ear to it once again. "Oh, please be Beth," I whispered. I drummed my fingers on the wall beside me. Suddenly, my weight shifted. I jumped back, and the door opened.

Forty

When One Door Opens

"What happened?" I grabbed Beth by the shoulders as she stood in the doorway.

She stared up at me with wide eyes. "It's creepy d-down there," she whispered.

"Is he still here?" I looked behind her and out into the darkened hallway, half expecting to see Cecil lurking in the dark.

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. But it really s-stinks, and there are these disgusting, black flying things everywhere."

"Did you see anything else?"

Beth shook her head. "I was too busy finding the w-way up here to notice anything, p-plus the stink." She waved a hand in front of her face.

I sniffed the air out in the hall and wrinkled my nose. There was a definite odour.

"So...you didn't see Jasper?"

Beth shook her head. "The only thing I paid attention to was m-my rolling stomach and not...puking." She stepped across the threshold, forcing me to take a step back into the room.

"Um, shouldn't we be leaving?" I waved my hand toward the open door. I didn't want to spend a second longer in that room.

"This," Beth hooked her thumb through the orange strip of cloth around her neck and held it up, "is not thick enough. I'm adding another layer. You should t-too." She pointed to the cloth around my neck.

I joined Beth at the mattresses and handed her the pocket knife. She cut two narrow pieces of cloth from my old pyjamas. She handed me a strip as she untied the other from around her neck. We each folded our two layers together.

"I hope this works," Beth said as she tied her strips back around her neck and jumped to her feet.

I picked up the knife and put it in my pocket. "Ready!" I said, standing up. My heart fluttered. I was excited and nervous at the

same time.

Beth nodded. "Hell, ya!" she smiled. Her icy blue eyes filled with more life than I'd seen in weeks.

It was strange standing outside the door. Stranger still was finding out that the room we'd lived in was the only one on the second floor. The staircase was in the middle of an open area and the landing only a few steps away from the entrance to the room. Wood railings ran down along both sides and at the back of the stairway. There were no other doors anywhere except for the one behind us.

A small and dirty rectangular window at the far end looked like it had never seen any cleanser. Boxes lined up against the walls and filled the space along each side of the staircase and at the back. A cleared area about two feet wide ran between the boxes and the railing, and it encircled the stairway. In some places, the cartons almost reached the ceiling. Pushed against the wall to my left was the cart Jasper had used when we'd first arrived. Dirty food containers piled on the top; there were moldy crusts of bread, and bowls caked with dried oatmeal.

"Let's check those out." I pointed to the cartons.

Closest to the room were the boxes of books and other things that Cecil had given us and then taken away. Beside them were a couple of large buckets and I recognized them as ones we'd used. The lid on one had lifted; the smell of waste permeated the air. I wrinkled my nose and held back a gag as I reached forward and pushed the lid into place.

The metal skeletons of our cots leaned against the wall. I trailed a finger along one of the cool, metal slats. Beth followed along behind; our footfalls echoed.

I reached out and ran my hand over the top of the table we'd once used as I walked past it. The wood was smooth under my fingertips, except for one spot. I paused for a second as my fingers found the rough edges of a gouge. There was no need to look at the mark. The feel of the carving itself was enough to spark the memory of its creation.

We had been filling our mouths and bellies with warm oatmeal that Jasper had provided us. While we ate, I recounted a dream to Bethany. It was the dream in which I'd remembered her name. Beth had grabbed the spoon she'd been using and scratched her name into the wood table.

I closed my eyes and shook the memory away as my feet continued to pull me along the row of boxes. I stopped when I reached the first small stack of unfamiliar ones. The cartons varied in size and while some were empty, most were not. Some boxes were not sealed, and their contents spilled out over the top, their sides bulged. Other cartons held only a few items.

I dipped my hand into one of the emptier boxes and pulled out a small figurine of a boy and his sheep. I traced a finger along the sheep's head, noting one of its ears was missing. The edges of the break were rough to the touch but not sharp. I placed it back inside the box that seemed to have been its home for many years. I sorted through the other objects and found a mismatch of trinkets, some dishes and even an old shoe.

"Anything good in there?" Beth whispered beside me as she pulled back one of the flaps to get a better view. Though her voice was quiet, I started at her unexpected question. My heart skipped.

I shook my head when I'd calmed and moved on to the next carton. It was a much larger box, and in the manner in which the lid bulged, it was definitely one that was full. With a light tug on the folded flaps, the contents revealed themselves.

I pulled a blue blanket out from the top and handed it to Beth. She held it up to her face and nestled her cheek into its softness, her eyes closing as she did. I smiled and turned back to the rest of the items. There were a few more blankets, bed sheets and pillowcases, and even a couple of table cloths. When I finished rummaging, I stuffed them back inside. We continued along the back wall. There were fewer boxes and most were empty, but a few contained items I deemed useless.

As Beth and I continued back up along the other side, another bulging box caught my eye. I reached over to release the flaps.

“What are you I-looking for anyway,” Beth said; her voice was a little louder than a whisper.

I shrugged one shoulder. “I don't know.” I pulled on the cardboard flaps and opened the box. My eyes widened. It contained clothing. It was old clothing, but it was clean, and while a few articles were too small, most could prove useful. I smiled as I held up a pair of dark grey sweat pants. I pressed the soft material to my cheek for a moment before laying them back on the top of the rest of the clothing.

“We should go,” I said turning to Beth who was busy examining an old sweater. I was suddenly filled with the awful thought of Cecil returning and finding that we'd escaped. We needed to get out of there.

I led Beth down the stairs. With each step, the putrid smell grew stronger and the black flying things materialized.

“Flies,” I said to Beth as I recalled the name and swatted at one that buzzed around my face.

By the time we reached the bottom, I had pulled the orange fabric up over my nose. It helped – a little.

At the bottom of the stairs, we turned to the right. As we rounded the corner, we could go one way or the other. We turned to the left and entered a living area. The room was directly below where he'd kept us.

The furnishings were sparse and consisted of a small brown couch and a chair. A pillow and a pile of folded blankets covered the one end of the couch. There was also an odd screen that belonged either to a computer or a television. Whichever it was, it was old, and I doubted it worked. Chunks of the ceiling and the brass lamp littered the floor. At the front of the room was the door – our way out.

I stepped further into the living area. Below the gaping hole in the ceiling sat a wood burning stove. I knew what it was the moment I saw it. Our grandfather had had one along with other relics he'd stashed in his old barn. The corner of my lip twitched as the memory came back.

I stared up at the hole and back down at the stove. Bits of the ceiling covered the top along with books, a glowing lamp, and several other nameless items. Like grandfather's, it too was missing its stove pipe. Its presence explained the round holes in the ceiling and the floor in the room. At one time it had been used. I crouched down and looked through the glass door. Several items filled the inside including paper, cloth, dishes, and what looked like the skeletal remains of a tiny animal.

"Let's go!" Beth tugged on my arm as she tried to pull me forward, but I couldn't leave. Despite my earlier haste, my curiosity drove me to explore our prison further.

"Hang on, Beth. I want to look around a bit."

"Seriously? What if he comes b-back?"

"Soon, Beth." I knew it was a chance I was taking, but I had to see.

We turned back and walked past the entrance to the staircase. There were two doors, one on the left and one on the right, both closed. I placed my hand on the doorknob of the door on the right.

Beth protested with a loud gasp. "Might not be a g-good idea," she said.

I ignored her and turned the knob.

Forty-One

Behind Closed Doors

The stench was so strong that I drew back and slammed the door but not before a fly escaped.

"That's disgusting!" Beth whined.

I turned to see Beth covering her nose with both of her hands despite the double layer of cloth tied around her face.

I nodded, and as we stepped away from the door a sudden noise from inside the room caught my attention.

"Sh!" I held up my hand to Beth and turned back toward the door. I put my ear against it.

"What –"

"Sh!" I interrupted. I closed my eyes and concentrated, sure that I'd heard some noise.

"It's probably just a...m-mouse or something."

I held up my index finger and tapped my lips, signaling for Beth to be quiet. As I was about to give up listening, another sound came through the door, and I was sure it was a groan. I placed my hand on the doorknob.

"What are you doing?" Beth grabbed my arm.

"Someone's in there."

"It's probably Cecil," Beth whispered.

"It might be Jasper," I whispered back.

Beth shook her head. "He's dead." She swatted at the fly buzzing around her head.

"I'm going in."

Beth released my arm, reached up behind her head with both of her hands and untied her mask. "You're going to need this more than m-me." She held out the two pieces of orange cloth. I took them with no argument and tied them around my face. I stared at her wide-eyed, my heart already thumping faster.

"I'll wait right here." She pointed to the spot where she stood. "But close the door."

I nodded and turned the knob. The stench assaulted my nose through the cloth as I stepped into the room; my eyes watered.

The room was small and ordinary. The bare and dirty white walls looked like they hadn't seen paint in years. Pushed into the corner and up against the wall was a single bed. It had neither headboard nor footboard, and on it, a body laid still and quiet, completely covered by a dirty, light blue sheet. An old and dark wood nightstand was inches away from the head of the bed. A small blue lamp sat in the middle and an almost empty water bottle lay on its side. A once-white dresser stood opposite the foot of the bed and between them was the window.

Flies buzzed around a bucket filled to the top with human waste – the lid half off. My stomach rolled, and I gagged beneath my mask. My throat burned with the taste of the stomach acid that I promptly swallowed back down. I moved toward the dirty window across from the bedroom door, careful to avoid the full bucket.

The frame was old and cracked in several places, and I hoped it would hold as I pushed up the sash. The wood squeaked in protest. I loosened my grip and felt the window slip; it was not going to stay up on its own. My gaze fell on the window sill. Cracks ran through the old paint and bits had chipped away and littered the floor. A weathered piece of wood rested against the frame. I held the window with one hand and grabbed the board, propping it up.

A cool breeze swept through the screenless opening. I stuck my head out and closed my eyes. Sunshine bathed the top of my head in warmth, and another breeze blew through my hair. I imagined how much nicer it would have been if it wasn't weighed down by dirt. I reached up and scratched my head.

My hand trailed down to the covering on my face, and I pulled it off just far enough for my nose to stick out. I inhaled; my lungs expanded to capacity, the sweet smelling, clean air was heaven. I turned my head to the right and opened my eyes. The forest stretched out around the house in all directions. I squinted as a clearing in the trees caught my attention. Several objects poked out of the ground. They weren't trees, but from that distance, I couldn't tell what they were. I stared at them trying to focus on the shapes,

but numerous trees were in the way. No matter how I moved my head, I couldn't get a clear view.

A sudden groan startled me, and I whacked my head on the bottom of the window. I groaned in reply and pulled my head back inside. I turned around and inspected the top of my head with my fingers. At the same time, my eyes focused on a lone hanger hanging from the open closet in the corner of the room by the door.

I stepped around the stinking bucket, swatting away the flies and reached for the hanger. I placed the hooked end over the edge of the lid and set it back onto the bucket. The action trapped several flies inside; their buzzing amplified.

Fresh air circulated through the window, and I moved toward the bed.

I reached out with a shaky hand and pinched the dirty sheet between my thumb and index finger. I drew it back, gasped, and fell to my knees. I covered my mouth with my hand as my stomach rolled again and threatened to fill my mouth with its contents. Tears burned, but this time it was not from the smell. I closed my eyes and settled myself.

A lock of his dark hair had fallen over his eyelids, and I gently brushed it away. His once beautiful brown skin was ashen and cold to the touch. The sharp, hard edges of his cheekbones gave him the look of someone much older. Dried blood filled the cracks in his lips, and where they weren't cracked, they took on a bluish, grey tone.

"Jasper," I whispered. With great care, I placed my hand on his shoulder. It was easy to feel the hard outline of bone underneath the sleeve of his shirt. He had withered away and was almost a skeleton.

Jasper's eyes rolled beneath his lids. A weak groan came from his parted lips. His eyelids fluttered and then opened; our eyes locked. My memory flashed to his soft brown eyes peering above his white mask into my almost lifeless eyes when we were in C.E.C.I.L.

How things have changed, I thought, as I peered over my orange mask into his almost lifeless, brown eyes. They focused and lit up with recognition.

"Ap-"

“Sh!” I stopped him from speaking.

He exhaled a wheezy breath, and I held my own as I waited for his chest to rise again. His lips moved to speak. I leaned forward and placed my ear above his mouth. His words were slow and strangled, but I understood each one. Tears blurred my vision as I concentrated on what he was trying to say.

I nodded and moved away. Reaching for the bottle on the nightstand, I unscrewed the lid and held it to his mouth, tilting it slowly. The clear liquid trickled down the neck of the bottle and into his parted lips. He swallowed hard. I pulled the empty bottle away and dropped it on the floor. We stared at each other for a few seconds more before he closed his eyes.

I pulled the mask from my face, not caring about the stench and leaned over to kiss Jasper's cheek. I stroked the back of his hand; my fingers bumped over each bone. My eyes watched the rise and fall of his chest. I don't know how long it took. It may have been seconds or hours. In that moment, time was of little consequence. And when it was over I leaned back against the nightstand, hugged my legs to my chest and rested my head upon my arms. Tears poured from my eyes like rain as I gave in to my sobs.

There was a quiet knock at the door followed by Beth's voice. “April!” she called. Through blurred eyes, I saw my sister standing in the doorway. Her hand pressed over her mouth and nose, her own eyes wide. “Is he...” she started.

I nodded. “Just,” I choked.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

“Do me a favour?” I stood up from my spot on the floor and pulled the mask up over my nose; the smell was stronger when standing.

Beth nodded.

“Get me one of those blankets from the box, please.”

“Which one?”

I turned back and stared at Jasper. In death, he looked more at ease and peaceful than he had moments ago.

“Something colourful and bright,” I said. “I think he would like that.” I looked back at Beth and wiped the remaining tears from my

eyes.

She nodded and left the room.

I turned back to Jasper and knelt on the floor beside the bed. I ran my hand down the side of the mattress until it met the box spring and pushed it between them.

The journal was easy to find, right where he said it would be, and I pulled it out. It was thick, and its black leather cover was worn with age and use. I poked my finger inside the spine and felt for the piece of string Jasper told me would be there.

I gave it a tug, and a small, black cloth bag came free. I placed the journal on the nightstand and sat down on the floor. I untied the golden strings and dumped the contents into my hand.

I stared at the small gold heart on its chain, an exact copy of mine, the one meant for Beth. I picked it up between my fingers and dangled it in front of me. The heart swayed, occasionally catching a bit of light coming in through the window. I smiled at its perfection.

"What's that?" Beth's voice startled me a little.

"A necklace."

"Yours?"

I dropped the chain into my pocket and looked at Beth standing in the doorway. I smiled and pointed at the blanket she held in her hands.

Beth looked down. "It's all I could f-find."

"It's perfect." I stood up and walked toward my sister. She held out the orange and gold blanket to me, and I took it from her hands. I turned toward the bed and kissed Jasper on the cheek one last time before pulling the sheet over his head. I placed the colourful blanket over his body and tucked the edge between the mattress and the box spring. I returned to the nightstand and grabbed the journal before meeting Beth at the doorway.

"Why aren't you wearing your necklace?" Beth said.

I reached down the front of my dress and pulled the golden heart from underneath.

"But..." She looked at me with narrowed eyes.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the other one. "This one is yours." I smiled and held out the ends. Beth turned around, and I placed it around her neck and fastened it.

"I don't understand," she said, turning to face me. She looked down at the gold heart with its tiny butterfly hanging at her chest and poked at it with her finger.

"It's all here," I said, holding up the journal.

Beth's eyes widened.

"I'll explain." I indicated the way out with my hand and Beth left the room. I turned back and looked at Jasper's covered form; fresh tears stung my eyes. I wiped them away before they could trickle down my cheek. I pressed my fingertips to my lips and blew my kiss in Jasper's direction. "Goodbye," I whispered and closed the door.

Forty-Two Free

"Are you going to tell me what's in that b-book? Where did it come from?" Beth said.

I held my breath and pulled down my mask, wiping my still running nose with the back of my hand. I replaced the mask before sniffing. My eyes ached.

"Later, I want to look around first," I said. My hand rested on the doorknob of the other closed door. A part of me worried Cecil would return. The memory of the strange clearing at the back of the house came to mind – there was that too.

The hinges squeaked as the door opened. The small bathroom housed a toilet and sink. The toilet had no seat, and a trail of rust ran down the back of the sink. Water dripped at a steady pace like a ticking clock. Every drop echoed as it fell into the drain. I closed the door.

The strips of cloth were not effective, and I found myself taking shallow breaths. Beth followed along behind, cursing under her breath about the smell. There was only one more area to check at the back of the house, and by the look of the entrance, I suspected it was the kitchen.

We saw him the moment we crossed the threshold. He sat slumped over at the kitchen table in the corner of the room. His cloudy grey eyes stared at us; the putrid odour saturated the air.

"Ugh!" Beth gasped, her hands covered her face. "That's disgusting!"

"Go wait in the front room."

"I have no p-problem with that." She spun around and left the kitchen.

I approached the table, my anger greater than any disgust.

"I hope you suffered. I hope you choked on your tongue." The words spilled from my mouth in a voice I did not recognize. I snickered at the sight of a bowl of hard candy in front of him; his hand still held on to a few. "Well, that's just as good." I shrugged

and walked out of the kitchen and back to the front room. I exhaled a sigh of relief. The one I'd been holding for months, or perhaps even longer.

Beth stood in the front room staring at something I couldn't see from my place in the doorway.

"What are you looking at?" I said, as I moved into the room and turned to stand beside her.

"That." She pointed. Mounted to the wall was a digital photo frame. "I just...p-pushed a button." Beth shrugged.

Pictures of children scrolled through the digital display. Some were much younger than us, others the same age or a little older, but they all stood on the same front porch. And every picture included a person dressed in a bulky white suit. A respirator and gloves completed their costume. I couldn't see the eyes behind the mask, but I knew as I stared at each photo that it was him. It was Cecil who had posed with these children. I couldn't see his face, but I knew that he smiled behind that respirator.

I recognized the clothing. They were the same articles that had hung inside the cabinet and were now scattered around the room. They were the children that had stayed here long before us – the lab rats. My heart sank as I looked at their smiling faces; they were completely unaware of their fate.

"I guess there are thirty of them," Beth said in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

I nodded and focused on the faces. *Did I ever meet any of them before at C.E.C.I.L?* They were not familiar to me, at least not in any of the memories I'd recovered. "Wait!" I called as an image on the screen scrolled past.

"Did you see s-someone?" Beth said.

"Can you rewind it or something?"

Beth stepped over to the frame and pushed a couple of buttons until the pictures scrolled back.

"Stop!" I called, pointing to the photo that appeared. "Stop it there."

Beth pushed another button, and the picture froze.

"Who is he?" Beth said as she came back to stand beside me.

I stared at the picture of the boy and flipped open the journal to the middle. Inside was a worn, folded piece of paper. I recognized each wrinkle as I traced my fingers over the sheet. I pulled it out and unfolded it. The boy stared back at me with his still laughing eyes. I held up the sketch beside the photo.

"What do you think?" I asked Beth.

Beth stepped closer. Her eyes narrowed as they moved back and forth between the screen and the sketch. "I think it's pretty g-good." She smiled. "They l-look identical. Who is he?" she repeated.

I folded the paper into quarters and placed it back in the journal. I stood beside Beth. "He," I said, "is our baby brother." The minute I said the words out loud a faint memory came to mind.

"What? Are you sure?" Beth turned to look at me. Despite her mask, I could tell that her mouth was wide open underneath.

I nodded. "It was one of the things Jasper told me before he... Anyway, yes."

Beth looked down at the floor. "Does that m-mean he's..." She cleared her throat, turned and pointed at our bother's photo.

I sighed. "No, or yes...Jasper said he'd escaped. He was the only one that did."

"So, he m-might still be alive?"

"Yes, he might."

"What else is in that b-book?" Beth flicked her head back a little and pointed her chin in the direction of the journal I held in my hands.

"Jasper told me he wrote down what he knew. There is some information in here about Cecil and his plan." I tightened my grip on the journal.

"His plan," Beth scoffed. "Jasper was in on his plan."

"Yes, but when he knew it wasn't about saving people, but about so much more, he did everything he could to stop it."

Her gaze left my face for a moment. "He said all that?"

"Not in so many words. But it was enough for me to piece together." Jasper's weak and breathy whispers replayed in my head.

Beth rubbed a hand over her forehead then adjusted her cloth mask. "Ya, but still..."

"He was sorry. He asked for my forgiveness, and I gave it to him."

"What's his n-name?" She turned and faced the digital frame.

I smiled. "Caleb." His name reminded me of the memory, and I moved past Beth to the pile of debris on the floor. I dropped to my hands and knees and sifted through the pieces of ceiling.

"What are you doing?" The pitch of her voice fluctuated.

"Help me look." I stopped for a moment and gazed up at my sister. She came over and joined me on the floor.

"What are we looking for?" She said as she tossed a large piece of the material away.

"A button."

Beth stopped searching and sat back on her knees. "A button?"

"Yes, a brown button, it was in my pocket. I dropped it; it rolled under the cabinet and through the floorboards and now it's here." I tossed a piece of the ceiling over my shoulder. "It's got to be here," I said more to myself.

We searched through the fragments, tossing large pieces behind us. Finally, all that remained was a small pile of white dust and tiny bits of wood and paper. I sat back on my knees and wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my powder white hand. I squeezed my eyelids together and sealed in the emotion that was about to escape. It had been just a button, but as more of my memories returned, the button became more significant. I had to find it.

"Here it is!" Beth said.

A large breath blew out from my lips. Between Beth's dirty, powder covered fingers she held an equally dusty brown button. I plucked it from her fingers and cleaned it off on my green dress. The brown plastic button gleamed.

"Why is that s-so important?" Beth said.

"You know that little bear of yours? This happens to be its eye. Well, what I was going to replace the original one with. That bear was Caleb's favourite. He cried when the eye came off and then he lost it. I found this button and was going to sew it on, but Caleb had already gone to bed with his one-eyed bear. I put the button in the

pocket of my orange and yellow pyjamas and went to bed. That was the night they came." My skin prickled at the memory of shadows in my bedroom waking me up in the middle of the night.

Beth sprang to her feet and hurried toward the hallway.

"Where are you going?" I rose and brushed the debris from the ceiling off my clothing.

"Getting the bear."

"Later. There's more to explore. Then we'll take what we can, and we'll leave."

"Okay." Beth rejoined me in the living room. I tucked the brown button into the corner of my pocket.

"Do you think you can go out through the back door in the kitchen?" I said to Beth, remembering her earlier reaction to seeing Cecil's dead body.

"Hell ya. That creep is d-dead, he just stinks, but I'll hold my breath."

I smiled under my mask, but I was sure it showed in my eyes as it did in Beth's.

It was a quick and quiet walk down the hall. My focus trained on the back of Beth's head as she led the way. Both of us held our breath.

She pushed open the screen door, and we stepped outside. Like butterflies emerging from their cocoons, we were ready to spread our wings and test out the vast surroundings. We didn't bother to untie our strips of cloth and instead yanked them over our heads. Our lungs gorged on fresh air. The cool grass soothed my bare feet. I tilted my face toward the sky. Though still early in the day, the sun had disappeared, and I suspected it was behind a few clouds.

"Come on, I want to look at something. We've got the rest of our lives to revel in the fresh air." I reached for Beth's hand.

We walked hand-in-hand through the long grass toward the edge of the trees and stopped before the clearing. It was easier to see from our new vantage point what I couldn't see well from the bedroom. Wooden crosses stuck out from the ground, each engraved with an ID number.

"What is it?" Beth whispered.

"A..." the word escaped me for a moment, "cemetery, sort of."

I dropped Beth's hand and led us through the few trees and out into the clearing.

The ground was hilled before each wooden cross, except for one. Below that marker was an open hole. An ID had been carved into the wood, and it was the same as the one carved inside the cabinet. It was Caleb's grave.

I tried to imagine Caleb escaping and the direction he'd gone as I looked at the forest around us. Random patches of wildflowers caught my attention, and I walked away from the cemetery. Beth followed behind, neither of us spoke.

I marveled at the tiny creatures that flew and crawled around each bloom. Their names unknown as I either didn't remember or I never knew it. I hoped as I blew one iridescent bug off the back of my hand, that their names would someday return.

We picked as many flowers as our hands could hold and delivered a small bunch to each cross with a silent prayer. I swallowed the tightness in my throat and rubbed my stinging eyes. When we had enough, we walked back toward the front of the small house.

We stood at the front entrance; the dirt and rocks scratched at my bare feet. The sensation was pleasant. I tilted my head back and stared at the large board that covered what had once been our only hope of escape for weeks.

I smirked; satisfied that another one of Cecil's plans had failed. I reached up and freed the heart pendant from under my dress and rubbed it between my fingers. It would no longer have to hide from Cecil. My father's voice once again whispered in my ear. I looked down at the pendant, convinced that it did hold secrets, but how to access them, I had no clue.

A breeze blew through my hair, and I closed my eyes, dropping the pendant from my fingers. It thudded against my chest then came to rest. I inhaled. My nose had never been happier.

"That's the porch in the pictures," Beth said.

I dropped my head and opened my eyes. It was the porch, exactly as it had always been.

As I stood there staring, I imagined all the children before us standing on that porch. Cecil's arm had wrapped around their shoulders as though he'd cared when he'd had other plans. Those children meant nothing to him. They were his guinea pigs. *Why had these particular children been picked to come here? Why had Caleb?*

The breeze picked up again, and the warm air brushed my hair back. I gazed up at the grey sky; clouds swirled in a mesmerizing pattern. Children's laughter filled the air. When I looked toward the porch, I was sure I saw their ghosts running from the house, finally free.

A drop of rain fell on the top of my head; it tickled as it slowly ran down through my hair and onto my face.

"Ah!" Beth gasped. She stared at me with wide, icy blue eyes.

"Rain," I said and smiled.

"Rain!" she replied

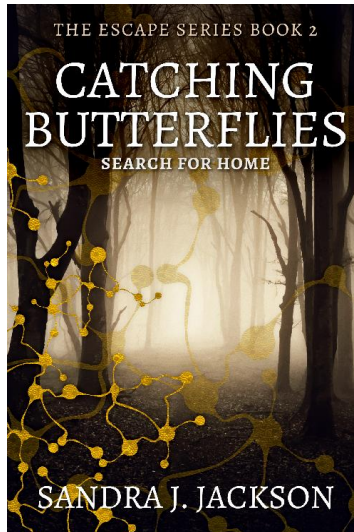
I grabbed her hands in mine as the rain began to fall around us – washing away the dirt, the pain, the sorrow.

We laughed as we danced and skipped in circles. The rain saturated the ground below my feet and as we spun bits of mud splashed against my legs. A small pebble wedged itself between my toes, and I kicked my leg out to the side to set it free. Beth tossed her head back with laughter; ringlets bounced on her shoulders.

Like the pebble sailing through the air, we were free. Free to go wherever we wanted, free to find our brother. We had much to do before we could leave, but for now, we were happy just playing in the rain.

Next in the Series

Catching Butterflies



April and Beth have escaped, and their captor is dead. Freedom is in their grasp - if only they knew where they were.

With some memories returning, April and Beth struggle to find answers to their questions. What they know is that they've been vaccinated against a strange virus. But what happened to their family, and to the rest of the world?

As they head out, they stumble onto the compound where their nightmare began, but the empty building only brings more mystery into their lives. Soon, they encounter others wandering on the numerous trails throughout the woods. For April, finding her family is priority one; for Beth, it's sticking to the trails.

How can April ever convince her to leave the forest... and why are they being hunted?

[Catching Butterflies](#)

About the Author



Sandra J. Jackson has two books published with Next Chapter, *Promised Soul* and *Playing in the Rain - Book 1 of the Escape Series*. Both novels have received 5-star review awards from **Readers' Favorite** and *Playing in the Rain* won the **Golden Quill Book Award** for Sci-Fi in August 2018. A short story, *Not Worth Saving*, was published in New Zenith Magazine's 2016 fall issue. And in October 2017 her short story *China Doll* won second prize in the Prescott Journal short story contest. She holds a professional membership with the Canadian Author Association and is a member of Writers' Ink.

Sandra lives with her family in a rural setting in Eastern, Ontario. She is currently working on editing Book 3 of the *Escape Series*.

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To learn more about Sandra J. Jackson, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).