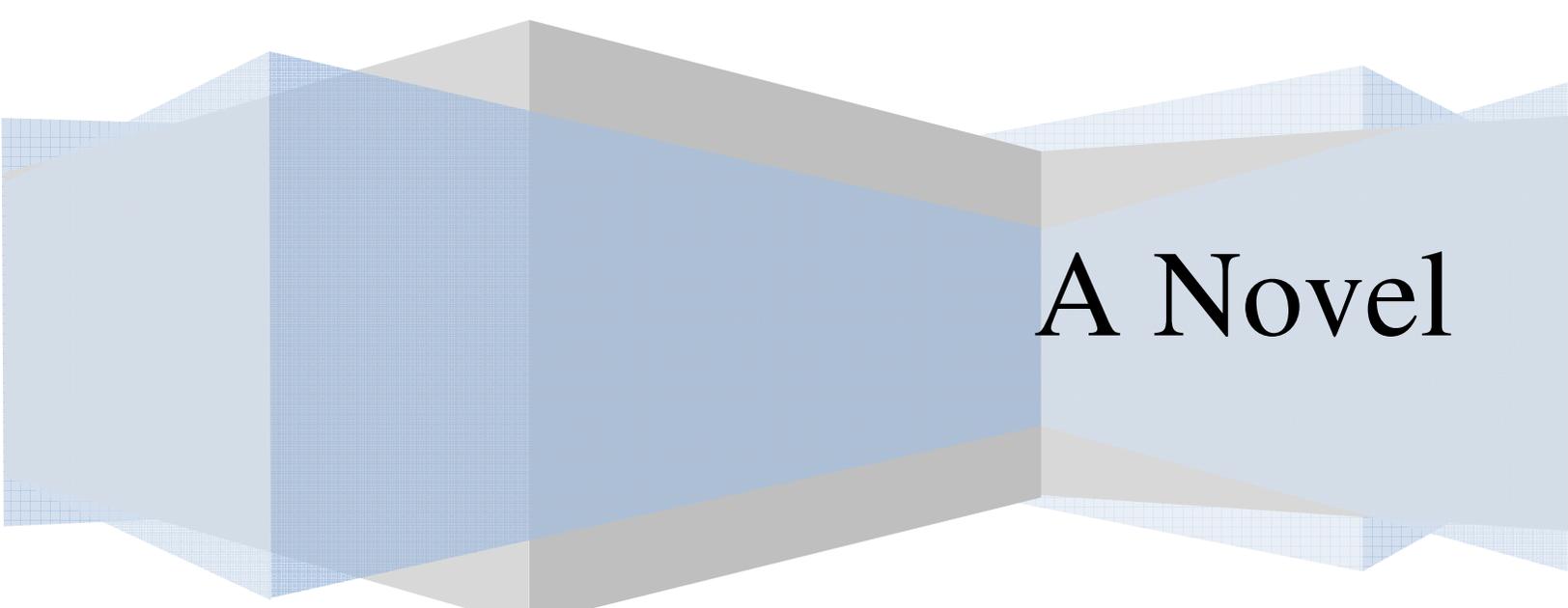


Visions

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A Novel

Chapter 1

“You look very nice,” I heard my mother say.

I glanced again at myself in the mirror. I looked like a dork. Those annoying little hairs were still poking out of my pony tail and standing up on end. I wet my hand and tried to pat them down again. They appeared to be behaving, but I knew they’d spring up as soon as I looked away from the mirror. Oh well. I couldn’t stare at myself in the mirror forever, could I?

I turned around. “Thanks Mom.”

“Leah,” my mom started. I knew what was coming. “You’ll, you know, I mean—I know you can’t control it, and of course it isn’t your fault, but it’s a fresh start now. And you’ll, um, you’ll...try to be...normal?”

I started. Maybe I hadn’t known what was coming. “I—yes,” I replied. I knew my face looked as hurt as I felt.

My mother sighed deeply. Her face crumpled into that guilty look I’d seen on her so frequently over the years. Why did she always look so guilty? In what way was any of it her fault?

I forced my face into a smile. “Yes, I’ll be normal, just like every other teenager. That is the plan, right?”

“Right,” my mom agreed, still looking guilty.

Technically, that had been the plan at schools three through five for my mom and, though I hadn’t told her, at schools one through five for me. What teenager doesn’t try to be normal at a new school? But for some reason my mom felt this was a new and clever plan now, never before been attempted, and sure to work.

“Tenth grade already!” my mom shook her head. “How the time flies. Maybe I should drive you there?” she asked.

My eyes widened. “I’m not sure that would help with the plan,” I said gently.

Mom nodded with understanding. Mom gets strangely emotional whenever I leave for a new school. She’s a little weird any time I leave, actually, but it’s especially bad on a first day, like today. She...well, she cries. I guess it’s sweet, but definitely not normal, and definitely not what I needed.

“Right then, out you go,” Mom said, trying to sound cheerful. “Don’t forget your lunch. I made you peanut butter and jelly without the crusts, just the way you like it.”

Ugh. Peanut butter and jelly without the crusts is perfectly normal when you're five. But I looked at her smiling face, and I couldn't say anything. Sometimes moms just need to feel needed. "Great! My favorite," I pretended, reaching for the brown paper bag. I escaped outside before she could do anything else to help me feel more "normal."

When I arrived at school, students were swarming everywhere. I never liked starting at a new school after the year had already begun. It was harder to meet people. I pushed through the crowds, sort of hoping someone would notice me and talk to me, but sort of hoping to remain invisible. I fumbled absentmindedly with my locker for a while; it was one of those old lockers where the dial stuck. I glanced over at the boy next to me opening his locker. He was wearing a shirt with a picture of Wolverine from the X-Men and pants that were too short for him, stopping just above his ankles. His thick, dark hair was a mess, with pieces sticking up in different directions. He sort of looked like a dork, too. I smiled to myself. Good to know I wasn't alone.

After I stopped by the office to pick up my schedule, I walked to my first class, trying to look confident as I navigated through the halls. I found my class easily. I'm pretty good with directions. I made it before the bell, thankfully. There's nothing worse than sneaking in late when you're trying to be normal. I asked the teacher, Mrs. Tiu, where I should sit, and she pointed to an empty desk near the middle of the room. I thanked her, slid into the seat and pretended to be studying something in my notebook until the bell rang. Mrs. Tiu was pretty, with straight black hair, smiling as she talked about intestines and kidneys or something. I wasn't really listening, but I had my notebook out as if I was taking notes.

That was when the most eventful part of my day occurred. He walked in late, but he did it so confidently, as if he didn't mind being the center of attention for a minute. "Sorry, Mrs. Tiu," he said. He had brown wavy hair and stunning blue eyes. I couldn't tear my eyes off of him. He looked like he had just walked out of the pages of *GQ*.

Mrs. Tiu nodded. "First time, that's your warning," she responded.

There was only one empty seat in the classroom, and it was right in front of me. My heart was pounding. He sat down. He didn't acknowledge me. I stared at the back of his head for fifty-five minutes. It was heaven.

Everything was downhill after that. I went to all of my classes. No one really talked to me. I didn't really talk to anyone, except once when I dropped my pencil and another girl picked it up, and I said, "thanks." But I finished the day with no one suspecting me of being different, and that marked success.

I was at my locker, trying to figure out which books I had to take home, contemplating the day's success, when the vision started. I felt the familiar queasiness, like I wanted to hurl or maybe pass out. I tried to force it to go away. I didn't want this to happen on the first day of school when everything had been going so well. I grabbed the door of my locker to steady myself, but then everything around me faded away.

There was a girl. I think I might have seen her walking through the halls at school. She was tiny, frail even, wearing a purple skirt and a button up shirt. She looked like a very good girl, the kind that will take care of her parents when they get old and who bakes cookies for the mailman at Christmas. She was riding the bus, and she kept glancing behind her, like she was nervous or afraid. I couldn't make out what she was looking at. When the bus stopped, she grabbed all of her belongings hurriedly and scurried down the steps and out the door, calling a "thank you" to the bus driver. Even in her frenzied state, she didn't forget to be polite. I could tell it wasn't her normal bus stop, though, that she was exiting early because of whatever—or whoever--was making her so jumpy. She walked quickly down the street, still glancing behind her. She was gripping the straps of her backpack so quickly her knuckles were turning white. She was darting through the crowds of people. She changed directions quickly and punched the crosswalk button. She fidgeted nervously for a couple of seconds, waiting for the light to change, but then suddenly hurried into the middle of the street before it was time. A blue car hurtled towards her, trying to brake, but there wasn't enough time, and it hit her with a stomach turning thud.

Then there was a man. I'm not sure where he came from, but he had a strange look about him. His expression was so blank, so emotionless, that it was impossible to tell what he was thinking, and this made him all the scarier. "It's Yesenia," he told people. "Yes, I know her. I've been her doctor for years."

"Oh, a doctor," the people around her nodded in reassurance. And murmurs of, "Yes, yes, a doctor," travelled back through the crowd of concerned onlookers.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of her and contact her parents," the man announced, bending to pick up Yesenia. All of the people nodded, somehow mesmerized by this stranger. The driver of the blue car looked relieved. He didn't have insurance, and he was thankful this man would take care of everything without involving insurance companies or the police.

"Wait," someone called from the crowd. "I don't think you're supposed to move her after she's been hit like that. She might have damage to her spinal cord."

Then the stranger's vacant, searching stare locked onto the eyes of the speaker. A moment passed in which the two stared at each other. "I said she'd be okay," the stranger stated, and his tone was almost chilling. The other man looked away, obviously confused. He backed slowly away from the stranger, stumbling and falling several times as he attempted to leave the scene. No one else reacted.

Then the stranger left, still holding Yesenia. He was gone so quickly that no one had time to react. The crowd stood frozen for a minute, as if everyone was unable to move. After several minutes, they somehow woke up from the trance that had held them. They blinked several times and looked at each other confusedly, and then they continued with their lives, speaking of the incident to no one.

And I had this horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that Yesenia was not going to be okay. I felt ill for her, and I didn't even know her.

“Um, you okay?” the girl next to me asked. I turned to see a girl smacking her gum. She was wearing about five layers of make up, with hair bleached too blond and bangs sprayed so thickly with hairspray that they appeared to stand up three inches like a solid wall on her forehead.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” I wanted to sound confident and cool, like I was the normal one and she was clearly unusual.

She smacked her gum and rolled her eyes at me. “You were, like, you know...staring and mumbling. I thought you were, like, gonna die or something.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You must be tired and seeing things or something.”

She stared at me for a minute. She wasn’t buying it. She shouldn’t believe me, anyway. She was right. I sometimes mumble in the middle of my visions, or so people have told me.

“Whatever,” she replied, distrustfully. “Whatever,” she repeated, as if this were a particularly intelligent phrase that summed up the whole situation. She slammed her locker shut and turned her back on me, her too blond hair swishing back and forth across her back as she walked away.

I sighed. She was only one person. How many people could she tell? And, really, I hadn’t done anything *that* weird yet.

I walked slowly away from my locker, still rolling the vision over in my mind. Who was that man? And why did he seem so...spooky? When I awoke from my thoughts, I was standing in front of the girls’ locker room. I wanted to go in. I wanted to change into shorts and cleats and try out for the soccer team. I stared at the locker room door, watching as a couple of girls chatted about boys and pushed their way in. I stood there watching the door swing shut again.

It might not be true, I told myself. It might have just been a dream.

I took another step towards the door. I just wanted to change my clothes and run up to the field to try out for the team. I just wanted to enjoy myself and make friends with the other girls and just be, well, normal. Is that so terrible? I couldn’t go running after every girl I see being kidnapped in a vision, could I?

I nodded to myself, convinced by my internal dialogue. Then I pushed my way into the girls’ gym to change.

Chapter 2

When I entered, I saw a group of girls chatting together, pulling on their shin guards and pulling their hair into pony tails. I so wanted to be a part of whatever they were talking about. But I just couldn’t shake how terrible I felt.

I've had these...visions...or dreams...or...premonitions--or whatever they are for as long as I can remember. I often try to pretend that they aren't true. Sometimes I've tried to ignore them, but I can't. I always try to help, and sometimes that works out, and sometimes...sometimes it really doesn't. Hence this being the fifth school I've attended in three years. No matter how I've reacted, though, the visions have always been real. They're not dreams. They've *always* been real.

I sighed. There really was no decision to make. I had to go help Yesenia.

I turned and pushed my way out of the gym and jogged towards the field. I saw a short, stocky man sitting in the bleachers writing on a clipboard. He was dressed in those camouflage army pants and a brown shirt to match. I couldn't help but think that was a little weird.

"Hi, er, are you the coach?" I asked him.

He looked up at me. His eyes were a very pleasing shade of blue. "Depends," he smiled. "Who's asking?"

"Um, I'm Leah." I stuck out my hand for him to shake. Adults liked that. It makes them think you're mature.

"Hi Leah," he nodded at me, gripping my hand too firmly. I wonder why men feel the need to do that. "Coach Solano, how can I help you?"

"I'm new to this school—today's my first day, and I'd like to try out for the team."

"Try outs ended last week, but we could use some more players" he responded, "that is, if you're any good. Can you start today?"

"I want to, but I can't because, um, I don't have my paperwork yet. My mom's taking me to get my physical today, but I'll have it all by tomorrow. That won't be too late, will it?"

I'm a pretty good liar. I'm not proud of that, but it's kind of a skill you pick up when you frequently go into strange trances and mumble incoherently while seeing visions of future catastrophes. It all comes with the territory.

"You say you moved here recently?" he asked me.

"Yes sir," I replied. Adults like it when you call them sir and ma'am, too.

He nodded again. He was quite the nodder. "I guess I understand that. I don't usually like people to miss practice, though."

"Yes, I understand that, sir. I don't usually like to miss it." And I really don't. That wasn't a lie. It sounded a little corny, though.

“Well, I’m glad you let me know. I’ll see you here tomorrow at 3:20.”

“Thank you very much, Coach Solano. I’ll be here.” That’s another trick I learned. People like it when you say their names. It’s affirming somehow. I’ve kind of gotten into the habit of collecting tricks that make me seem more normal.

I turned and jogged toward the bus stop. Before I was even halfway there, I saw her ahead of me. She was wearing the same purple skirt with the button up shirt, just like I’d seen. She didn’t look nervous or anything, though. Maybe it was all a fluke. Maybe nothing bad would happen...

When the bus pulled up, she sat in the front seat, and I made my way to the back. I didn’t want to weird her out or anything.

As the bus started moving and making its stops, I got nervous. I tried not to look at her too much, but sometimes I’d forget and catch myself staring at her. She noticed after a while and deliberately tried not to look at me. Then I started to worry I was too far away from her. She moved so fast in my vision; how would I be able to stop her from running in front of the car from this far back? So every time the bus made a stop, I moved forward a couple of seats. I noticed her glancing nervously back at me. Most of the students had exited the bus by now, and there were just a couple other people besides the two of us. Was I scaring her?

The thought sent shivers down my spine. *I was scaring her.* In my vision, when I saw her looking nervously back at something, feeling scared, exiting the bus before it was her stop, it was me. I was the one scaring her.

How could that be? I don’t look terribly scary. Did she have some reason to be nervous about being followed? Was she carrying weapons of mass destruction in her backpack or something?

Then again, I was acting creepy. I’d be scared too if someone was inching toward me on the bus, staring at me constantly.

This was ridiculous. I decided I should just slide into the seat beside her and introduce myself, like I just wanted to be friends. That’s perfectly normal. I was new at this school, and she looked like a nice girl, and we’re both supposedly going to the same place. I just wanted to be her friend; that’s all. I wasn’t some crazed student staring at her and moving closer and closer to her every chance I got.

Well, apparently I was that, but I could be friendly too.

At the next stop, I started to move into the seat near her, but she jumped up and scurried off the bus. I looked around me. Yes, this was the stop in my vision. I recognized the McDonald’s on the corner. I had to hurry to catch her. She was moving fast.

Everything became sort of a blur after that. I tried calling out to her, but she couldn’t hear me over the traffic and people’s voice. She kept glancing back at me, a look of fear in her eyes.

What in the world was making her so afraid of me? Then I saw her on the street corner, pushing the button, and she glanced back at me one more time, and I knew I had failed. She dashed into the middle of the street. I looked away. I didn't want to see it. I heard the brakes screaming and the sound of her body hitting the car and the people's cries of panic. I still didn't want to look.

And then there *he* was. I don't know which direction he came from. His emotionless face was so...disturbing. His expression was so vacant and yet so intense at the same time, so intense that it was frightening.

He glided slowly towards her. The words sound rehearsed. "Yesenia!" he cried. "Oh, I'm so glad I'm here to help. Please be okay, Yesenia." He leaned over her and felt for a pulse, pretending to be very concerned, but his words and actions felt insincere. Somehow, I felt like he was an actor in a movie, and he was enjoying this role.

Events started to move in high speed, and it started to feel like I was in the movie, too, and playing my role.

"I'm her doctor. I've known her for years," I heard him explaining. And he began to pick her up and take her, and I felt my teeth clenching, but I couldn't say anything. What was I supposed to say?

"Wait," came the voice from the crowd. "I don't think you're supposed to move her after she's been hit like that. She might have damage to her spinal cord." I've had more than fifty visions that I can remember, and somehow it still terrifies me to relive what I've already seen.

The words came from a man dressed in faded blue jeans and a red and black checked flannel shirt. He looked like an ordinary man running errands on his lunch break. The stranger looked at him, just as I'd seen before. I could have mouthed the stranger's response along with him, "I said she'd be okay." Then I watched the stranger lock gazes with his victim. It looked as if all the will and desire and thoughts were being sucked out of this poor man until he was just a shell, easily manipulated and controlled. It made me feel sick inside. I couldn't watch it.

"No," I heard myself say. "He's right." Everyone turned to look at me. I'm not particularly brave, usually. I didn't know where the words came from. It's just that it all still felt like lines from a movie, and this was my part to play. "I mean, um, I don't think you're supposed to move her," I clarified.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the poor man who had spoken before me. He shook his head confusedly but seemed to recover himself. He nodded in my direction but furrowed his eyebrows, as if he wasn't sure any more if what I was saying was right.

The stranger shifted his gaze to me, and suddenly I was lost. It felt like there was a rush of wind, as if someone had left the window open, and my previous thoughts flew outside, scattered in the wind. Everything was empty for a second, completely vacant. Then a sense of calmness overwhelmed me. I suddenly felt confident that Yesenia would be fine, that this man was not a stranger but a friendly doctor, that I should leave everything in his hands. What was I doing here

anyway? A vision of a girl in a purple skirt flitted through my mind, but again, the calmness came and erased my worries. I felt reassured.

Suddenly I didn't want to be here at all. I wanted to leave, to go anywhere but stay. And I felt my legs begin to move. I guess I was moving them. But the poor, frail girl, something in me whispered. Then the calmness rushed through me and reassured me. Everything would be fine. I should leave. I took another step backwards. The stranger bent to scoop Yesenia into his arms, and my vision came crashing back to me: I remembered the stranger, holding Yesenia, disappearing. I remembered the dazed crowd, staring for several seconds, then dispersing, as if nothing had happened.

“No!” I cried. Now I really felt like I was acting in a movie. “She’s not okay. Someone needs to call an ambulance.”

I must have sounded completely incoherent to everyone around me, but they all seemed to be in a trance, too. Some of them looked at me, completely confused, but most of them were staring vacantly at the stranger.

The stranger continued looking at me. I watched as he stared hard at me for several seconds. His blank, expressionless face completely unnerved me, making me feel as if he had complete control of the situation. He nodded at me slowly, his face remaining a mask, and I felt like he was giving me his approval, like this was a test, and I had passed. It made me feel disgusting all over, to think that I had somehow met this man's approval.

Then he was gone.

Minutes passed, and life began again.

“Help her!”

“Are you okay?”

“Get back! Give her room!”

“Someone call 911!”

“Wait! Stop! I don't think you're supposed to move her after she's been hit like that. She might have damage to her spinal cord.”

I started. There he was, the man in the worn jeans and flannel. I looked around confusedly. The stranger wasn't here. It was as if no one remembered him, as if we had rewound the tape and were starting this scene over from this moment. Had it ever really happened then? If no one remembered the last five minutes but me, what did that mean?

“Excuse me, ma'am,” I turned to a woman next to me.

“Yes, honey?” she responded. She had a small dog in a pink purse. She didn’t seem too concerned about Yesenia. I think she only stayed for the drama of the incident.

I continued, “Did you see a man who...a man...” She looked at me distractedly, but I could tell she had no idea what I was talking about. I shifted uncomfortably.

The woman had already lost interest in me, engrossed in the people fretting about how to handle the incident.

I stayed until the ambulance came and Yesenia was loaded onto a stretcher, safe from the mysterious stranger.

Maybe she had always been safe from the stranger. Maybe I couldn’t tell the difference between my visions and reality. Was he real? Was it me?

Chapter 3

“That’s it? That’s the whole story?” my mother asked. The frantic edge was slowly starting to leave her voice.

I know. I told my mom. I tell her everything. After five schools, it’s hard to hang onto friends, and my mom’s the only one who knows and understands my...condition.

“Yeah, that’s the whole story,” I confirmed.

I could see the tension leaving her shoulders. “Then no one seems to remember you said anything. And after an accident like that, this Yesenia girl probably won’t remember you following her, either. No one in school will know then. I think you might be safe.”

It bothered me that all she worried about was avoiding people’s notice—nothing about Yesenia or the strange man—but after moving school districts five times, I couldn’t really blame her. “Right. I mean, I guess so,” I answered, “but, Mom, weren’t you listening? Who was that strange man? And why was Yesenia so afraid of me? What did she have to hide?”

My mother looked at me without saying anything for a while. I couldn’t quite make out what she was thinking. “It’s hard to say, honey. We don’t know this girl. Perhaps she’s involved in gangs.”

After that long of a pause, I guess I’d expected she was about to say something very profound. “Mo-o-om,” I sighed. She hated it when I made the word three syllables, but sometimes I couldn’t resist. “Be serious. She really didn’t look like the gang type.”

“I really can’t answer that question, hon. You’ll have to ask around about her at school to find out what’s going on in her life. But, you know, be careful who you ask. No need to arouse suspicions. Just be normal, remember?”

I ignored her last statement. In a way, I was sort of relieved my mom hadn't given me what I knew was the real answer: I looked like a maniac following her, and she wanted to get away from me as quickly as she could. I pushed the thought out of my mind and repeated my first question. "The stranger, though. Who was he? Why can't I remember what he looked like? Why did everyone suddenly forget about him?"

This time she was silent a long time before she spoke, and the silence seemed stretch out between us. "Are you sure he was real?" she whispered.

I felt the blood drain instantly from my face. She didn't believe me. "Yes. I am."

I didn't feel as confident as I sounded, though. I just wanted to sound brave and make her feel bad for doubting me.

I suddenly felt like I might start crying if I stayed there any longer. I grabbed my backpack and headed quickly for the door.

"Oh, Leah, I'm sorry," my mother called. "Don't go. Let's talk about it some more."

I shook my head. I wanted to be alone. "It's okay," I mumbled. "Not your fault...I'll be back for dinner." The door slammed harder behind me than I'd intended.

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My mom didn't talk about the incident any more that evening or the next morning at breakfast, when I chewed numbly on my toast with jelly, still trying to puzzle out yesterday's events. It bothered me that Yesenia had been so afraid of me. I was still thinking about everything at school that morning as I strode through the halls. I think that's why I didn't notice that people suddenly became very quiet as I walked by. Slowly, I became aware of the whispering.

"That's her, isn't it?"

"I think I have English with her."

"She doesn't look so scary. I wonder how she does it."

I paused at my locker. This was beginning to feel achingly familiar. How had it all happened so soon?

"Oh yeah, that's her alright," I heard a voice say loudly near my ear. "Yesterday, here I was, like, just getting my books and all, when this crazy chick's eyes roll back in her head, and, like, she's foaming at the mouth. And she starts mumbling about cars and accidents. I swear, it was like that episode of *Days of Our Lives* when the girl got possessed. I was, like, so freaked out."

Who was this girl? I turned to see the bleached hairsprayed wall of bangs, blond hair cascading around a face covered in six inches of cover up.

“I wasn’t foaming at the mouth,” I responded, and I said it coldly, as if that made my words really powerful. I felt pretty stupid immediately after I said it, though. I wasn’t foaming at the mouth? What kind of a comeback is that?

She rolled her eyes at me, eyes so coated in mascara that her eyelashes looked like spider legs. “Could’ve fooled me,” she retorted.

So this was how the whole school knew about the incident? This girl?

“Kind of scary,” one of her friends agreed. “Maybe you shouldn’t chase little girls on buses and then push them in front of cars.”

“What are you talking about?” I cried. “I didn’t push anyone!” I hated it when I got all emotional like this. Try to stay calm. I could squelch the rumors these girls were trying to start. I wouldn’t let them push me out of this school.

“No, she’s right,” Make-Up Girl clarified. “She just foamed at the mouth, and then went chasing after the girl. The girl got so freaked that she ran in front of the car.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it,” I said sarcastically. “Listen, do you want to borrow some of my make-up? Because I don’t think you have enough on yet.”

I felt guilty immediately after I said it. I hated being mean.

Make-Up Girl didn’t seem to care, though. She rolled her eyes again. “Whatever, freak girl,” she told me, and then she and her cronies walked away.

“You totally told her,” I heard one of her friends confidently saying.

I looked around me. *Everyone* was staring. I could see the questions in their eyes. Had I pushed her? Or just chased her until she leapt into the street? Why would I do that? What powers did I possess that made innocent people run in fear?

I spun around and pretended to suddenly be intensely interested in my beat up locker door.

Make-Up Girl really hadn’t told me. That was the second time she had ended the conversation with “whatever.” Why do people think saying “whatever” means that you win? Plus, my comment about the make-up was infinitely cleverer. *I* had told *her*. *And* I hadn’t even said anything about how she probably had to turn her head sideways when she walked into a room so that her bangs didn’t scratch across the top of the doorframe. And I could think of a thousand other smarter things to say than “whatever”. So there.

“Um, do you want some help with that?” I heard a voice beside me say. I’d been absentmindedly spinning the dial on my locker for the last couple of minutes.

“Oh, uh, no thanks,” I looked up. It was the dorky guy from yesterday. He was wearing a pair of shorts that were a little too short for him and a wrinkled, button-down shirt that looked like it was pulled out of his grandfather’s hamper. His dark hair still looked like it had never been combed. I smiled in spite of myself. It didn’t actually bother me if it didn’t bother him but, well, I couldn’t imagine why it wouldn’t bother him. I suddenly felt embarrassed that he’d guess why I’d smiled, so I immediately said, “Thanks for the offer, though.”

“I wouldn’t let her get to you. She’s really not the sharpest pencil in the box.”

I smiled again. That was a funny saying. Had he made it up? “I know,” I answered. “I just...everyone was listening. I wish it hadn’t all been so...public, you know?”

He nodded, but I didn’t think he knew. A guy who wore his grandfather’s clothes maybe didn’t care what other people thought.

“I had more good comebacks that I could have said,” I confided with a smile.

“You don’t really need them,” he reassured me. “I really don’t think anyone believes you scared Yesenia into jumping into oncoming traffic. How absurd.”

He said it so confidently that it did sound rather absurd. I wanted to believe him.

I nodded. “Thanks,” I responded. “Um, I’m Leah.” Had I just made a friend?

“I know. I think everyone knows your name now.”

Hmm. That may have been more honesty than I needed.

“I’m P.C.,” he told me. Then he stuck out his hand for me to shake. I smiled again. It seemed like something my grandpa would do.

“Well, looks like we’re locker mates, Leah, so I’ll see you around.”

“Okay, see you around P.C.”

I thought about what P.C. had said as I walked to my first class. Maybe people would think it was absurd. How could I have really caused any of it?

There was something that had been bothering me about the whole incident, though. My mind had been working through it for a while now, like there was some thought I was hiding from myself. Slowly I let it float to the surface of my consciousness. This was it: I had caused the incident.

I almost stopped walking as I let that thought hit me completely. If I’d never had the vision, I wouldn’t have chased Yesenia. She wouldn’t have run or been hit by the car, and the man, whoever he was, would never have appeared. My vision had started it all. Was that always the

way it had been? Had my visions always caused the accidents? I started to leaf through the different premonitions I'd had. I didn't think so...most of the time...but sometimes maybe they had. I started to feel a little empty inside. I didn't want to think about this anymore.

I slinked quickly to my seat in biology. I didn't look up because I didn't want to know if people were staring. Maybe no one really knew about the locker scene and Yesenia. When I finally did raise my eyes, I was staring at the back of a very beautiful neck. Ah, I'd forgotten I got to sit right behind him. I'd found out his name. I'd heard a student say it the other day while talking to him, and Mrs. Tiu said his last name when she was calling role. Kai. Kai Roberts.

I wondered how he'd ask a girl out. I think he'd do it with a lot of confidence, like just come up to me one day—well, if I'm going to imagine it, I might as well imagine myself as the girl he asks, right?—He'd just come up to me one day, cup my chin with his hand, and say, “Hey, wanna catch a movie tonight?” I wouldn't be nervous or silly at all. I'd be expecting it. I might even toy with him. “Well, you know, I'm supposed to go out with Joe tonight,” I'd say. But he wouldn't give up on me so easily. “Tomorrow night then,” he'd say it like it was definitely going to happen.

I'd introduce him to my mother on the first date, not because I wanted to, but because he'd be *that* kind of guy, the kind who would want to assure my mom he wouldn't have me out too late. Mom would be enamored with him. And Kai and I would talk and laugh the whole time.

I wonder how he'd propose? I think he'd be the type to get down on one knee, and to think up a whole plan about how to surprise me. Maybe he'd have strewn rose petals all over the room before he asked me.

I was suddenly jolted out of my reverie by the movement and rustling in the classroom. Students were shuffling around. What were we doing? I hadn't even gotten to planning our careers or how many children we'd have yet.

Mrs. Tiu was saying something about finding partners. Oh great. I didn't even know anyone yet. I'd feel like such a smuck if I was the only one standing around with no one to work with. I glanced quickly around the room.

Kai's eyes caught mine. Ugh. Why had I looked at *him* first? Actually, I knew exactly why I'd looked at him. I tried to look away but I couldn't. A lock of his brown hair was falling just over his left eye. It looked pretty sexy.

He smiled. “Leah, right?” he asked.

Ugh again. Everyone really did know. I nodded. My tongue felt glued to the roof of my mouth. Oh geez. He was talking to me. I felt like I might pee my pants. Was I blushing? I hoped I wasn't blushing.

“I'm Kai.” His smile made me weak. “Do you want to work with me and Tyrone?”

I didn't even look up to see who Tyrone was. I couldn't look away. "Um, yeah, sure, okay," I breathed. I am such a moron. Did I have to say "yes" three different times? Couldn't I have shut up after I said, "yeah"?

He motioned for me to join them. Was this really happening? Things like this never happened to me. I really hoped he'd do the rose petals thing when he proposed. No, stop thinking that. Just follow him and try not to say anything stupid.

"Leah," I heard Mrs. Tiu call. "Why don't you work with Tatyana? Her partner's not here today."

She hadn't done it to be mean. I was sort of standing by myself. Kai had been sitting a ways away from me, and it did look like I didn't have a partner. I looked at Kai. Maybe he'd correct her. He'd fight for me.

He shrugged. "Another time," he said.

I nodded. "Right, yeah, okay," I responded.

I sighed. I guess it had been too good to be true. I walked over to where Tatyana was sitting. I hoped she wasn't too disappointed she had to work with me.

"Hi," she said, and smiled. "Do you like dissecting? Bio isn't my strongest subject."

Wait...we were dissecting? I looked down and saw a lifeless rat splayed on the lab table. No wonder it smelled so bad in here. I really was oblivious today. "I'm okay," I said modestly.

Tatyana was beautiful. She had straight, slick dark brown hair that fell casually around her shoulders, framing her face, and beautiful dark eyes. She had style, too. She wasn't wearing the name brands that everyone else was wearing, but she looked good. I think we both knew that she was too cool for me, but I was glad that she seemed like one of those nice popular girls, not like Make-Up Girl.

We started working through the lab together. Tatyana was quick; if biology was her weak subject, then she must be pretty good in her other classes. I was glad not to be stuck with someone who made me do the lab myself and then copied the answers.

Honestly, I'm pretty good at school. Actually, I'm *really* good. I just don't like to think about it or mention it, but I really never have to read anything twice, and I never have to study for tests. I just kind of absorb the information the first time I hear it or read it. But, okay, confession time: I frequently fail tests on purpose. I know it's stupid. I didn't used to but, well, it's hard to be the smartest one in every class, to know the answer to every question. At schools one and two I never held back, but the other students started to feel jealous and make fun of me, and I even made the teacher nervous with my questions and quick understanding. So now I hold back. I still try to keep my grades decent, but I don't want to stand out like that anymore. My mom

knows I do it. Of course she knows—how can she not notice such a drastic change in my report cards—but we’ve never talked about it, and I’m glad for that.

“You like him?” she asked me suddenly.

She’d caught me staring at Kai. I’d been doing it unconsciously, while I was lost in thought. This time I knew I was blushing. “I—I don’t even know him,” I stammered.

“It’s okay. You’re not alone. Everyone likes him. He’s a knock out, isn’t he? A nice guy, too, which is rare for someone so good looking.”

I nodded. There’s a truth every girl understands. “You like him too?” I asked. Her boldness made me bold.

She shook her head. “I did. Every girl does at some point. I’m interested in someone else.” She blushed a little then, before changing the subject and asking, “So where’d you move from, Leah?”

“Oregon,” I responded without looking at her. Had she heard about me? Did she know I’d transferred schools so often?

Tatyana nodded. “Did you like it there?”

“It was okay,” I responded slowly, hesitantly. Where was this leading?

I think Tatyana noticed my discomfort because she changed the subject with her next sentence. “So what do you do for fun?”

I brightened. “I like soccer a lot. I used to play in Oregon.”

“Do you? You should try out today! I’m on the team.”

I smiled at her. “I plan to,” I told her. “I just couldn’t come yesterday because I had to get my physical.” And scare a girl into lunging in front of a car.

“Awesome,” she smiled.

The period passed quickly. My whole day passed quickly, really. I was worried other students would ask me questions about the scene with Make-Up Girl that morning, but no one seemed to take her story seriously. Maybe P.C. was right. Maybe it did sound absurd that I had scared Yesenia and caused the accident. People didn’t realize how creepy it is to feel like someone is stalking you.

As I walked to the girls’ gym, I felt pretty happy, so happy that I almost didn’t notice the queasiness. I wasn’t expecting it; it usually doesn’t happen so often. Normally days or weeks

pass before it happens to me again. I was passing a restroom when it happened, so I slipped quickly through the door and into a stall so that no one would be around to witness anything.

It was inside a home, a beautiful home with pictures of family on the walls. Everything looked clean and cozy and warm. There was a woman standing at the top of the staircase, gripping the handrail so hard her fingers looked white. She looked familiar, like someone I'd met once. Her face looked pained, her mouth opened slightly and her eyes widened in...fear, I think. She was afraid. She turned suddenly then, as if she'd heard a sound. Her legs twisted awkwardly. Despite her firm grip on the handrail, she was falling, and I could hear the noises her body made as she hit the hardwood floor and skidded down the stairs, her legs sprawling in unnatural directions. A soft scream traveled through the room.

Suddenly my eyes focused in on the chipped paint of the bathroom stalls, where someone had written in bold, black marker "I heart Kai 4 eva."

I left the bathroom and continued towards the girls' gym. I didn't want to tell anyone what I'd just seen. If I didn't mention it, would the woman be okay? If I told, would that cause it to happen?

I really didn't think so, but then, I've never really ignored a vision. How could I?

I knew who the woman was. It could be because the resemblance was so strong, but more likely it was just part of the power of the premonition. After I see things, I know certain information about the people and events I've seen. I can't explain it. Well, I can't explain anything about my visions, really.

I saw the person I was looking for immediately when I entered the locker room. "Tatyana," I called softly, almost without thinking. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I was almost apologizing as I said it. I was becoming convinced that I did cause these tragedies, either by acting on them or maybe just by seeing them. I wasn't sure. I had all kinds of guilty thoughts, and none of them made me feel good.

"Tatyana," I said her name again. I realized I had to lie if I wanted her to check on her mom and prevent my vision from happening. "I just saw Coach on my way here. He wanted me to tell you that your mom called and that she needs you to come home right away. She said it was urgent. You should go quickly."

Chapter 4

After Tatyana left, I changed mechanically into my soccer clothes and trudged to the field like a zombie. I should have gone with her, I know. I should have helped her take care of her mother. Of course she would want help and support at a time like that; anyone would.

I wanted to go to practice, though. I didn't want to face all of the questions Tatyana would ask me. How did I know? What do you mean you have visions? What causes them? Tonight my mother would help me with all of these answers, I hoped.

And I didn't want Tatyana to ask me the question that pulled at me the most: Had I somehow caused this?

It was a little strange that the very day I meet Tatyana, I had a terrible vision about her mother. Was I choosing my victims?

"Okay, could you move forward a little?" I heard a girl asking nervously. I focused my attention back to the present. I nodded to the girl and scooted forward. We were all sitting in a circle in the middle of the field, waiting for Coach to arrive.

"And you," the girl continued nervously. "Maybe you could move back some? Oh, it just doesn't look right. That whole side over there needs to move back."

This was weird, right? We were just sitting in a circle so that we could stretch together before practice, right? Did it really have to be a perfect 360 degrees?

The weird part was that everyone else seemed rather nervous about the perfection of the circle as well. To think I was occupied with worries that Tatyana's mother was in danger when clearly the real problems of the world were about getting a high school soccer team to sit and stretch in a perfect circle.

"Quick! Sit down!" someone called to the girl in the middle, and she rushed nervously to her spot.

Coach Solano was approaching. He was wearing that same army getup and holding a clipboard. What a character.

"WHAT IS THIS???" he roared. "DO YOU CALL THIS A CIRCLE?!? THIS ISN'T A CIRCLE! This looks like a squashed pancake. Pathetic!! Completely pathetic! That side, move in. That side, move out. You over there, move to the right. Pathetic, absolutely pathetic!"

Um, was this the same guy I'd talked to yesterday?

"Now flip over and do pushups while I call roll—the ENTIRE time I'm calling roll. And none of those weak, girlie pushups, either. I want the real thing. Pathetic!"

He called a couple of names on the roll while we frantically performed pushups.

"You there! What do you think you're doing?" Coach Solano bellowed at some poor victim. She was trying to obey his...commands...but her butt was sticking up in the air oddly while she did her pushups.

“Uh...um...” She had no response.

“You there!” he called to me. “Come out here and show this girl how to do a push up.”

Oh great. I was being called forward as an example—perfect. This would make me real popular with the other girls. I moved slowly to the center of the circle.

“Run! Move!” Coach boomed, so I ran. Quickly, I performed five pushups, keeping my back as flat as possible.

“Flatten your back!” yelled Coach, even though I was sure it was pretty flat. I guess he had to find something to criticize. He turned back to his earlier victim. “Now you see how to do them. I’ll expect you’ll do them correctly tomorrow.”

“Yes,” the girl whimpered, as if my demonstration had clarified everything for her.

“New to this team, are you?” Coach returned his attention to me, as if I hadn’t met him and explained all this to him yesterday. I only nodded. “Well, we’ll see how you do and if you’re good enough to play on this team.”

I nodded again and smiled to myself when he looked away. I couldn’t help it. Who was this guy kidding? There were only thirteen girls out here; I’d already counted. Even adding Tatyana, that made fourteen. He’d have to take us all to have enough subs.

“Listen,” Coach instructed. “A soccer game is a battle, a battle in which we take no prisoners. It’s not enough to win; you have to crush the enemy. Crush them! Crush them!” He punched his fist into the imaginary enemy several times for emphasis. “Now, weak bodies do not win battles, and I’m looking around, and I see a lot of weak bodies here, I mean A LOT. Today begins basic training. By the end of two weeks, those weak, pathetic bodies will be gone. You’ll be new, strong soldiers, and you’ll be ready to crush the enemy. Crush them! Crush them!” The imaginary enemy received two more blows to her imaginary stomach. “Now what are you sitting down for? I want 20 laps around the track—that makes five miles. That will be good for a warm up.”

Everyone groaned, but I smiled. I think I might like being part of this team.

During our scrimmage later, I scored two goals. I’m pretty good at sports as well as school, but, again, it just feels weird standing out, so I try to hold back a little. I don’t really want to be the star.

That night, I was cheery with my mom at dinner. I just wanted to forget everything that had happened yesterday, and I was excited about the fun I’d had at practice. “He was funny, Mom,” I laughed, describing Coach. Then I did an impression of his serious, military style lecture, and Mom laughed with me. I think she was happy that everything seemed normal again.

“It’s good to come home and laugh with you,” Mom said.

Suddenly I felt like I was seeing her for the first time. She looked so pale and...well, tired.
“Mom, you okay?”

“Yes,” she nodded, but her eyes looked bloodshot. “Stressful day at work. There were so many people coming in all day and asking me questions that I just couldn’t get anything done.”

I nodded in response. Mom worked at some kind of immigration services office. I really didn’t know what she did. Sometimes she talked about it a little, but it all kind of bored me, so I didn’t listen much.

“I was worried about you, too,” Mom continued. She looked so guilty as she said it.
“You...doing okay?”

I didn’t want to tell her about Tatyana, even though I’ve always told her about my visions. I’d tell her later...I just didn’t want to ruin that moment, this happiness I felt right then. “Yeah, fine, you know,” I stuttered.

“You didn’t cause the incident with Yesenia,” Mom said. “I know you’re worried about that. Seeing it doesn’t make it happen. The man would have come for her whether or not you saw it.”

I nodded slowly. I felt the relaxed, happy feeling slipping away from me, and I sort of knew that of course my mom couldn’t think that I created scary visions that altered reality. Would a mother ever believe her daughter could hurt people like that? Still, it was good to hear her say it.
“Yeah, okay,” I said.

She nodded. “You don’t want to talk about it. That’s okay. I just wanted you to know that you don’t cause bad things to happen.” She smiled then. “Tell me more about practice.”

I sighed. I liked moments like this with my mother.

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I was still feeling good as I flipped through my locker combination at school the next day. I was trying not to think about...things I didn’t want to think about. I wanted to just pretend I was a normal tenth grader transitioning to a new school. I put away the books I wouldn’t need like other normal students. I pulled out the books for my first two periods like other normal students. I looked forward to seeing Kai, even though I would be too nervous to talk to him, like any other normal student.

“Don’t talk to me, freak girl.”

I saw a wall of hair to my left and knew who the voice was coming from. I opened my mouth to respond with a comeback. I’m not sure what I was going to say, but I’m sure it would have been properly witty. But then I suddenly thought better of it. Why bother, really?

She flipped her hair, and the smell of hairspray wafted into my nose, making me cough. She seemed to take an unusually long time examining herself in the mirror today. I don't know why I stuck around. It was a little fascinating to watch her routine. She fluffed her bangs, as if they could possibly get any higher. Then she patted on more powder until her face turned a bit orange and you could see the line where the make-up ended and her neck was a different color. Then she plucked a few stray eyebrows—right there in the middle of the hallway. I was caught between feeling repulsed and wanting to laugh, but still I held my tongue. I didn't really want to fight this morning. I felt too happy. Make-Up Girl gave herself one last, long look in the mirror before slamming her locker shut and flashing me a smile. "Let me know if you're going to turn into a rabid dog again, freak girl," she told me, then walked away.

I felt so good I laughed a little to myself after she left. She was so mean it was almost comical. Besides, how could I feel sad now? I was headed to biology, one full hour of staring at the back of Kai's neck. I headed down the hall, smiling in anticipation.

I froze when I saw it. He was smiling and laughing. He looked...he looked like he was genuinely enjoying himself. I felt my stomach tighten. And she had her hand on his right arm, just above his elbow. She played it off well, too. It looked like a very natural gesture, like it somehow fit in with this hilarious story she was telling him. His face lit up as she talked, and I heard his laugh ring out again and bounce off the lockers all around me. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to cry. And it was so hard to look away. She felt me staring at them, and she turned and smiled at me. "Oh, hi Leah! See you around!" she called. He smiled at me in acknowledgement, too, and I blushed, waved, and hurried away.

She hadn't called me freak girl or said anything mean. She wanted him to believe she was nice, and he—well, he was buying it. He couldn't possibly *like* her, could he? Kai and Make-Up Girl? I felt sick. I ducked into the girls' bathroom to pull myself together before class.

I was happy that Mrs. Tiu lectured most of the period. I didn't look at Kai, even though I think he might have smiled at me when I slipped in just before the bell. Tatyana tried to catch my attention all period, but I pretended not to notice. I really didn't want to talk about yesterday, not now anyway. I just wanted to feel sorry for myself and process what I had seen. How could someone who seemed so cool like *her*? And if he wasn't as cool as I thought he was, then that made me sad, too. Love sucks, I guess.

At one point, Mrs. Tiu gave us a worksheet and told us to fill it out with a partner. I bent my head over my book and pretended I was studying the worksheet very hard and wanted to work alone. I didn't look up when Kai glanced at me, although I felt his eyes on me, and was aware of every step he took as he moved to work with his friend Tyrone. I knew he was going to say I could work with them, but I didn't want him to feel he had to take me in like a stray dog or something. Also, I was strangely mad at him. I was mad at him for liking *her*.

I kept my eyes especially low to avoid Tatyana calling to me from across the room. Eventually one of her friends called her over, and Tatyana couldn't ignore her, so she gave up on me. I was glad. I just wanted to be alone for a while.

I already had my bag packed when the bell rang so I could make a quick getaway. After the teacher dismissed us, I scooted quickly towards the door. I looked at him one more time. I couldn't help myself.

He looked up at smiled at me. "See ya tomorrow, Leah."

Whoa. He talked to me. I smiled and waved.

I'm stupid. He would have worked with me if I hadn't hidden behind my book. What was I *thinking*? He might never like me. Of course he wouldn't like me. But that didn't mean Make-Up Girl should get him! Why was I feeling so sad and giving up without a fight? From here on out, the war was on.

"You live off of J Street," I heard a voice beside me confirm. I was at my locker again. Why had I come here? I didn't need to change books. I must have been walking without thinking. I looked up to see P.C. staring at me very seriously.

"Um, yeah," I responded. "How did you know that?"

"I saw you walking home yesterday."

"Oh." This guy was a little creepy.

"I, too, live off of J Street, so it makes sense for us to walk home together today."

I think he was asking me if I wanted to walk home with him, but it didn't sound much like an invitation. It sounded a bit like a command, actually. "I can't, P.C. I have soccer practice after school, so I don't leave right away."

"Yes, I know you do. I saw you carrying your bag with cleats. I have an important club meeting, so we will finish around the same time. I will meet you here at our lockers."

"Oh, right, that sounds good I guess." He was definitely creeping me out a bit, but I'm just one of those people who doesn't say "no" very well. And—I don't know—more friends might be nice, and he seemed harmless enough, if a bit odd. Honestly, I wouldn't mind the company. It's hard to explain, but after transitioning to so many different schools, I've started to feel more and more envious of people who have friends to walk to class with, or anywhere with, and I guess I was just tired of pretending I don't mind being alone.

Chapter 5

I passed Kai on the way to soccer practice after school, and I smiled and waved and called, "Hi Kai." I did it quite naturally, like it was normal for us to say hello whenever we passed each other, and he returned the greeting. I still felt tingles move up and down my body as I passed him, and I completely blushed when I said it, but I still liked to pretend it was very natural. I glanced back at him after I passed (I know that screams desperate, but I couldn't help myself),

and I saw Make-Up Girl walking to meet him. I only mildly felt like throwing up this time when I saw it. After all, Kai and I had just exchanged a “hello” like we were long time friends. Clearly, we’re getting closer every day, right?

It was hard to avoid Tatyana at soccer practice, harder still because I liked her as a person, but I really didn’t have a good explanation for her. I decided I’d rather avoid her and have her suspect I was weird than have her question me and have her suspicions confirmed.

So when she tried to catch my eye, I always looked down. And when coach asked who wanted to play on left midfield, I raised my hand, knowing Tatyana usually asks to play right wing. And when practice ended, I left quickly.

P.C. was waiting for me at my locker when I got there. I was already a little nervous about the walk home. What would we talk about?

He said nothing when I walked up to him, just nodded and started to lead the way. It was a little awkward—for me, at least. He didn’t seem to feel awkward at all. We walked in silence for the first couple of minutes, and my discomfort grew. “Um, how was your meeting?” I asked, wanting to break the silence.

“Very productive, thank you.”

A couple of more minutes passed. I wished he’d say something. Finally, I asked, “What was the meeting for?”

“The Information Society. You’ve probably heard of it. I’m the president.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t heard of it. But he sounded proud of himself, so I added, “That’s very impressive.”

“Yes, thank you, I think so.”

Right, he was definitely proud of himself. “Er, what exactly is the Information Society?”

“Oh, you don’t know? You are new, I suppose. It’s a computer club, actually. I head projects to uncover information contained in computer systems. I’ve headed several very successful projects at schools in the past, and I’m working on a very interesting one right now. I wish I could tell you more about it, but, naturally, it’s classified.”

Naturally. I still honestly didn’t know what he was talking about. I thought about asking him another question about it, but he spoke first.

“Tatyana’s mother fell down the stairs yesterday,” he said suddenly, abruptly.

It took me a moment to register his words. I didn’t know what to say. But maybe there was nothing to panic about. He didn’t know anything about what really happened that day. He was

probably just talking about rumors he'd heard around school. "Oh, really? How terrible. Is she okay?" I tried to make my voice sound casual.

"You know the answer to that."

I looked at him confusedly. Now I was a little worried. "I really don't know what you mean. I haven't talked to her today." That much was true, at least.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Why do you feel the need to lie?" Then he paused, as if he were sincerely pondering this question, as if he couldn't imagine why I would want to lie about having a vision of Tatyana's mother falling down the stairs before it happened.

I didn't respond, so he continued, "Tatyana walked in, calling her mom's name. She was scared because of what you told her, and her screams startled her mother. Her mother turned to face the door, lost her balance, and fell. Tatyana called 911, and an ambulance came. Her mother broke both of her legs, but she'll recover. I told you the story because you're pretending not to know."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "I didn't know," I said honestly. "I mean, I didn't know why her mother fell. I just knew she fell." I still didn't want to admit how I knew.

He looked at me seriously for several seconds, until I felt uncomfortable and turned away. "I believe you," he said finally.

"You see things," P.C. continued flatly. He wasn't asking for confirmation. He said it like a fact, which, I guess, it is. "You saw Yesenia get hit by the car, and you tried to stop it, but it happened anyway. Then you saw Tatyana's mom fall down the stairs, so you told Tatyana, but, again, it happened anyway. What you see comes to pass. That's a fascinating gift."

"Is this why you asked to walk home together? Because I see things? And you think that's fascinating?" I was a little angry when I said it. The whole conversation had unnerved me.

Again, he looked at me oddly. "We live near each other, and we were leaving school at the same time," he replied, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. But he said it so matter of factly that I didn't think he was lying.

"How long have you had this gift?" he asked me.

I paused. I wanted to tell another lie, to deny that I could do anything strange or special, but it seemed pointless. He already knew everything. I sighed. "As long as I can remember," I responded honestly.

He nodded. "You've been to five schools before this one, spending one to three years at each school. These visions are the reason you've moved so often." Again, he wasn't asking.

I felt my face turning red. "P.C., how do you know this about me?"

He shrugged. “I told you, I’m a member of the Information Society.”

“Um, do you mean that you googled me on the internet, and searched until you found information on me?”

“It really isn’t as simple as that,” he said.

I wanted to be mad at him, or at least completely creeped out by him, but I wasn’t. The truth is that I’d always wanted to tell a friend. My mom has always cautioned me not to tell anyone, and I know she’s right, but it is nice not to have to keep secrets from people. And P.C., well, he was the closest thing I had to a friend right now.

“The visions are why you change schools often,” P.C. repeated again. He wanted me to respond.

I shrugged. Why play games? “Yes, the visions are why. My mom and I—we don’t want anyone to know. Slowly, at every school, people start to figure it out, and they start to talk, and it just becomes very uncomfortable for me. My mom tries to pull me from the school before too many people know, before it spreads too far. It isn’t looking like I’ll be at this school much longer, since you and Make-Up Girl already know.”

He looked at me strangely when I called her Make-Up Girl, but he let it pass. I didn’t know her real name yet.

He continued his strange interrogation. “You don’t want to stand out. That’s why you want to leave.”

“Right, yes.” It still felt a bit odd having him know so much about my thoughts and life. “Did you find that out in your club or are you a good guesser?”

“I’m very good with people,” he responded. I almost started laughing, until I realized he wasn’t kidding. “You don’t want to stand out. That’s why you want to leave, but that’s not why your mother pulls you from the schools.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Of course she doesn’t want me to feel uncomfortable and singled out.”

“True, but your discomfort is not enough of a reason for your mother to pull you out of five different schools, and your gift isn’t so terribly strange that no one should know about it. There are others who have visions of the future.” He paused before concluding, “Your mother has a different reason.”

This time I felt a little hurt, partly by his words, and partly because I started worrying they were true. “We’re very close,” I said defensively.

He nodded. “Yes, I figured you would be.”

We walked for a while in silence again. Part of me was angry at him, but a bigger part of me felt relief at finally being able to talk about everything with someone other than my mother. Mostly, though, I felt worried about how he'd said that Taty had scared her mother, and that's what had caused the fall.

"P.C.?" We were almost home, and I had decided to confide in him. I need to talk to someone besides my mother. "I don't think I just see things. I think I cause them."

He thought seriously for a minute before nodding. "Yes, I can see that. You scared Yesenia and she jumped in front of a car, and when you told Tatyana, she went home and scared her mother. Yes, it makes sense that you think that."

Hmm. Was that all? I was hoping for a bit more. "Um, what I mean is, do you think I cause them?"

"Why should it matter what I think?"

Of course it matters what other people think! I wanted to scream. But instead I took a deep breath and tried again. "I just want to know your opinion."

"I really don't see why it matters, but if you must know, I think it rather arrogant to believe you can change the space-time continuum."

This time I did laugh, hard, until my eyes started to water. "That was an awesome answer," I told P.C., who had no idea why I was laughing.

When I got to my house, I felt my stomach drop. Tatyana was sitting on my doorstep. "Oh my gosh. How does she know where I live?"

"She asked me, and as President of the Information Society, I felt compelled to give it to her."

Lovely. "Ah, right. So, um, I'll see you, P.C.," I said, bracing myself for what was to come.

"I will stay and say 'hi.' I want to hear this," he told me confidently, not taking my hint that he should leave.

I was on the verge of making up some excuse why he shouldn't stay, but Tatyana was already approaching us.

"I thought we could chat," she began. "My mom told me she never called Coach, so...I just wanted to know...how you knew, you know, about my mom."

"I—Tatyana, I really didn't know. It's just a feeling I get sometimes," I tried to explain.

“This isn’t true,” P.C. broke in authoritatively. “She has visions, premonitions, if you will, of future events that eventually come to pass. Her vision of your mother was much like the one she had before Yesenia’s accident.”

“P.C., why don’t you make a website about my premonitions? I think you could reach more people that way,” I said bitterly.

He nodded seriously, which made me worried. “Look,” I told him. “I was kidding. I just—I mean, could you not tell everyone? It kind of causes trouble for me. Could we just keep this a secret—between the three of us?”

Tatyana nodded. I knew she had more questions. She was still digesting everything P.C. had blurted out.

“P.C., you’ll promise not to tell anyone either? Please?” I pleaded.

“You mean it’s information for the SID, or the Secret Information Division. Yes, this is a subset of the Information Society. I am the director of this division, in addition to being, as I mentioned, the president of the Information Society. I can add your secret to our list.”

“But, wait, you can’t tell anyone else in the society, okay?” I asked again.

“Um,” Tatyana smiled slightly. “He’s, um, the only member of the society, hence being the president and director.”

I wanted to laugh, but I just exchanged a small smile with Tatyana instead. “Right, I guess we’re fine then.”

“I’m not sure why the number of members is relevant,” P.C. said stubbornly, and it became a little harder not to laugh.

My mom interrupted us then, and I felt a little relieved. I would be free from more questions for now.

Mom was wearing a flattering yellow sundress that I’d never seen her in before. She seemed almost giddy when she opened the door and saw us, calling out, “Oh, Leah! I thought I heard your voice, and you have friends! How wonderful! Why don’t you all come inside. I have such an amazing surprise for you, Leah. Your father’s here!” Then she seemed to almost dance back inside, floating on a wave of happiness. I stared blankly after her.

“How strange,” noted P.C. “The Information Society uncovered no mention of a father.”

I was still staring at the closed door. “I’ve never heard her mention my father before today,” I whispered. I’d always figured my father was dead. Mom would never talk about him.

“Your mother knows many things that you don’t,” P.C. mused.

Chapter 6

P.C. had wanted to accept the invitation, but Tatyana saved me, gently suggesting that perhaps I would want some privacy when I met my father for the first time. I smiled at her gratefully.

“Come on,” Tatyana said softly to P.C. “I’ll walk you home.”

P.C. stiffened in response. “Thank you, but that won’t be necessary,” he said abruptly, and then hurried away.

I didn’t understand his sudden coldness, and when I looked questioningly at Tatyana, she shrugged. Something in her eyes made me think she understood his actions, though, and just didn’t want to say anything. I promised to answer her questions later, and we said good-bye and I walked tentatively into the house.

The man who was supposedly my father was sitting on the couch in our living room. He looked like me, I guess, a little. His hair was dark like mine, with matching brown eyes. My mom was sitting awfully close to him. He stared intensely at me when I entered, but he didn’t smile. “Leah,” he said.

“Hi,” I responded. I didn’t know what else to say. “Hi Dad” didn’t really roll off of my tongue. I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why are you here?” I asked. I suddenly realized I was angry at him, for being gone so long and showing up now, for my mom’s strange and unnatural happiness.

“We have some things to talk about. Please sit.”

It seemed a bit weird to ask me to sit in my own house, but I did it anyway.

“Leah,” my mom broke in. She had that guilty look on her face, the kind that made her look older. “Your father—I—we—I mean, I know we’ve never talked about your father before.”

And we hadn’t. At all. I’d asked before, many times, but any mention of him always made her so sad, and she’d never really answered any of my questions, so eventually I’d stopped asking.

“The thing is, though,” my mother continued, “John—I mean, your father—has been gone...on...a mission—a very important mission. It’s like he’s just been at work for a very long time.”

“Uh huh,” I said. Why was she so ready to forgive this stranger? But, I guess, he wasn’t a stranger to *her*.

“And, honey,” my mother continued, “he’s here now because he needs to tell you some very important information about himself and about you. He’s—your father—he’s a little different

from us. I hope you'll understand and hear him out. He's here to help keep us safe because, well, because things aren't always safe for you."

She still looked guilty as she was saying it, and I didn't really know what she meant. I guessed she was referring to how I'm different, though, and how we have to move a lot.

"Leah," the strange man leaned towards me. "Tell me how you've *felt* about my being gone and then showing up now. It's made you *feel*...sad?"

He emphasized the word "feel", like it was terribly important. I shifted uncomfortably, feeling just a little like the lab rats we'd been dissecting in biology this week. "Uh, yeah, of course, and betrayed, I guess."

He paused for a minute as if pondering my words. "Betrayed," he echoed, "fascinating."

I felt repulsed now. Did he want to know about that feeling?

"Leah," he continued. "Like your mother said, I have to tell you a little about myself and about you. I have been working in this region for some time now with four colleagues. Our mission is to study human emotions."

"You're psychologists?" I asked.

"Yes, you can describe us that way. We are like psychologists, except that my colleagues and I do not experience human emotions. This is why we study them. Your mother and I—"

"Wait," I interrupted him. "How could you not experience emotions? That doesn't make sense."

"We are..." he paused, "different, as your mother said. This is all I can tell you right now. When I met your mother, she agreed to help me continue my studies. I wanted to know about the emotions associated with physical contact and procreation of progeny. Do you understand what I mean?"

He meant sex. He just couldn't say it. He wanted to know about the emotions associated with sex. Maybe no dad, whether he's in your life for years or, like mine, five minutes, really wants to say the word "sex" in front of his daughter.

"So we had you," my mother interjected, smiling.

O.K. I really didn't see where this was going. "So, um, you had me as part of some kind of experiment?" I asked. "To study me?"

He nodded curtly, not seeming to find this weird at all. "I could not tell my colleagues about this study. They may not have understood and, strictly speaking, it was a violation of our orders. You see, we have to send records of our findings and activities back to...our home base, but I

sent no records of you, so no one knew of your existence.” His face remained expressionless as he talked. I was beginning to believe he really did have no emotions.

“You had me as part of an experiment,” I repeated again, “and then you just left us?”

He nodded quickly again. He didn’t seem to get it.

“Honey,” my mom began, “he—he had to go. Please understand. He did have very important work to do that kept him away, and we didn’t want his other colleagues to find out about you.”

The man—my dad—whoever he was—continued to stare at me. “It bothers you,” he said slowly, “that you were part of an experiment. It makes you *feel* angry and sad.” Again he put that unnatural stress on the word “feel”.

“Yes! Good job!” my mom said, patting his knee, speaking the words like she was congratulating him on his insight. I said nothing. Were all psychologists like this?

“Mom,” I began. “You were okay with having a daughter as part of an experiment? That doesn’t bother you at all?”

Mom laughed gaily. “Oh, honey! Your father just talks like that. He makes it sound so scientific and formal. *Of course* that’s just the scientist in him exaggerating. Of course we love each other and you very much. Don’t you love us, John?”

John didn’t respond. Instead, he changed the subject. “To answer your earlier question, I am here now because you are in danger. Leah, you see visions. Will you tell me about them?”

I glanced at my mom. I didn’t want to tell this man anything. And besides, what was this, confessional day? First P.C. found out, then Tatyana, now my long lost father. Was CNN going to stop by later?

My mom saw my hesitation and nodded at me. “Please, Leah, tell him. I know your father...takes a little getting used to, but he’s here to help you, really. He wouldn’t be here now unless we needed him very, very badly.”

Right. He would have been content to stay out of my life forever. Still, my mom trusted him, and I didn’t see what choice I had. Also, I have to admit I was a little curious about these mysterious colleagues and dangers.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I see the future sometimes, and it’s always bad, like some tragedy or disaster, so I always try to stop it. I can never stop it, though, and lately, it appears I’m causing it.”

“That’s an interesting conclusion,” said John, “but I don’t see how you could alter the space time continuum.”

I smiled. “Yes, it is very arrogant of me.”

John nodded, agreeing. “Yes, I had figured out you had these visions, Leah,” he continued. “You have them whenever my colleagues and I are...working. I’ve seen you there before during our missions. You don’t usually disrupt much, fortunately. As you say, you can never stop these visions. Once, though, with Yesenia, you did change things. Do you remember?”

“You mean the stranger,” I responded. “He was one of your colleagues,” I suddenly realized.

John nodded.

“What was he doing with Yesenia?”

“Research. I can’t explain more, and it isn’t important now. What is important is that you realize, Leah, that when you spoke to my colleague, he couldn’t continue his mission, and, worse, you made him aware of your presence. He doesn’t yet know about...my relationship to you, but he’s digging for information. Your mother has been very careful up to this point. I don’t think he’ll discover anything yet, but it’s imperative that you don’t disturb any of my colleagues ever again. You must not make your presence known to them, for your own safety.”

I didn’t know what to say. Was John suggesting I should have allowed the stranger to kidnap Yesenia—so that no one would find out he had secretly fathered a child? I looked at him with disgust. Suddenly I turned on my mom, “That day, when I told you the story about Yesenia, and you said I’d imagined the stranger, did you know the stranger was one of John’s colleagues?” I asked. I said John’s name as coldly as I possibly could.

“Honey, I didn’t know anything for sure,” my mom answered carefully, but I understood there was more in her words than she was admitting.

“Why do I have to switch schools so often?” I asked, remembering P.C.’s words.

“I—You know why!” my mom was stunned.

“No, she doesn’t,” the man confirmed. “It’s for your protection. Your mother doesn’t want you attracting too much attention in any one place. She doesn’t want any of my colleagues to find out about you. She’s doing what she must to keep you safe.”

He meant she was doing what she must to protect John and keep me a secret! We really hadn’t been moving because of me. I suddenly felt very betrayed and alone. I stood up abruptly and glared at the man sitting next to my mother on the couch. “What *are* you?” I asked.

I expected him to look hurt, but his face remained a silent mask that revealed nothing. He held my gaze but remained silent. I felt shivers run up my spine and had to look away. I suddenly wanted to be as far away from him as possible. “I’m going for a run,” I mumbled, moving quickly towards the door.

“Leah!” my mom called, starting to come after me, but John stopped her.

“I believe she *feels* overwhelmed,” he stated. “I believe she needs some time alone.”

How utterly insightful of him. I shuddered again with disgust. My life was weird before, and I was weird before, but things felt like they made sense, at least. I’d sort of gotten used to things. It didn’t *feel* good to find out my deadbeat father was an emotionless madman that kidnapped young girls and called it research.

“Leah!” I heard someone call. If I had stopped to think about it, I wouldn’t have looked back, but I turned my head instinctively. It was P.C...and Tatyana.

“What...what are you guys doing here?” They were sitting in my front yard, and in my distraction I had run right past them without even noticing them.

“Uh...” Tatyana looked embarrassed. “He wouldn’t leave. I tried everything I could think of.”

“I want to know what happened,” P.C. said stubbornly. “Besides, she could use a friend right now.”

“Right, like *that’s* why you stayed,” Tatyana responded angrily, but P.C. ignored her.

“Look, could I just be—” but I couldn’t finish my thought. I started sobbing. John and his colleagues would have had a lot to add to their research if they could see me now.

I thought I wanted to be alone. That’s what I had started to tell them, but they stayed with me and walked with me, and I shared the whole painful experience with them. I’d never really had anyone besides my mother to talk to before, and while part of me wondered if I should be more secretive, it still felt good to just let go and talk. Tatyana was so kind and compassionate, and P.C. was so off the wall that he made me laugh, though he was never trying to.

“You say they have no emotions?” P.C. asked. “Well, then, the answer is obvious. They are much like Mr. Spock from the planet Vulcan.”

“Who?” I asked, confused.

“From *Star Trek*,” Tatyana clarified, rolling her eyes at me when P.C. wasn’t looking.

“Um, oh.” I didn’t really see how that made the answer obvious. “Um, what are you suggesting?”

“Well, that your father is not of this planet, obviously.”

“You’re really saying he’s an alien from Vulcan?” Tatyana asked. It made me uncomfortable that Taty and P.C. always seemed to be slightly annoyed at each other.

He shook his head and spoke to her like she was a small child. “He doesn’t *have* to be from that particular planet. Clearly there could be other species like Mr. Spock.” Now he rolled his eyes at her.

“Um, I’ve never been what you’d call normal, but I think this is all a little too weird even for me,” I confessed.

“Look,” P.C. began again. “You said your father called himself and his colleagues ‘different’, and you noted that they cannot express, in your words *human* emotion. Further, he’s never seen you before because he’s doing very important work that he has to relay to, again your words, his home base. Of course he’s referring to his home planet, and of course this important work is to study our world. Finally, you said that his colleagues are very dangerous and can never know about you. This is all very suspicious. It clearly points to alien activities. Trust me, my Society has researched alien activity extensively. I’ll show you the research tomorrow at school.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. We had wandered back to my house by now. I hadn’t even realized we had been walking this way. “Uh, I guess I should go now,” I mumbled. I suddenly wanted to be alone again.

“I wish you hadn’t said such weird things,” Tatyana scolded P.C. “You made her sad.”

“She shall know the truth, and the truth shall set her free,” P.C. said very seriously.

“Do you want to stay at my house tonight?” Tatyana asked me, ignoring him.

I thought about it. It was tempting, but I shook my head. “No...but thanks, both of you. Thanks for listening. I appreciate it.” I really did.

They both nodded, and Tatyana hugged me before they left. I could hear them bickering a little as they walked away. I took a deep breath and opened the door. My mother was sitting alone on the couch, waiting for my return.

“Leah!” she cried, relieved, running towards me.

I turned away from her coldly. “Is John an alien?” I asked. I’m not sure where the words came from, and once they were out I felt rather silly.

My mom stopped suddenly and stared at me. Slowly she nodded. “Yes, I suppose so,” she whispered.

Chapter 7

I didn’t talk to my mother that night. I know it seems like I should have asked her a million questions, but I think I was in shock. I went to my room and stared at the ceiling for I don’t know how long, and when my alarm woke me this morning, I was still wearing my clothes from yesterday. I showered and got ready for school, trying to think as little as possible. My mom

was already gone, but she'd left me a note asking me to call her. I crumpled it and threw it in the trash.

In the hall, I passed Make-Up Girl and Kai. She was curling her hair around her finger and giggling at something he was saying. I guess it was her best attempt at flirting. It looked so fake to me, and she had so much perfume on, the smell almost overpowered me as I walked by. I coughed loudly a little just for effect. She knew what I was doing. She raised her eyebrow at me, and I know she wanted to say something, but she held her tongue. She was still pretending to be nice when she was in front of him. Why couldn't he see through her?

In bio, Mrs. Tiu passed out an article from *The Scientist Today* and told us to read it and answer the questions with a partner. Tatyana asked me to join her and her friends, but I told her no.

"Can you meet me during brunch, though?" I asked. I don't know why I said it. I'd seen P.C. before school and asked him the same thing. I guess some part of me wanted to tell them. I couldn't imagine they'd still want to be friends with me afterwards, though, and if they told anyone...but they wouldn't tell anyone, right?

"Sure," Tatyana agreed. "Um, is there something you want to talk about?" She had picked up on my nervousness.

"Yeah, but not now."

She looked at me with concern. "You sure you don't want to work with us? Nina's really nice."

I glanced over at Nina. She was, like Tatyana, gorgeous. I felt a little outclassed. "Uh, I kind of just want to be alone to think about some things."

Tatyana nodded and left me alone.

The article was interesting. It was about an experiment in which scientists used computers to stimulate the rats' brains and control where they walked. First the scientists pressed the right arrow key on their computers. If the rats turned right, the computer stimulated the rats' brains so that the rats felt pleasure. The scientists were able to control how the rats moved, then, just by stimulating their brains. When the scientists stopped stimulating anything, the rats were confused and wouldn't move any more. I thought it was kind of interesting that it was so easy for people to control other animals.

"Alright, see ya Tyrone. Hey, can I join you? My partner just had to leave. Dentist appointment."

It was Kai. I knew it before I even looked up at him. I had already finished the assignment, though. I usually try to be more careful and pretend that it takes me as long as everyone else to complete the work, but I'd just wanted to finish and sit and think about everything from yesterday. I glanced at the clock. It had only been ten minutes. I definitely wasn't supposed to be done yet.

“Um, where did you leave off?” I asked.

“We’re about halfway through reading the article. You?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m not much farther.” I thought I could fake it.

We read the rest of the article together, but I was glad I’d already finished. I couldn’t really concentrate with him sitting right next to me. When we started the questions, I put my binder in front of my paper so he couldn’t see I was already done.

“This is pretty weird, isn’t it?” he asked. “I mean, I don’t know what I think about just controlling the poor little guys like that.”

“Oh, I guess,” I responded. I didn’t think it was weird, though. Should I say what I thought or just agree with him? I really didn’t know how to act. I took a deep breath and decided to be myself. “If we can learn from the rats, though, then why shouldn’t we study them? Who knows where experiments like this might lead. I mean, if we understand the brain better, that could mean big things.” Yes. I did it. I actually said what I thought.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “But I just don’t think it’s right. I’m not sure we should abuse our power just because we can.”

I nodded. I didn’t think we were abusing our power. Honestly, though, I was more interested in how I’d just had an intelligent conversation with Kai. I don’t think I’d ever said so many words in front of him before.

He smiled. “So how do you like Watson High School, Leah?”

“I like it, actually,” I responded. And I meant it. I liked this school better than any other I’d ever attended. I had friends here.

He nodded. “Seems like it. I’ve heard you’re quite the athlete on the soccer field.”

I blushed. “I’m alright,” I mumbled. “I don’t know who would have said that.”

“Tatyana,” he responded. “She speaks very highly of you.”

Tatyana had been talking about me to Kai? That was...nice. I’d really never had a friend like that before.

We answered a few more questions on the sheet. I was glad we had an activity to fill the silent patches.

“You’re friends with P.C.?” Kai asked. “What a character!”

I suddenly felt protective of P.C. I hoped Kai wasn't making fun of him. "He's great. I like him a lot," I responded quickly.

"He is great," Kai smiled, and I relaxed. "He's played some funny pranks over the years."

Were we talking about the same person? "P.C.? Pranks? What do you mean?"

"I've lived in this town my whole life, and most of the other students here have too. It's a small school, where everyone knows everyone, and people don't forget much. I think P.C. hopes people will forget, but no one ever will."

"Tell me what you mean," I said. "I really don't know anything."

"Well, he's a hacker, you know that right?"

"You mean the Information Society?" I asked.

Kai laughed. "He still calls it that? Yeah, that means he's a hacker."

I thought back to the description P.C. had given me. It was something about uncovering information in computer systems. Yes, I guess that meant hacking. I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before. P.C. just seemed so...not rebellious.

"Oh," I mused. "No, I didn't know. It doesn't sound like him."

"Maybe not, if you're first meeting him, I guess," Kai reflected. "Like I said, everyone knows everyone here. Now it seems so much a part of him to me. So when we were in middle school, the boys' and girls' locker rooms had doors that locked electronically. You had to swipe your school card to get in. P.C. hacked the code and unlocked the doors. He told a bunch of guys about it, and we all snuck in and surprised the girls. We didn't see anything. We were so excited we went in too early before anyone had started changing. P.C. never got caught, but everyone knew it was him."

"Whoa. I definitely wouldn't have thought him capable."

"And then there was this other time," Kai continued, "when he hacked into the bell system at the school. He made it so that the bell rang just ten seconds earlier every day. I think school was ending a good ten minutes early before anyone caught on and fixed it."

"And he didn't get caught again?"

"No, but it was close. He waits a couple of years in between pranks so that people don't get too suspicious."

I laughed. I was beginning to relax a little. "He definitely didn't mention any of that." My paper fell to the ground at Kai's feet then. He reached down to pick it up.

“Oh,” he said, surprised. “You’re done. Guess I’ve been talking a lot.”

“No! I did them earlier,” I answered awkwardly. “I liked it, that you were talking a lot, I mean, not that you were talking a lot. I just mean I liked it.” Ugh. Could I *be* any stupider?

Kai smiled and began filling in the rest of the answers on his sheet. The bell rang, then, saving me from further awkwardness.

“I liked talking with you, too,” he said, packing up his stuff. “Like I said, it’s nice to meet someone who doesn’t already know everything about everyone.”

He left then, and I practically floated to my next class. Eat that, Make-Up Girl.

We had a test in math second period. I finished it in ten minutes, but I knew it would take most of the students the rest of the period. Normally I’d pretend to be still working on it so no one would notice me, but, like in bio, I just didn’t have the strength to pretend today. I wanted to think about my conversation with Kai and feel happy, but I kept thinking about yesterday...and about John.

I was grateful that, after the period ended to release us to brunch, P.C. and Tatyana were already waiting for me at my locker.

“So what is it?” P.C. asked eagerly.

“Um, you won’t tell anyone, right?” I whispered to them. I was starting to feel weird about sharing this secret. They both huddled closer to me so that they could hear.

“Of course not,” Tatyana said, and I could tell by her face that she meant it. Yes, she was definitely a trustworthy friend.

I glanced at P.C. He put his right hand solemnly over his heart and recited, “The Secret Division of the Information Society is sworn to protect your confidentiality.”

“Uh, okay.” He seemed like he took that oath seriously. “Um, P.C. was right,” I whispered.

“Yes! I knew it!” he cried. “Tell me about Vulcan!”

“Wait,” Tatyana was confused. “That’s not what she means, you dolt. Obviously you’re not right about that.” She turned to me. “What was he right about? And, please, never begin a conversation this way again, even if he does stumble upon the truth accidentally.”

“Er...” Really, I couldn’t blame her. I wouldn’t believe he was right, either. “He’s right about...what he thinks he’s right about.”

Her jaw fell.

“And I don’t know anything about the planet Vulcan,” I added hastily. “I don’t know any details at all.”

“This is awesome!” cried P.C. “The Information Society has never had contact with an extraterrestrial before—at least, never in front of other witnesses,” he said, glancing at Tatyana.

Tatyana blinked. “You’re serious.” I think she was in shock. Maybe she would have to stare at the ceiling for a few hours to process the information too. I was still planning to do that a while longer when I got home.

“That’s why you’re so good in bio,” Taty said slowly.

“I’m not—” I automatically began denying it.

“No, you are,” she said definitively. “I’ve seen you pretending you haven’t finished an assignment when everyone else is still working. I know because you usually start staring at—well, you know.” P.C. looked at me quizzically. I knew he couldn’t stand not knowing who she was talking about. “And that’s why you’re so amazing on the soccer field,” Taty continued. “And it’s why you knew about my mother and Yesenia. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think I believe you.”

“The thing is, I don’t feel *that* different from other people,” I broke in. Part of me didn’t want them to believe so easily that I was an alien. “I mean, I might be smarter than most people, and I might have more physical ability than most, but I’m not exactly superhuman. I’m not so strong that I can bend steel with my teeth, and I’m not so smart that I instantly know the answer to every question ever asked.”

“True, you’re not *that* smart, certainly not as smart as Mr. Spock,” P.C. confirmed, and I was mildly offended. “But you do seem to be smarter, stronger, and faster than most. That’s still an important point.”

“And you have the visions,” Taty agreed. She was firmly on P.C.’s side now. “Maybe these, er, extraterrestrials aren’t *that* much more advanced than us.”

“So I was right then,” P.C. confirmed, not wanting Tatyana to miss this point. “What about Area 51? Can you verify that this was, in fact, an alien invasion? Oh, this is awesome!”

“This isn’t awesome,” I cried, suddenly losing my temper. “I don’t like being good at biology or soccer or having visions. I just want to be normal!” I said the last sentence much louder than I’d intended, and it rang out above the other conversations in the halls.

“Fat chance of that happening!” I heard a voice say coldly from behind me. I turned to see Make-Up Girl walking with her stupid friends. “Taty, why are you hanging out with these *losers*?” She said the word so coldly it seemed to hang in the air. I wanted to say something

clever back, but her words seemed to float around my body, freezing my tongue in place. I looked at P.C. Why *was* Tatyana hanging out with us? We were losers.

“Get a life, Brianna,” Taty called to her.

The bell rang then, and we all started leaving for class. P.C. followed me, though, spouting off more questions about the existence of aliens from movies, books, and television shows. He didn’t seem at all concerned with what Brianna had said.

I felt a little lousy, suddenly, worse than yesterday even. It was amazing how the truth could suddenly bring you down.

Chapter 8

We were at lunch when it happened. Tatyana wasn’t eating with us. Some guy named Rick had asked her to eat lunch with him, and she was pretty excited about it. P.C. looked very calm when she mentioned it, and I got this weird feeling he was just itching to research the poor kid online to find out every lie Rick had ever told and whether he wore boxers or briefs. I was happy for her, and I couldn’t help feeling it was maybe for the best. I really didn’t want P.C. and me to ruin her reputation.

I was in the middle of a bite of peanut butter and jelly with the crusts cut off (thanks, Mom) when I suddenly felt nauseous. I clutched my stomach and moaned softly, and P.C.’s voice sounded very far away.

“I’ll be out for a while, Mom. Don’t expect me for dinner,” a boy called as the screen door banged shut. He was about my age, with long brown hair that flapped in his eyes. He was carrying an artist’s easel in one arm, a bag slung over his shoulder. He loaded his materials into his bike basket and biked for a while, stopping when he reached the edge of the woods. I watched him wander onto a trail that I could tell he’d walked dozens of times before. After a mile or so he reached a lake. He stopped and admired it for a moment before starting to set up his easel. But then he paused suddenly, his gaze drifting to the left. Had he heard something? I wasn’t sure. But he dropped his supplies by the lake and started walking determinedly away from the trail.

When I came back to my senses, P.C. was practically dancing. “Did it happen? What’d you see? Aliens? Your father?” he asked eagerly.

I quickly described the vision to him.

“That’s it?” he asked. “Then it’s not really a problem, is it? You didn’t see anything bad happen. You’re drooling,” he added as an afterthought.

I touched my face. I was. I wiped it quickly away, hoping no one had seen. “I know...I always see something bad happen. I don’t get it. Still, I think the boy’s in trouble. I can’t ignore it. I’m going to have to go.”

P.C. paused for a moment. “How will you know where to go?”

“Oh, I know exactly where to go. It’s just...part of the vision I guess. I always know the details I need. The boy was in Foothills Park.”

He was silent again, before asking, “When will you go?”

Hm. Normally I’d just cut and have my mom excuse me later, but now, after that meeting with her and my father, I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t sure I’d want to tell her about whatever happened today. I looked at P.C. “Er, do you think you—I mean, The Information Society—could get me excused from fifth and sixth period?” Now that I knew the kind of stunts P.C. pulled, I figured clearing an absence would be a pretty easy job for him.

He looked at me suspiciously, but I could tell he didn’t want to ask how I knew he was used to doing things like that. “Leah,” he began very seriously, “I’ve thought about this, and I don’t think you should go.”

“Um, okay.” Why wouldn’t I try to save the poor boy from whatever was in the woods?

“Think about it. Why does your father kidnap people? What does he do with them? Alien abductions are very serious; I’ve read the research and testimonials.”

I almost laughed then, but I managed to stop myself.

“Look, if you ever want to find out what your father is planning, you have to let someone get abducted. We need to find out what happens to him. Do they return the people they kidnap? If they do, do the people act differently? What happens to them? We’ll never know these answers if you prevent the kidnappings.”

I stared at him with my jaw open for a second. “Are you insane? You think I should just let aliens abduct this poor boy?”

“So that we can learn more, yes. Leah, we don’t even know the boy. If we at least knew who he was, like with Yesenia, it might be different. If he was all the way in Foothills Park, he probably doesn’t even go to our school.”

I shook my head. “That’s pretty twisted, P.C.”

He looked sad then, and I wish I hadn’t said it. I stared at the ground for a while. “Look, are you going to excuse me or what?”

He stared at me. I knew he wanted to lie and say he didn’t know how, but, well, P.C. doesn’t lie. “You don’t have to save the world, Leah,” he said softly.

“I’m not trying to—I just want to help this boy. If you suddenly had visions of people in danger, you wouldn’t be able to ignore them either.”

“You don’t know he’s in danger.”

“If he’s not, it won’t matter that I go.”

Finally, he nodded. “Alright. Decided you have. Help you I will.”

P.C. started walking swiftly then, and when I didn’t follow, he came back and grabbed me by the wrist, pulling me along with him.

“Uh, where are we going?” I asked.

“To my office. I need to grab some supplies.”

His office? “Uh, P.C., you’re, um, I mean, you don’t need to come with me to save this boy.”

“Of course I’m coming,” he said matter of factly, as if I were a bit of a fool.

“I’ve, you know, I’ve always gone alone before. I’m pretty sure I’ll be okay.”

He stopped walking then suddenly and turned to face me. “The Information Society cannot lose this opportunity for knowledge,” he told me very seriously.

Right, then. So he wasn’t coming to keep me safe. He was coming for knowledge. I felt a little silly for thinking he was coming to protect me. I had to admit I was glad to have someone go with me, though.

He led us to the gym and then up stairs that I didn’t even know existed. We stopped at a little office just above the gym.

“Whoa, I didn’t even know there was a floor above the gym. How’d you find this?”

P.C. opened the door to a small room that was cluttered with technology. I recognized the computer on the desk in the corner, but I didn’t know what most of the other stuff was.

“This is my office,” P.C. declared proudly. “I just happened upon it one night when I was wandering the halls after school hours.”

“How do you have an office in our high school?” I didn’t think they issued those to students.

“Well, I changed the locks, so no one at the school can enter except me.”

“And no one ever tries to change the locks again? I can’t believe the school would just let this office sit because they don’t have a key.”

“Er, I also installed a thumbprint scanner. The lock doesn’t actually do anything. Only my thumbprint will open the door.”

“Whoa. That’s, er, bold of you. Why doesn’t the school just replace the door or something? And don’t they notice the thumbprint scanner?”

“It’s hard to see unless you’re looking for it. And, Leah, you’d be surprised. There are a lot of unused rooms and offices in the school. People do try to get into this office and test different keys on the door now and then, but they don’t try that hard. The teachers and principals are busy. They don’t want to waste a lot of time getting into a forgotten office.”

Wow. There was a lot I wouldn’t have guessed about P.C.

He grabbed some strange supplies and shoved them in his backpack. I had no idea what they were.

“Leah,” he said sternly as we left, “you’re sworn to secrecy, you know. The Information Society takes its secrets very seriously. We don’t share them with just anyone.”

“Um, I feel very honored you showed me this. I won’t tell anyone, of course.” Who would I tell? Who would believe me?

We ran into Taty in front of the school just as the bell for fifth period was ringing. She was practically floating. “Hi!” she called beaming. “Oh, how wonderful to run into you two. Lunch was wonderful! Rick is wonderful!”

“That’s nice. Leah had a vision about a boy in a forest and now we’re going to go save him,” P.C. said flatly.

Tatyana just stared at him for a minute. She was having trouble coming down from her excitement at lunch. I kind of wish P.C. hadn’t decided to tell her this right now.

“Want to come with us?” I asked.

“Um…” Taty hesitated, then glanced at P.C.

P.C. rolled his eyes. “I’ll excuse you from class,” he told her, as if this was an especially large burden for him.

“Uh, okay,” Taty agreed. “You’re skipping practice?” she asked me.

Even though it did seem like such an unimportant thing to worry about right now, I had to admit I was thinking the same thing as she. I didn’t want to skip. Coach would make us run three miles for missing practice without telling him. “I know,” I told her. “The vision happens right after school, and we’ll have to hop on the bus now if we want to get there in time. You can stay if you want. I’d understand.”

“No, it was a stupid question,” she admitted. “Of course I’m in.”

We were all quiet for a while as we scurried to the bus stop. Students were still loitering in the halls, so no one really noticed us leave. It wasn’t until we were seated on the bus that we really got a chance to talk.

“So tell us about Rick,” I began. “What’d you talk about?” I wanted her to distract me from worrying and wondering about what would happen when we got there.

“Oh, Leah! It was just so...wonderful! He bought me lunch. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Leah didn’t actually see anything happen to this kid we’re going to supposedly save,” P.C. broke in. “I told her she should just leave him alone so we can see what the aliens are plotting, but she has a savior mentality.”

Again, it took Taty a minute to shift from her memories of lunch. “Oh,” she mumbled. “Maybe you should fill me in on what you saw, Leah.”

I shared the story with her quickly. I didn’t really want to think about it, honestly. What were we supposed to do when we got there? P.C. was right. It was a bit stupid that I was rushing off to save the day, I supposed, although I wasn’t sure I agreed about the savior mentality thing. “So that’s it,” I finished the story. “What did he buy you for lunch?” I wanted more details about Rick.

“I thought you couldn’t date,” P.C. broke in again.

“Oh,” said Taty. “It wasn’t—I mean, I can’t. It wasn’t a date, P.C. We just had lunch together during the school day. I’ve done that with you before.”

“Are you going to tell your parents about this Rick?” P.C. asked. “He only has a 2.5 GPA, you know. If you gave him a penny for his thoughts, I think you might get change back.”

Taty’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not going to tell my parents.”

“Because you’re not allowed to date until you’re seventeen,” P.C. responded, but the way he said it, it was almost a question.

“Because I’m not allowed to date until I’m seventeen,” Taty agreed.

Suddenly it felt very awkward in the bus. I stared out the window for a while and pretended I hadn’t heard the whole conversation. It was a bit of a relief when, fifteen minutes of silence later, we arrived.

“This is it,” I said awkwardly, standing up. They both followed me in silence, and I quietly led the way. It was going to be a bit of a walk.

“So what is our plan when we arrive?” P.C. asked. He said it so naturally, as if he hadn’t just asked Taty weird and awkward questions about her dating life earlier.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. Maybe he falls in the lake or something, and we’ll pull him out.”

“Wait,” P.C. stopped walking suddenly. “You understand that *they* will be there, right?”

“Who? My fa—I mean, John?” I couldn’t call him my father. It sounded too disgusting in my mouth.

“Of course,” P.C. said simply.

“No, I only saw the aliens in one of my visions. I’ve never seen a man—a kidnapping—like I did with Yesenia.”

“Right,” Taty cut in. “When she saw my mother, it was just an accident. No aliens.” I could tell Taty was happy to say anything that proved P.C. wrong.

“Maybe Leah didn’t see the aliens, and maybe *you* didn’t, Taty, but they were there. You just didn’t get there in time. The aliens are always there when Leah has a vision. That’s why she has the visions. How am I the only one who knows this?”

“P.C.,” I paused. I felt like I had to break this to him gently. “The aliens aren’t always involved in my visions, and I’m pretty sure you won’t see any aliens today.”

“We’ll see,” he said confidently.

Weird. I had never thought the aliens were involved in all of my visions. I still didn’t think they were. Like Taty said, her mom just fell. I hated the thought that I had some connection to these aliens, not just through genetics but through my visions as well.

“Look,” P.C. broke in. “I researched it, okay? Wherever you’ve lived, Leah, there have been local kidnappings. Sometimes the victims are returned to their families, but sometimes they aren’t. It’s the aliens. They follow you. Or you follow them, I don’t know which. But wherever you live, there are kidnappings.”

“There are kidnappings everywhere,” I said slowly. I didn’t want to think about what he was saying.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, you’re right.”

“Were there more kidnappings than normal in the areas where Leah lived?” asked Taty.

“No,” P.C. conceded. “Just...enough to make me suspicious.”

Taty nodded with satisfaction. He was wrong again. She liked that.

“I’m just saying,” P.C. continued. “I think when you have your visions, it’s because the aliens are there doing something. Think about it, Leah.”

We lapsed into silence again.

Chapter 9

When we were in the right spot, I knew it. I saw his easel and bag lying in the dirt. The boy I had seen had been here recently, and in my vision, he turned left from this spot. I suddenly felt we had to hurry. I started to jog a little, and then I started to sprint.

“Hey, Superwoman, wait up!” I heard Taty call behind me, but I didn’t slow down. We were close, and they could catch up to me. I felt frantic. What if he was already drowning or in trouble?

Then I saw him. I crouched behind a bush. For some reason, I didn’t want him to see me. He was staring intently at something that I couldn’t see. We were deep in the woods now. I felt a chill run down my spine. We were very alone. No one would hear us scream.

I jumped with surprise when Taty and P.C. caught up and joined me behind the bush. They crouched beside me quietly and together we waited.

I felt my stomach start to twist and turn on itself then. I tried to fight it off, tried to will myself to stay conscious, but I couldn’t.

Taty, P.C., and I were in the woods, crouched behind the bush, watching the boy, just like now. The boy suddenly flinched as if he had been hit by something, and then he fell to the ground, lifeless. He might have been dead; I couldn’t tell. Taty gasped, but still the three of us stayed frozen in place. Then a man stepped out from the trees. He had that same empty, expressionless look on his face as the stranger who’d try to take Yesenia. Actually, he had the same blank look on his face as John. Slowly, the man knelt and picked up the boy, effortlessly slumping the boy’s body over his shoulder. The man began to walk away then, carrying the boy.

P.C. was right. The aliens were here.

I thought quickly about what to do next. I’d never had a vision that left me so little time to think and act before. Usually I saw the future hours or days before it actually happened, not minutes. I wanted to tell P.C. and Taty, but I wasn’t sure if there was time. I didn’t know if there was time for anything. When Yesenia had been in trouble, I only had to stand up and start talking. The aliens hadn’t wanted to take her when they saw there were witnesses.

Impulsively, I stood up and began to walk towards the boy. He didn’t see me yet, so I opened my mouth to call out to him.

Instantly, I felt a strong hand clamp itself tightly over my mouth, as another arm wrapped itself around my body. I struggled desperately, fear gripping me. My arms were being pinned against my chest, and I couldn't move or yell out. Then I felt the needle poke into my side. I fought to free my hands, but slowly a feeling of numbness started to spread throughout my body, and that's the last thing I remember.

I awoke splayed on the floor of the woods. I didn't know how long I'd been sleeping, but my body felt stiff from lying on the hard dirt. I instantly felt awake and jumped to my feet, looking for Taty, P.C., or the boy. I saw no one. I was about to call out, when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Sit, daughter." The words made me freeze. I turned around slowly.

"John," I said. I imagined the word bothered him, that he was sad or irritated that I wouldn't call him father, but he didn't react. His face was, as always, completely without emotion.

I walked to where he was sitting on a rock but refused to sit. "How long have I been here?" I asked.

"Sit," he commanded again. I wanted to refuse again, but it suddenly seemed too childish. Why bother trying to make him angry at me when he doesn't feel anger? But that isn't why I sat down. I still felt weak, like I might pass out at any minute, and so I crumpled on the ground beside him.

"You had a vision we would be here," John said flatly.

"Yes," I replied. I didn't want to give too many details.

"Tell me your vision." His manner was very different now than when I had met him with my mother. Then he seemed, well, happier. That's not the right word, I suppose. I guess he never feels happy, but before he seemed less serious, less scary, less evil, and more child-like. Before he seemed like a strange man sitting on my couch telling me my birth was part of a psychology experiment. Now he seemed more like a perverted, scary man who kidnapped kids with his gang of friends. I guess that's always who he was, but I didn't actually see him there when Yesenia was in danger. Now that I'd seen him participating in the kidnapping, he just seemed more...twisted.

More than that, though, I got the strange feeling that he'd been acting before, for my mom's benefit, to trick her into...loving him. The thought sickened me. My mother wasn't here now. There was no reason to act any more.

The silence had stretched for a while, so he said again, "Tell me your vision, Leah."

I shook my head. "Tell me why you kidnap people," I responded.

“Don’t think for a minute that I don’t possess the means of making you talk,” he responded, and I shivered. Was he talking about another shot with the needle? Or some strange alien torture?

“I don’t see why that should be our relationship, however,” he continued. “After all, I am your father, aren’t I? Fathers don’t torture their children to get them to talk.”

Right. So he was referring to torture, then.

“I have information you want, and I don’t mind sharing some details about my work with you. And you, Leah, are terribly interesting to me. I want to know everything about your visions. Tell me what you saw.”

I hesitated. I reasoned to myself that we were just going to share information and that I was being very strategic right now. I would tell him about the visions, which seemed pretty harmless, all the while gaining information about the kidnappings. This was the only reason why I was talking to him, I reasoned, but, really, my fear of alien torture might have had something to do with it, too. So I described to him the vision I’d seen of the boy biking to the lake.

“You didn’t see what happened to Dante, then?” John asked. Dante. That must be the boy’s name.

I shook my head. “Why didn’t I?” I asked. He paused. “You promised to talk, too,” I reminded him. “We’re just a father and daughter, discussing our lives with each other.”

He nodded, and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but he responded, “We didn’t decide on a plan until the last minute. You saw that the boy was in danger and that we had decided to take him while he was in the woods after school today. Those are all of the details we had planned, but exactly when and how we would do it had not yet been decided, so there was nothing for you to see. As my colleagues and I perfect our system, it is my belief that you should have fewer and fewer of these visions.”

I felt sick. That’s why I’d had a second vision so soon before the kidnapping occurred. John and his men hadn’t decided what they were going to do until right before it happened. I wondered briefly if John knew about my second vision; I didn’t want to tell him about it. I didn’t want him to know that I could still see what they were planning, just not until it was too late. “John,” his name felt like ice in my mouth. “When I have visions, are you or one of your...uh, colleagues always involved?” I wanted to test P.C.’s theory.

“Of course. I would have thought you’d have figured that out by now.”

“But with Tatyana’s mother—”

“We were there,” he confirmed. “That’s why she slipped down the stairs. She saw us, and it terrified her. We erased the memory later, however, so she believes she merely slipped when her daughter came home.”

“You didn’t take her,” I noted.

“We would have,” he stated. “but her daughter arrived. No matter, though. We scanned her brain and can still run our experiments later, should we so choose.”

“What will you do with the boy, with Dante?”

“I told you already. We’ll study his emotions.”

“Why?” I breathed. “Why do you do this?”

“For knowledge, of course,” he answered flatly. “Isn’t that what all people want? To understand more about the world around them?”

But you’re *not* human, I wanted to scream. But then again, I wasn’t human either.

I thought back to what P.C. had said earlier today. “How do you choose your victims?” I asked.

“I had thought that would be obvious, too. I choose people who have an emotional attachment to you. My colleagues don’t know this, of course, because they don’t know about you. I told you, Leah, you fascinate me.”

I thought about this answer and mentally flipped through the list of people I’d had visions about in the past. Some of them I did have a slight emotional attachment to, but nothing major, nothing like what I had for, say, my mother. But, really, I understood why he didn’t need to take my mother. She participated in his studies willingly. “But, a lot of the people I saw in my visions were strangers to me. I didn’t have any emotional attachment to Yesenia or Taty’s mother...not until after I had visions of them, anyway. Now I do worry about them and think of them.”

“Exactly,” John confirmed. “You have an emotional attachment to them now. Studying you allows me to sense that attachment, no matter when it is created. I cannot reveal more at this time. But what you say is interesting. Our interference created the emotional attachment. That is very interesting.” I got the uncomfortable feeling I had just revealed too much. “Time, you see, is not as important for us as it is for you. It doesn’t matter when the emotional attachment is formed, so long as it’s there at one point in time.” I really didn’t understand what he was talking about, but I nodded anyway.

I thought about everyone from my visions in a different way, now. I guess I did care about all of them, at least a little bit. Honestly, apart from my mother, I hadn’t been very close to anyone in my life before P.C. and Tatyana. I suddenly felt my stomach tighten. Were they okay?

“Thank you for this talk, Leah,” John said suddenly. “I’ve learned infinitely more about you from the questions you’ve asked.” I shuddered. So I’d given away more information than I’d realized. I was wondering why he was letting me ask so many of the questions. “Why don’t you take me and study me?” I asked, still feeling very protective of Taty and P.C.

“I can’t do that. It’s against the rules. We don’t do that to our own kind. That would be wrong.”

I didn’t like thinking of myself as one of *his* kind.

“Leah, I brought you here for more than just questions. As I told you before, my colleagues don’t know of your existence, and it is crucial that they never find out. When my colleague was taking Yesenia, and you spoke, everyone became suspicious. He tried to control your mind, and it didn’t work. Of course, when people concentrate, we can’t control their minds, but most people don’t concentrate and block us out. It made my colleague suspicious that you blocked him out so successfully. If my colleagues had seen you here today, if I hadn’t stepped in and grabbed you...” He didn’t finish his sentence.

I was sure he liked thinking of himself as the hero who had saved me. Suddenly I felt angry, and my anger made me bold. “I’m not thankful that you grabbed me and shoved a needle in my side,” I told him. “And I’m not going to keep your secret for you. I don’t really care if they find out. Every time I have a vision, I will be there, and I will try to stop you.”

My words hung in the air for several seconds. “You will care,” he told me, “because it is not only you and I who will suffer. Your mother will suffer as well.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but he spoke again, “And, Leah, remember that I have no feelings. I do not care at all what happens to your mother, no matter what she thinks or how it might appear. In any situation, I will act only in my own best interest.”

He moved towards me swiftly, then, so swiftly that I didn’t have time to react. My arms were pinned and I felt the needle prick my side before I knew what was happening.

Chapter 10

I was in my room when I woke up, lying on my bed. I blinked several times. I didn’t think I had dreamed any of it, but I felt so disoriented.

“Oh, honey! You’re okay,” I heard my mother call to me. Instantly her hand was on my forehead, feeling my temperature and then smoothing my hair. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said, leaning down to hug me. “Thank goodness your father was there.”

My body stiffened as she spoke the words. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, thank goodness he found you! He told me about how he found you passed out in the woods. You must have fallen and hit your head. I’m so glad he was there to take care of you.”

“I didn’t fall and hit my head, Mom,” I told her firmly. “John did *not* find me and save me.”

“Oh, I don’t know if you remember even seeing him, Leah,” Tatyana said, stepping forward. P.C. was with her. I hadn’t even noticed them. They were okay! “We told your mom

everything,” she continued. “You know, about how we decided to go for a hike after school, and—”

“I can’t believe you skipped soccer practice!” my mom interrupted in amazement.

“I know, pretty stupid idea,” Taty agreed. “We won’t do it again Mrs. Vera.” Taty looked pointedly at me as she continued her story, “So John brought you here. We told your mom about how you fell and hit your head very hard during our hike, but John arrived unexpectedly and carried you to his car. Then he gave us all a lift here.”

I nodded. There had better be a very good reason why we were lying and making John sound like a hero. I knew there was though. Whatever John had given me was wearing off, and I remembered clearly now that everyone attached to me—that meant the three people in this room with me—were in danger now. I wondered if John had told Taty and P.C. that.

“Oh, what a wonderful man!” my mom gushed. “If you had seen him walk into the house with you in his arms, Leah! He was so gentle with you. It was beautiful to watch.”

“Mom, please, you’re making me want to throw up,” I told her.

My mom looked mildly hurt at first, but her face broke into a smile again. I’d never seen my mother happier than these last few days when John has been in our lives. That made my chest ache a little bit, thinking of how lonely she must be if she perked up at the sight of a scary alien that lures teenagers into the woods.

“Are you children staying for dinner?” my mom asked P.C. and Taty. How I wished she hadn’t just called them children.

“Mom, they’re not ten,” I complained.

“We’re having meatloaf surprise!” my mom said cheerily. Yikes. Any dish with “surprise” as part of its title is a definite no. Now I knew they wouldn’t stay.

“Oh, yes ma’am!” cried P.C. eagerly. He’d been strangely quiet during this whole time. I wondered what was on his mind.

“Er, actually, we probably should, you know, let Leah and her mother have some time alone,” Taty stated. I smiled at her. I did have some things I wanted to talk to my mother about, actually.

The pain on P.C.’s face was sincere. I think he really wanted the meatloaf surprise.

“I’ll walk you both to the door,” I told them.

Once we were outside the house, I looked at them both quizzically. “Why are we lying?” I asked.

“Um, your father is a scary man,” P.C. admitted.

“A very scary man,” Taty confirmed. “Look, here’s the shortened version of the story. After you stood up and your father grabbed you, you collapsed almost instantly. We thought you were dead. Then genius boy here jumps up and pulls this crazy contraption out of his backpack and throws it on the ground at your father’s feet.”

“It wasn’t a crazy contraption,” P.C. cut in. “It was a ghost trap, THE ghost trap, actually.”

“Wait, like the one the guys use in *Ghostbusters*?” I asked.

“Of course. I recreated it after watching the movie extensively for research. It looks and works exactly like the original,” he stated proudly.

Tatyana blurted, “Genius, her father’s not a ghost.”

“Well, close enough. I didn’t have an alien trap. And I didn’t see you pulling anything clever out of your backpack. Besides, where do you get off making fun of my intelligence? At least I’m not dating someone who’s like a pair of children’s scissors—pretty to look at but not very sharp.”

Taty rolled her eyes. “So anyway, John just sort of stares at the ghost trap, or whatever it was, while it makes strange noises and flashes lights.”

“Really? He wasn’t sucked into it?” I asked. I couldn’t resist. I was glad they were okay, but a ghost trap? Classic.

P.C. refused to comment.

“Strangely, no,” Taty continued. “Neither P.C. nor I remember a thing after that. All we remember is being in front of your house with John carrying your limp body. He told us that we would agree with whatever he said, and, Leah, it’s weird, but when John was here, I *couldn’t* disagree with him. I really believed that what he was saying was true. It was the strangest thing.”

“Not strange at all,” P.C. noted. “Clearly the aliens have the power to control our thoughts. Leah mentioned a similar occurrence when the alien was taking Yesenia.” He looked at me. “You told us that you and the people believed the alien was helping Yesenia. Clearly, the alien was controlling everyone’s mind then, too, but somehow, Leah, you broke free.” He looked at me very seriously then and said, “Probably because you’re one of them.”

For some reason the serious expression on his face made me want to laugh, even though I knew there was truth in what he was saying. “Wait, John told me about that,” I told them. “He said that anyone can resist the mind control games as long as you concentrate.”

They both nodded worriedly, contemplating this new information.

“What do you remember?” P.C. asked, still with his very serious face.

I thought for a minute. Maybe I shouldn’t tell them that, because I felt an attachment to them, they were at the top of the aliens’ hit list. I could just stop hanging out with them at school, and maybe they’d be safer. But then again, I felt an attachment to them now, and John had said time wasn’t important to him the same way it was to me—whatever that meant. It did mean, though, that if I felt attached to them at any point in my life, then they were in danger. I decided they had a right to know that, so I shared everything that John had told me.

P.C. smiled a little bit after I finished. “Whoa...the aliens want us.”

Taty was quieter. I took that as a sign that she grasped the danger more clearly than P.C.

“Come on,” P.C. said to Taty. “Let’s go and leave her to her mother. I’ve got to go get some gadgets together for this possible abduction.”

I grabbed both of their hands quickly. “Take care of yourselves, okay?”

They both nodded. Even P.C. suddenly looked more serious. “I’ll ask my mom to give Taty a ride home,” he said, “so she won’t have to walk.”

“You take care of yourself, too,” Taty told me. Then they turned to walk away.

“Wait,” I called suddenly. “What about my mom? I mean, should I tell her that John is, you know, a scary man?”

“A very scary man,” P.C. corrected, “but, no, you shouldn’t tell her.”

“I agree,” Taty confirmed, and in different circumstances, she would have been too annoyed to admit this. John must have really scared her. “I don’t think that she’s ready to hear that, Leah. She really, um, *loves* him,” she said the word with disgust, not that I blamed her. I felt disgusted at the thought too.

P.C. nodded. “Clearly, John didn’t want her to know about today, and we don’t want to anger him by telling her. Also, we don’t yet have enough information. How can we do anything to save her if anything does happen to her? You’d just be worrying her needlessly. We need to research these aliens and gather evidence. I will find out what they are doing with this Dante fellow and report back. It’s never wise to tell parents *too* much, Leah. They just don’t understand these matters as well as we do.”

I really didn’t know what he meant by that last statement. Was he saying my mother didn’t understand evil, emotionless extra terrestrials as well as I did? Because I really couldn’t say I understood them so well myself. Still, I agreed with Taty and P.C. I didn’t want to tell my mother, for all of the reasons they stated, but also one more. What if she didn’t believe me? Her

eyes lit up any time John's name was mentioned. Like Taty said, Mom really did seem to love him, and I'm not sure she'd believe anything bad about him, especially...that he's evil. And I couldn't bear it if she didn't believe me.

I said good-bye to P.C and Taty, and when I walked back inside, the meatloaf surprise was already on the table. Mom must have prepared it earlier. It was pretty much meatloaf burnt to a crisp. The real surprise was how we were able to eat it without cracking a tooth.

"Oh, Leah, do sit down," my mom said. "I can't believe you were standing out there so long. Is your head okay?"

I nodded.

"I like your little boyfriend! What a dear."

"Oh, mom, P.C. is not my boyfriend." And do you have to call him "little"?

She looked at me as if there must be something I wasn't telling her. I sank into my chair, suddenly overwhelmed by grief. I tell my mom *everything*. How could I not tell her what happened today? Still, I bit my tongue. She loves John, I reminded myself, and she wouldn't believe me.

My silence left me feeling empty in the pit of my stomach. My mother had always been my ally, the one who knew everything about me, the one I told everything to, but now I couldn't talk to her. I'd have to rely on P.C. and Taty now.

"Mom," I began, "you know, you were right. I was very lucky that John was there."

"Oh! I'm so glad you realized that. I knew you would," she said, clapping her hands together.

I hated lying to her even more, but I wanted to ask her something, and I thought she'd give me more information if I talked about John a little first. That always put her in a good mood. "Um, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, honey! Anything," she said warmly.

"Why exactly did we move so much?"

She paused. "Oh, you know why, dear. We didn't want people to talk about you and your visions. You wanted to change schools too, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. I mean, I know that part, but, well, how did you pick the places we moved?"

"Oh, you know...just places that sounded interesting," she answered nervously, slopping some meatloaf surprise on my plate. It landed with a thud.

“Did, um, did John help you decide where to go?”

She looked at me with suspicion. “Did John tell you that? I thought you were unconscious.”

“I—well, I sort of guessed,” I explained.

“Okay, Leah, yes. John comes to me sometimes and tells me we have to leave. It’s very important to him that no one finds out about you, you see. He’s very worried about our safety, so he tells us when we’re no longer safe, and I move wherever he tells me to go.”

I was speechless. My mother’s life and mine, then, have always been controlled by John.

I pieced together the truth in my mind. John and his colleagues must need to move frequently, as they don’t want to be discovered, but John told me he only wants to kidnap people with an emotional attachment to me. He has to convince my mother to move me wherever he moves, then. My mother follows him, feeling grateful that he’s supposedly watching out for my safety. I follow my mother, feeling grateful that I can start over at a new school. The whole time, though, my father is controlling everything. I keep having visions because my father and his colleagues keep kidnapping people near me.

“Mom, does John live near us? Does he move when we move?”

“Oh, of course not honey. I’ve rarely seen him over the years. Seeing him twice this month has been a rare treat!”

That’s what I thought. John doesn’t tell my mom he’s moving with us, so there’s no way she could suspect that we’re moving for his benefit, not mine.

I shivered. How little I knew about my own life before this moment...and how little control I had over what happened to me.

Chapter 11

I was worried about Taty and P.C. when I got to school the next day. Who knew what might happen to them? If John and his colleagues really had perfected their idea of not making a plan, I wouldn’t have any more visions to warn me. I never thought I’d see the day when I *wanted* to have a vision, but it was better than not knowing.

I was scanning the halls for them as I walked to my locker. I hoped P.C. would be there already. I hoped they both got home okay.

Oh. Oh no.

My face twisted in disgust when I saw it.

I should have felt devastated. I mean, the first time I saw them even talking together I felt heartsick and sad all day. But for some reason, I just felt disgusted, the way I did when I thought about my mom's feelings for John.

He was...oh gross. He was *kissing* her. Why would anybody want to do that with *her*?

I knew why, though. She was beautiful, although I hated to admit it. Really, though, anyone who spent that much time on her appearance *ought* to be at least a little pretty. Also, she was popular. People liked her. Who knew why? But it was clear that everyone at school wanted to be her friend. I'd seen less popular guys hanging around our lockers drooling over her. She treated them like scum, and they just continued to drool.

I was still staring at them when he pulled his face away from hers, pulled his tongue out of her mouth. I wish I hadn't seen that last part. I wish I hadn't seen the whole thing. She smiled at him and reached for his hand. He slowly let go of her fingers and told her good-bye. Just as he was leaving, his eyes caught mine, and he smiled just a little, but looked away quickly, embarrassed. I should have looked away in embarrassment too, but I was in shock.

"You like that one, freak girl? His arms felt *so* good around my waist. His lips felt *so* good against mine. Guess you'll never know how that feels." She winked at me and smiled insincerely.

I didn't say anything, just moved to my locker and started turning the dial. I hadn't realized how clear it was to everyone else, even Make-Up Girl, that I liked him. She flipped her hair, the smell of hairspray wafting in my face, and walked off.

"You okay?" a voice behind me asked.

I jumped in surprise, sighing when I saw it was Taty. "Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Taty smiled sympathetically. "Maybe because the guy you've been obsessing over since your first day at this school was kissing the only girl in school that you hate. It's okay to be sad, you know."

I nodded but didn't say anything, so she continued. "I talked to Kai about you," she confided. I knew that. I'd been meaning to thank her. "He said that you're so quiet. He said he's tried to ask you to work with him, but half the time you just brush him off."

"He's only asking me to work with him because he thinks I'm smart," I told her. "He's not asking because he's interested in me. I'm not exactly in his league."

She shrugged. "That might be why he's asking you, but it doesn't mean you shouldn't take the opportunity to let him get to know you. Come on. If he finds out who you are, he'll like you."

Why did I feel like she didn't understand the real issue here? "Taty, I'm not beautiful or popular like you and Make-Up Girl. I'm perfectly ordinary. I mean—to Kai I'm ordinary," I amended,

when she raised her eyebrows at me. I sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know why you hang out with me.” There. At least I’d said it.

“For supposedly having super human intelligence, you sure miss a lot of things,” Taty responded. “Leah, you’re convinced that you’re not as good as anyone else. The people who are popular aren’t necessarily the nicest people at the school, or the ones who make the best friends. They’re the people who are pretty, or confident, or wanting to make themselves the center of attention.”

“I wouldn’t mind being pretty and confident,” I responded.

“Look, it’s not *that* much better, the way you’re thinking it is. To be popular, you have to do certain things. It’s more pressure than you think. I don’t want to have to care so much about what I wear, or how I style my hair, or who I hang out with. I don’t want to have to pretend I don’t like certain people or that I do like others. Leah, you feel like you’re left out because you’re not in some special ‘in’ crowd, but I feel left out half of the time because I’m in the ‘in’ crowd, and it’s suffocating. Sometimes I feel all alone because the people I’m with only want to be with me because of my image. Sometimes I feel trapped, like I can’t say or do what I want or just be myself because I have to act cool or popular, and I never feel that way with you or P.C.”

“I never knew it was like that,” I admitted. She hadn’t fully convinced me that it wasn’t better to be popular, but I hadn’t realized there were so many rules she had to follow to fit in. I hadn’t thought about Taty struggling so hard to fit in, about Taty feeling out of place or like she couldn’t be herself. I seldom felt like I could be myself, either, but, to be fair, that was more because my father was an alien and I had strange visions of the future.

“Well, it *is* like that,” she told me. “And if you want to be with Kai, Leah, then stop acting like you’re not worthy of him. You *are* pretty.” I shook my head, but she continued. “You’re super smart, super athletic, a wonderful friend, and frequently risking your life to save people you don’t even know.” I stared at her. I did sound like a cool person when she said it like that. “So stop acting like you don’t deserve anything good in life, like everyone else is better or more worthy than you. Grow a spine, girl.”

I nodded slowly. Yeah. Okay. Maybe. “Okay,” I told her. “Today. In bio. I’ll talk to him.”

“That’s right,” said Taty. “You can’t expect him to fall in love with you if he doesn’t even know you.”

I snorted. Fall in love with me. Yeah, right.

“Leah! That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Stop thinking so negatively about yourself.”

Oops. I’d forgotten already. It was a hard habit to break. “Okay,” I told her. “I’ll try. And, Taty, thanks. Thanks for telling me all of that.”

She smiled. “Of course. What are friends for?”

Honestly, before about a week ago, I really hadn't known what friends were for. Maybe because I'd never made close friends at the other schools I'd attended, maybe because of my visions that made people think I was weird, or maybe because, honestly, I never thought I was cool enough to deserve friends before.

P.C. interrupted our moment, stumbling towards us, crashing into his locker. He was wearing a bike helmet that was a few sizes too large for him. It was lined with tinfoil, a large piece of which was sticking out in front of his face, blocking his vision. He also had on a bright orange vest with reflectors taped to it. It was a pretty crazy get up, even for P.C.

"I don't even want to know," Taty commented, but when I looked at her, I saw that she was smiling, probably because she knew P.C. couldn't see her.

"It will protect me from the aliens. Here, I made you one too," he told her, thrusting a helmet and vest in the direction of her voice. "I read online that the aliens are unable to penetrate this. I've done a lot of research. We'll be safe now. You probably feel the shield this is creating around me already, Leah, since you're half alien and all."

I really wished he didn't say things like that when other people could hear, but then again, would anyone really believe him?

"The aliens are unable to penetrate tin foil?" Taty asked. "You know, for being so smart, neither of you have a clue," she mused, but then softened. "Um, this was thoughtful of you, P.C." She gently slipped the vest and helmet into her large bag. It was a bit touching, actually, in a bizarre, P.C. kind of way.

P.C. walked us to the door of our biology class, speaking quickly about everything the Information Society had learned about extra terrestrials, especially the evil, kidnapping variety. (Who would have thought there were websites on aliens who father half alien children? But apparently there are.) He kept talking once we reached the door to class, and Taty had to practically shove him outside, assuring him he could tell us the rest later.

"Fine, then, go to class," P.C. said, as if annoyed. "But I'll just have to tell you everything I learned about Dante later then. See ya." And then he was gone.

"What? Why would he ramble on about stupid websites about alien children and then not tell us the important stuff we actually want to hear?" Taty asked.

"So that we'll listen to the spiel about alien children first," I answered, smiling. I did wonder what he could possibly have found out about Dante, though.

"Okay," Taty whispered. "Today you'll talk to him, right?"

I felt my palms getting sweaty. "Right," I whispered, not yet sure if I would.

When the bell rang, Mrs. Tiu briskly reminded us that today we'd be dissecting pigs. I'd forgotten about that. The room did smell funny, which should have been a clue, and when I glanced around the room, I saw the pigs and dissecting supplies lying on each of the lab tables.

As soon as we were dismissed to get started, Taty swooped to my side of the room. "Tyrone, I thought maybe you'd want to work with me today," she called, casually flipping her golden hair behind her shoulder.

"Uh...um...yeah, sure, Taty," the usually confident Tyrone stammered.

I looked at her. Who wouldn't want to work with her? I glanced over at Kai. "I guess it's you and me, then," he said to me.

"Yes, I guess so," I replied. I followed him to a lab table, mentally telling myself to be confident, like Taty had told me.

"You want to start?" he asked me, as we surveyed the pig and lab tools.

Why not? "Sure." I picked up a tool and poked it into the pig's skin, preparing to cut into it and search for one of the organs we were supposed to identify. Suddenly I felt a wave of nausea pass over me, not like I was going to have a vision, but like I was going to be sick. "Actually, um, you start," I mumbled.

Kai looked at me with concern. "You okay? I mean, do you want to step outside or something? Get some fresh air?"

Yes, I did want to, but I didn't want to leave Kai. "I'm okay," I said, trying to make my voice sound stronger. "I just felt a little sorry for the pig all of a sudden.

"Really? I thought you said it was all worth it in the name of science and knowledge."

Oh, he meant the experiment on the rats. It seemed like that day was weeks ago instead of only yesterday. "Yeah, maybe I was wrong." I didn't really want to talk about this. We were silent for a minute while he poked at the pig. I started to feel a bit desperate. What could we talk about? I wanted to say something, let him get to know me like Taty said. "Uh, so, you're going out with Brianna?" I blurted out suddenly. Ugh. Why had I said that? That was definitely *not* what I wanted to talk about with him.

He shrugged. "Yeah, sort of, I guess."

I looked at him. I wanted to be bold, like Taty had told me, and I'd already brought it up, so I might as well keep going. "Why do you like her?" I asked bravely.

He shook his head. "Sometimes I honestly don't know, but then there are other moments when she's a lot of fun."

Oh. I couldn't imagine her ever being fun.

"How are you and P.C. doing?" Kai asked casually.

"Oh—no, P.C.'s not my boyfriend." So that's why Kai had told me about all of P.C.'s antics. He must have thought P.C. and I were an item.

Kai stopped poking the pig and looked up at me suspiciously. He thought I was being secretive.

"No, really, we're just friends." Let's get that straight. If Brianna ever stops being a lot of fun, I'm definitely single.

He poked some more on the pig. "Hmm," he mused after a while. "You know you were right about what you said earlier. This is pretty interesting stuff. We probably could learn a lot about our bodies through research like this."

I groaned. "Yes, I was quite the lawyer arguing my case that day."

He laughed. "You're a funny one, Leah. No wonder everyone in this school is talking about you."

Wait, me? I shouldn't be surprised, really. People often started talking about me at school. It's always been hard for me to just sort of fit in and lay low, but I honestly hadn't heard any of the rumors at Watson High. Maybe because I was distracted by P.C. and Taty. Maybe because I had real friends here.

"Talking about me? What do they say?"

"As if you didn't know!" he smiled.

But I didn't know. "I...I've sort of been avoiding it all."

"Well, Yesenia's a bit in awe of you. She talks about how you were watching over her that day, or somehow protecting her. I swear she thinks you're some kind of god. You sort of terrify and fascinate her at the same time. Tatyana thinks that you saved her mother."

My eyes grew big suddenly.

"No," he reassured me. "Don't worry—I know I'm not supposed to tell anyone that story about her mom. She hasn't told anyone else."

I nodded, and he continued.

"I heard Mrs. Tiu tell another teacher that you're a genius, but that you don't apply yourself. Remember earlier when we were doing that biology worksheet, and you pretended you weren't already done? I felt so stupid later for even asking you to work with me."

I blushed. “You shouldn’t feel stupid,” I mumbled. I hadn’t realized Kai was this observant.

“Taty says Coach Solano thinks you’re the best player he’s ever seen, although he pretends to be very stern about it all. And Brianna, well, I sometimes think she’s a little threatened by you.”

I was speechless for a while. That was a lot of information. “Um, you’ve been talking to a lot of people,” I stated.

He smiled, and it was a beautiful smile. “I guess so.” Was he embarrassed? “I haven’t gone looking for the information or anything. It’s hard to miss. People talk. Honestly, I think everyone at this school is a little fascinated by you, including me.”

He bent his head then and returned to the pig. Did he mean that? Was he really fascinated by me? I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t think. Should I tell him he fascinated me too? Kai poked his tool nervously into the pig’s side, preparing to make an incision. Suddenly, I was gripped by the memory of John’s arms pinning my hands to my chest as he sank a needle into my side. The memory felt so real. I immediately felt sick. I fainted then, slipping off my lab stool and falling to the floor with a loud and awkward clunking sound, unconscious.

Chapter 12

“Leah, you okay?” Taty asked me during a break from practice. I hadn’t seen her since bio, but she was smiling, so I knew she had found out the whole story about my fainting episode. Were there no secrets at all at this school? Who was I kidding? There were no secrets at any school.

After I fainted, I was sent to the nurse’s office. I was a bit thankful for that, as it meant I didn’t have to talk about the humiliating incident with Kai.

“Depends on what you’re asking,” I told Taty. “Physically, I feel fine.”

She laughed then. “Come on, you’ve got to have a sense of humor about it. It *is* pretty funny. He tells you that you fascinate people, wonders why you haven’t responded, and looks up to see you’ve fainted.”

I smiled. I guess it might be funny if it hadn’t happened to me. “I’m never going back to biology,” I said grimly. Maybe P.C. could permanently excuse me somehow.

Taty looked serious then. “Listen, it isn’t that bad. Just try again. Talk to him tomorrow. You get more than one chance, you know.”

I thought about what she said during the rest of practice. I let myself score five goals during our scrimmage. I usually tried not to go any higher than three, but I was impressed about what Kai had told me regarding Coach Solano. The best player Solano’s ever seen, huh? Coach was so serious all the time that I really hadn’t thought he’d noticed me much at all.

Coach gathered us around in a circle after practice (a very perfect and symmetrical circle, of course). We hadn't played so hot in our game last week. We'd still won by a goal, but we had looked pretty sloppy. He'd yelled at us about it all week, but I guessed he was going to continue his tirade now.

"You know how you all looked on the field last week? Pathetic! That's how you looked! Absolutely pathetic. The parents were shaking their heads, mumbling about how weak and pathetic you were. And you know what? I agreed with them! Yes! I said you were pathetic and weak too. I expect a much tighter passing game for next week's game. Each player touches the ball three times max before passing it. Do you hear me?" He shook his head. "Of course you don't hear me because you're all pathetic. Go on. Leave me."

The girls began scurrying away quickly before he could change his mind. I glanced at Taty. We tried to sneak away quickly before he noticed us.

"WAIT," he called, his back still facing us. Everyone froze. "Taty and Leah, meet me in the center of the field."

We exchanged worried glances. This couldn't be good.

"Sit down," he told us firmly once we'd jogged over to him. He remained standing, towering over us. "Think you're so good you don't need to practice, do you?"

"Uh, no, sir," I mumbled, looking down.

"Of course not, sir," Taty agreed.

"You both think you're stars, don't you? You think you only need to practice when you feel like it, don't you?" This time, neither of us responded. We realized he hadn't actually been asking a question. He shook his head to show us his disappointment. "You're both lucky I'm not benching for next week's game. A soldier never deserts his company, but what did you do? Left us high and dry. You are both pathetic and weak. What are you still sitting there for? Both of you, ten wind sprints and ten laps. Go now. Go!"

I sighed with relief. The punishment could definitely have been worse, I thought. At least, like he said, we still got to play in next week's game.

An hour and two long tirades from Coach later, Taty and I walked exhaustedly to the gym and up the stairs to the strange little office where the Information Society held their meetings.

"Taty, did you know P.C. had an office here?" I asked her as we walked up the stairs. "Did you even know this floor existed?"

"Course," she responded simply.

I looked at her suspiciously. I didn't think most of the students at the school knew about this office. "Taty, did you and P.C...I mean, why does he get so angry about Rick?" I'd been wanting to ask Taty about her and P.C. for a while now.

"Who knows?" she asked, rolling her eyes.

She wasn't fooling me. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," I responded seriously.

She nodded. "You're right. I guess we have a little bit of a history. We spent a lot of time together when we were in seventh grade. My mom was working and couldn't come pick me up until 4:30 or so, and P.C. was always somewhere working on a computer, so we hung out after school every afternoon. We had fun together. He asked me to go to the movies once, and my mom said definitely no; no dating until I'm seventeen. I told P.C., but he didn't believe me. He thought I was trying to blow him off or something, and my mom got worried about me hanging around with a boy, so she found a friend who could pick me up at three. We really didn't hang out at all after that—not until this year when you came, honestly. So it's been about three years. I really don't think he ever forgave me."

Whoa. P.C. and Taty? "Did you, um, *like* him?"

She smiled. "He's funny in his quirky little way. Yeah, I guess I liked him. I was pretty wrapped up in my friends and being cool back then, though. I never told anyone we hung out, and I definitely didn't hang out with him during school. See, popularity makes you be mean to nice people. I sort of think I deserve all the jabs P.C. takes."

"Hmmm. It was a long time ago. I think you're forgiven. Also, well, I don't blame you for sacrificing a lot to fit in."

"I shouldn't have sacrificed friendships, though." She was firm on this.

I nodded but said nothing. We stopped at the door and Taty knocked.

"Who is it?" P.C. called.

"You know it's us. Let us in. Who else would knock on this door?" asked Taty.

P.C. cleared his throat nervously. "Do the secret knock. You know I can't tell if it's you unless you do the secret knock."

"Really? You really can't just get up and open the door?" Taty sounded annoyed. She was too tired to play games.

"How do I know the aliens aren't imitating your voice? The Information Society must take precautions."

"Pedro Castillo, open the door."

The door opened immediately.

“Pedro Castillo? That’s what P.C. stands for?” I asked, surprised.

“Whoa,” said Taty. “How weird that you don’t know his name, especially in a school where everyone knows everything about each other. I keep forgetting we haven’t known you that long, Leah.”

“Of course P.C. stands for my name,” P.C. answered, annoyed. “What? Did you think I just chose the initials because of my love for computers, while really my name is John Doe or something?”

I didn’t respond. Yeah, that’s pretty much what I had thought. I changed the subject quickly. “So, um, what were you going to show us? About Dante?”

P.C.’s eyes sparkled. “Here, I’ll show you.” He ushered us towards one of the many computers crammed into the little office. “I set up a webcam in Dante’s room, so that I could see what he was like after the abduction.”

“Wait, Dante’s back at home again?” I asked. “I thought the aliens still had him.”

“Wait, you put a webcam in this poor boy’s room? Without him knowing?” Taty’s voice raised slightly.

Hm. That part was a bit disturbing.

“Yes,” P.C. told me, ignoring Taty. “From my observations, I surmise that Dante was returned home just hours after he was taken. No one even knew he was gone, including him.”

“How could he not have known he was gone?” I asked. This was getting confusing, but P.C. was enjoying having the knowledge and making us ask him for answers.

“It’s unclear, but I assume the aliens used a brain scrambler on him.” Then, realizing we hadn’t read as many science fiction novels as he, he explained, “You know, a brain scrambler is a device that prevents you from remembering the abduction occurred. Come on, guys, the aliens always use them. The victim might still dream about the abduction, or he might notice bruises or scars on his body, but he won’t be able to consciously remember anything about the abduction. I assume that’s what happened to Dante because he hasn’t mentioned anything about it to anyone, at least, not as long as I’ve been watching him.”

“You mean spying on him!” Taty accused.

And, really, that is pretty much what P.C. meant.

P.C. ignored her again, however, and several seconds passed before I realized he wasn't going to offer any more information unless we asked him. "How did you know where he lived so that you could, um, put the webcam in his room?" I asked.

He became very solemn then. "The Information Society cannot reveal this information."

"Oh, right, sorry," I replied, forgetting that, well, P.C. *was* the Information Society.

"Give me a break," Taty rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. You followed Dante home from school one day. Then you waited until he and his family left, somehow snuck into their house, and planted the camera in Dante's room where he wouldn't notice it, like, say near his bedside lamp. In the movies, they always plant the bugs near people's bedside lamps."

P.C. remained rather quiet, which made me think Taty had guessed the story pretty much right on.

"Alright, fine, let's see. Roll the film," Taty said, and P.C.'s eyes lit up. I could tell he'd been waiting for this all day. We gathered around the computer monitor.

Then we saw Dante in his room. Well, sometimes we saw him. Sometimes he moved a bit, and then the webcam couldn't catch him. Judging by how the right half of the camera view was blocked by something resembling a lampshade, it did appear that P.C. had put the camera near the bedside lamp.

"Mom!" Dante called, rushing towards a woman with dark hair that I couldn't quite see. "You're home! Finally. I missed you," he threw his arms around her and kissed her cheek.

"Dante," she said, surprised. "What brought this on?"

He didn't respond, just took her hand and held it, stroking it. His mother seemed surprised but didn't say anything about it.

"What are we having for dinner tonight?" Dante asked, still stroking her hand.

"I thought we'd have pasta," his mother answered mildly.

"What?!" Dante dropped her hand. "I told you I don't like pasta! Why would you do this?"

His mother looked uncomfortable, and Dante's hands were clenched into fists. I felt uncomfortable watching it.

"It's just an easy meal," his mother said, trying to sound casual. "I'm tired from work and thought we could have something that's quick to prepare. You never complained about it before."

“I’m complaining now!” Dante roared back at her. “You just want things to be easy. I don’t know why you would do this to me. You’re lazy and selfish.”

“Um, I think you’re overreacting a bit,” his mother soothed, still trying to pretend the situation was under control.

Dante looked at her then with a hatred that scared me. He moved towards the wall closest to the webcam and clenched his fist tighter. There was a strange sound then, and when he moved back again, I saw he had punched a hole into the wall.

His mother looked at him sadly, and immediately all of the anger left Dante’s face. “I’m sorry, Mom. I love you,” he cried, running towards her.

“Again, Dante? I just don’t understand what’s wrong with you lately,” his mother replied.

Dante looked confused. “I don’t either,” he responded.

P.C. paused the recording then, and Taty and I said nothing.

“You understand, right?” asked P.C. “The aliens are controlling his emotions, making him feel loving and affectionate, then suddenly angry. They’ve planted something in his brain that allows them to control his emotions somehow. It makes sense, Leah. Your father said that his mission was to study human emotion.”

I nodded silently. I wish people didn’t refer to him as my father.

I thought of my mother then. I had asked her why she would ever have agreed to have a child with John, who was so clearly evil and, well, alien. She never gave me a straight answer, though. Her eyes glazed over, and she exclaimed, “Because I love him, Leah, of course! Who wouldn’t want to have a child with John?” And when I’d asked how she’d met John, she couldn’t remember. She said it felt like he’d always been a part of her life.

As I thought about Dante and about my mother, my hatred for John increased. He and his colleagues might not be physically torturing their victims, but manipulating people’s emotions so much that it seemed to alter their personalities seemed so cruel.

“What can we do?” I finally whispered.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” asked P.C. “We must fight these evil villains! We have to find the aliens’ lair, and to do that, you have to have a vision that tells us where they live and work.”

“Oh, I can’t have visions any more. Did I forget to tell you? John and his colleagues make last minute decisions now. That’s why I didn’t see what was going to happen to Dante until too late, and eventually, they’ll perfect their system, and I probably won’t see anything at all.”

P.C. and Taty were both silent for a minute, digesting this new information. Finally, P.C. said, “He’s a very clever one, that John.”

“Leah,” Taty spoke for the first time in a while. “You have to have a vision. You have to will it. Concentrate and practice. There must be a way that you can control your visions and will yourself to see what you want to see.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t think it works that way. They usually just come to me.” Her suggestion made me nervous. Honestly, I had never tried to force a premonition. A lifetime of having visions, and I’d never thought to try to control them. I spent most of my time wishing they didn’t happen.

“You have to control them, Leah. Try,” Taty told me again, and for some reason, I nodded. I didn’t believe I could control them, but I thought of Dante, and I nodded.

Chapter 13

I did try after that. I sat for long periods and concentrated, staring off into space and willing myself to see something. I looked so out of it that people often waved their hands in front of my eyes to bring me back to reality. Nothing happened, though. I was beginning to worry it wasn’t possible to force a vision.

Days passed. Taty tried not to ask me about it too much, but I could tell she thought about it often. P.C. did ask me, frequently.

“So, um, see anything today?” he’d question hopefully.

“No,” I’d respond, glumly.

“Alright. Take your time. It’s a bit important, though, you know.”

“I know! I’m trying, P.C.!”

We watched more clips of Dante. They were eerie. He’d be fine one moment, having a quiet conversation with his mother, and then the next his emotions would swing violently. He’d yell and break furniture, or he’d start crying uncontrollably, or he’d be shaking with unexplainable fear. His mother worried endlessly and called psychiatrists, but Dante refused to see any of them. We all worried for Dante, too. When would the aliens get bored of him and end their experiments? And I remembered John’s words and worried that P.C. or Taty would be next.

It finally happened when I wasn’t really trying at all. I was turning the dial on my locker when I heard someone ask, “How do you like my new boyfriend, Leah?”

I turned. Gag me. It was Make-Up Girl. I sort of rolled my eyes at her but didn’t say anything. I bet she didn’t *fascinate* him.

“Since I figure you must be wondering, he’s a great kisser, absolutely the best.”

I turned to face her then and opened my mouth to tell her how shallow and annoying I thought she was when I was suddenly powerfully reminded of my earlier vision of Yesenia. I had been standing at my locker when I'd had it, just like this, and when the vision had ended, Make-Up Girl had been there taunting me. I was filled with the same feelings of shame and anger as I had been on that day. It all felt so achingly familiar. I concentrated hard then, trying to recapture the feeling I'd had when I'd seen Yesenia on that bus. Slowly a familiar wave of nausea came over me.

John walked briskly into a computer store, moving quickly as if he were in a hurry. No one noticed him, as the store was full of people examining products and talking to salespeople. P.C. was there, studying something on one of the computers.

And that was all I saw.

Did that mean P.C. was the next victim? I didn't feel afraid for him, as I normally would if the vision meant he were in danger. Maybe when I force the visions, I don't necessary see someone in trouble. I had to talk to Taty and P.C. about it.

I smiled to myself; I'd finally done it! When I focused again and realized where I was, I saw Make-Up Girl staring at me, a look of disgust on her face.

“Ugh. You're drooling again. You are, like, so disgusting.”

Her insults didn't bother me. I felt proud. I'd forced myself to have a vision, and in a strange way, I had Make-Up Girl to thank. “And you are, like, so stupid,” I responded; then brushed past her to find P.C. and Taty.

I was late to bio, and students were already positioning themselves at the lab tables. I glanced over to where Taty was; she didn't have a partner sitting near her, so I knew she must be waiting for me.

“Look who thinks she can walk in late now,” I heard Kai call to me. He wasn't getting me in trouble or anything; we all knew Mrs. Tiu never missed marking anyone tardy. Maybe I could have P.C. clear it for me later.

“Thanks for making sure everyone noticed,” I joked back. Kai and I had had several conversations over the last few days—nothing long or romantic, but friendly, and I was becoming more comfortable with him. He hadn't mentioned anything about my little fainting spell, and I was thankful for that. We were keeping it light.

I felt bold now, though, maybe because I'd finally succeeded in forcing a vision. I looked at him and smiled. “Actually, I'm late because your girlfriend was telling me what a good kisser you are. Good for you.”

I could hear Tyrone laughing in the background, and Kai's jaw dropped. “Wha—Why would she tell you that?” Kai asked. He wasn't really offended, but a bit embarrassed, I think. He

looked cute when he was embarrassed. I hated thinking that. I kept hoping my feelings for him would die down a little bit, now that it was obvious that he and Make-Up Girl were an item.

I shrugged at him. “Don’t know. Some girls kiss and tell, I guess.” Then I smiled at him in what I thought was a very sexy and mysterious way before turning my back on him quickly and joining Taty at her table.

I slammed my books on the lab table and jumped on my stool.

“It’s about time,” said Taty. “I thought you were going to talk to Kai all period.”

Usually Taty helped me dissect every conversation that Kai and I had to see if his words contained any hints that he was madly in love with me. Taty humored me because I let her do it with her conversations with Rick. There was less to analyze with Taty and Rick now, though, as it became increasingly obvious that Rick liked her. I noticed with interest that she was wearing his jacket. Today, though, I didn’t say anything about Kai or about Rick’s jacket. We suddenly had more important things to talk about.

“I had a vision,” I said to her. Her eyes widened, and I described it to her.

“P.C. was there,” Taty whispered when I had finished.

“I know,” I nodded. “Now what I can’t decide is if I should tell him what I saw or not. Before, when I had visions, I always wanted to prevent them, but I’m not sure if I want to prevent this one or not. I mean, it might be good if P.C.’s there. He can find out what John is up to.”

“That’s true,” Taty agreed. “You said you didn’t feel like P.C. was in danger?”

“Right,” I agreed. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I’d *know* it if P.C. were in danger in the vision. I always felt it, this sick feeling of dread and worry, but in this vision, everything seemed fine. I’d felt...well, hopeful, actually, but I couldn’t explain why.

“So you’re thinking that if you tell P.C.,” Taty continued, “it will somehow change things, and P.C. might not be in the store at the exact same time as the moment you saw in your vision.”

“Right,” I agreed. “I don’t want to change anything by telling him. On the other hand, maybe it’s *because* I tell P.C. that he is in the store at the same time as John. If I’m always going to make the decision to tell P.C., then he’ll always go, and the vision will come true *because* I tell him.”

Taty nodded. “I think I might have actually understood what you just said. So if you don’t tell him, then, he might not go.”

“Yes! Or is it that if I do tell him, he might not go? It’s all rather confusing.” I shook my head, still trying to understand it all. “Are you going to lunch with Rick today?”

She nodded with excitement. “But I’ll come back early. Wait to tell P.C. about everything until I get there.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I smiled. It was funny how Taty knew I would tell P.C. before I’d even fully decided it myself. Maybe that’s what friendship means—that other people know you better than you know yourself.



P.C. knew I had a secret the minute I saw him at lunch. I’m not sure how. He mumbled something about the Information Society knowing everything. I guess something in my face must have given it away. I somehow managed to distract him until Taty came to meet us, though.

P.C. never asked me where Taty was when she didn’t eat with us. She wasn’t always gone because she was eating with Rick. Sometimes she met with her other friends, the more popular, pretty girls with trendy clothes and hairstyles, the ones that made me jealous and envious at the same time. I could have asked her to introduce me to them, but after her talk with me, I realized more and more that I was more comfortable hanging out with P.C. and being myself.

Most lunches, though, Taty was with Rick. I didn’t mind. I still saw her in bio and at soccer, and I knew P.C. caught up with her after school or during pass periods. I knew it bothered him when we walked to our lunch spot together and she wasn’t waiting for us, but I was thankful he didn’t say anything to me about it.

She ran up to us looking giggly and excited, the way she always did after spending time with Rick. I’d have to ask her about everything that had happened later. I’d learned not to do it in front of P.C.

Taty looked at me eagerly. “You haven’t told him yet?”

“No, I waited,” I reassured her.

P.C. ignored us. Suddenly he wasn’t as interested in the big secret. “Whose jacket is that?” he asked her.

“Rick’s,” she told him flatly. “You know it’s Rick’s.”

He shrugged. “It’s a bit strange for a girl to wear a guy’s jacket when she’s not dating him; that’s all.” I think they had some variation of this conversation several times a day.

“I’ll put it in my locker before I go home, and my mom will never know. It’s not like we’re in middle school any more, P.C. Back then, maybe my mom was right that I was too young to date, but we’re older now, and I can make my own decisions.”

Wow. She sounded so confident. I was a little in awe of her.

And I knew P.C. was stung. Until now, she'd always denied that she and Rick were dating. Rick must have asked her to be his girlfriend at lunch today, then. I sort of figured that would happen soon.

"I'm just saying that I wouldn't want to date someone who was so dumb that he couldn't tell you which direction an elevator was going if he had two guesses."

"Lucky for you he isn't asking you to date him, then."

There was a bit of awkward silence, then, and a bit of P.C. staring uncomfortably at his shoes while I stared uncomfortably at the ceiling while Taty stood with her arms crossed and nostrils flared.

And then, mercifully, Taty spoke. "Right, so Leah has news."

I sighed with relief. I hated it when they fought. The words tumbled out of my mouth quickly and awkwardly. I thought that if I spoke quickly enough, I might be able to distract them so that they would forget they were angry at each other. "I had a vision and saw John in the Apple store and you were there too doing something but you didn't look up so I was wondering if you were going to the Apple store any time soon and if you are maybe you could figure out what John was doing there."

Taty smiled a half smile. "I guess that was the gist of it. Did you get all that, P.C.?"

P.C. nodded very seriously. "The Information Society sometimes conducts its research at the Apple store. That way, it's harder to trace which computer we're using to conduct the research. If we were traced to a personal home computer, we might be caught, but if we use a public computer at the Apple store, our identities remain a secret."

"Yes, I'm sure the Information Society is under constant threat of being tracked by the CIA, FBI, or even terrorist groups," Taty said sarcastically. "It's wise of you to be careful."

P.C. nodded seriously, missing the sarcasm completely. "People who know too much are always in danger," he confirmed.

"Look," I broke in, not liking where this conversation was going. "P.C., when were you planning on going to the store? Maybe Taty and I can hang around outside unnoticed. It's dangerous with John. I wouldn't want you to go alone."

"Good, Leah, you're getting better at this, even if you haven't read any James Bond," P.C. said approvingly. "I'm not sure when I'm going. I was going today, but then recently I'd thought of going tomorrow."

"But what day were you thinking of going this morning?" Taty asked. "That's the decision Leah would have seen in her vision, right?"

Yes. Maybe. That sounded logical, I guess.

“Today,” P.C. stated. “This morning I was thinking of going today.”

“Great,” I responded. “When?”

“Now, I suppose,” he said, sounding very calm. “But I can’t see John without getting some equipment together first.”

Hm. As I really hadn’t read a James Bond novel, I really didn’t know what kind of equipment he might be referring to, but after the tinfoil and ghostbuster’s episodes, I thought we should maybe wing it without P.C.’s, um, equipment.

“What do you say we try it on our own, just this one time?” I asked.

P.C. looked at me suspiciously, but I think he knew I’d had enough of the disagreeing.

“Alright,” he agreed, but I had a feeling he was still planning on doing what he wanted anyway.

“Now?” Taty asked. “You don’t want to wait until after practice, or at least until after school?”

P.C. shrugged. “I don’t usually wait. No time like the present.”

Taty nodded, weighing his words. “Uh, yeah, so we’ll leave now then,” she stuttered nervously. “I’ll just, you know, be right back. I just need to run to my locker real quick to, you know, do some stuff. Just two seconds, I promise, you won’t miss me.”

“To put the jacket away, right?” P.C. quizzed her. “*Rick’s jacket*, the one who’s so stupid it takes him an hour and a half to watch *60 Minutes*?”

Taty said nothing, just slipped out the door.

“Look, you’ve got to stop,” I turned on P.C. as soon as the door closed. “She didn’t pick you, okay? She picked Rick. She likes Rick, not you, not in that way at least. I know that hurts. It’s hard to watch the person you like date a total idiot when you know you’re the better catch, but that’s just the way life goes sometimes, okay? You can’t keep making her miserable over it.”

P.C. just stared at me. He was surprised at how sharply I was speaking to him. I was surprised at myself, too. I hadn’t expected to say anything. I guess I could relate to his situation though. I think P.C. and I felt alike on this one.

I began again, this time more calmly. “The way I see it, you have two choices. You can decide that seeing her with someone else makes you too unhappy and start avoiding her. I wouldn’t blame you for doing that. You’ve got to take care of yourself, in the end. Or, you can accept that she’s with Rick now and that the only way you can be near her is to be her friend. That choice will make you sad sometimes because you’ll still like her and want more from her, but those are your only two choices. If you keep talking to her like you have been, *she’ll* decide she

doesn't want to be *your* friend, and then you won't even get the chance to make the decision yourself."

P.C. looked at me, weighing my words. Finally, he said, "Make-Up Girl's an idiot, too."

I laughed. "Yes, she is."

"Kai should have picked you. You were the better choice for him."

I shifted uncomfortably. It was always hard to say anything good about myself, but I thought of Taty's speech, and I answered, "Yes, I was, actually."

P.C. nodded. "I'm the better choice for Taty. Rick really is an idiot."

I didn't know Rick at all, but I still felt good about what he'd said about Make-Up Girl, so I answered, "Yes, he is."

"Okay," said P.C. "You're right. I'll be nicer. I guess you really do have super human intelligence, Leah."

I shook my head. That was too much.

"But Leah," P.C. continued. "Can I still make jokes about how Rick's stupid? I won't give her a hard time about dating him. I'll just make a small joke now and then."

I nodded. I hadn't expected P.C. to agree with me about everything so easily. What harm could a few jokes about Rick's intellect do? They were a bit funny, actually.

Chapter 14

We went to the Apple store. P.C. was inside, typing at the very computer I'd seen him using, and Taty and I were in separate nearby stores, keeping a lookout. We were using walkie talkies with ear pieces. I know. I felt like a child in a Disney movie, but P.C. had insisted and pulled them out of his "office," and they actually were working pretty well. Who even knew they made walkie talkies with ear pieces? Of course P.C. wished we had personal cell phones equipped with blue tooth, but since we didn't, the walkie talkies would have to do.

Taty radioed first. "I see him. He's alone."

"Roger that," P.C. responded. "Solo, over."

P.C. insisted on using terms like "over" at the end of his statements and "copy" or "Roger that" when he had heard us. He'd also given himself a code name, Han Solo. He'd given Taty and me code names, too, but we refused to use them.

“Hey, Solo, remember to keep your head down when he enters so that he doesn’t see you,” I reminded P.C. I was a little nervous about everything. I hadn’t seen any danger in my vision, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“Copy. Solo, out,” came the response.

Then Taty and I waited. We couldn’t use the walkie talkies because we didn’t want John to hear us. And it felt like such a long wait.

Finally, P.C.’s voice came on again. “Uh, he’s gone. I mean, I really don’t see him anywhere.”

Taty and I both remained silent while we digested that information.

“Solo, out,” P.C. added quickly.

“So what do we do now?” Taty asked.

“Now...now, I guess we wait,” I responded. Both of us trudged slowly to the Apple store, meeting at the door and entering together to find P.C.

And we did wait. Hours passed.

“Maybe he’s an employee at the store, and he’s in some kind of back office working somewhere?” Taty asked.

P.C. shook his head. “I already thought of that. I checked the employee payroll using one of the iphones in the store. I didn’t see his name listed.”

We called our parents and told them we wouldn’t be home. I told my mother I was staying the night at Taty’s. Taty told her mother she’d be at my place, and P.C. said he’d be with some other friend, someone I’d never heard of.

Still we waited. When closing time neared, we had to find places to hide. There were two storage closets, and P.C. picked the locks of both and he hid in one, Taty in the other. I went into the women’s bathroom and squatted on the toilet so that no one would see my feet. I left the door unlocked to avoid suspicion, but swung it partially closed so that I wouldn’t be visible. The employees were pretty easy to fool, as they weren’t looking for anyone, and when we had crouched in utter silence and darkness for half an hour, P.C. radioed that he couldn’t spend another minute in the dusty, cramped storage area, and we all wandered out of our hiding places and into the empty store.

“Whoa,” P.C. gasped when we’d come outside. “I’m in an Apple store all by myself, and all of this technology is mine to play with.”

He immediately began grabbing gadgets and fiddling with them.

Taty and I sat in a corner out of earshot, and she told me about her lunch with Rick. He'd brought her a single red rose, and given a small speech about how wonderful and beautiful he thought she was before asking her to be his girlfriend. I thought it was sweet, and Taty was so excited. He was her first real boyfriend.

When P.C. grew suspicious of our conversation, we joined him and fiddled with the iphones and ipods that were out on display. We couldn't waste too much time playing, though, because we had to investigate the store and find where John was hiding or how he'd escaped. We searched the closets and studied the vents but found nothing. The only unexplored area that remained was a door leading to a storage room, but it was locked.

"We're going to have to break into the storage room," P.C. said, producing a key and then removing his left shoe.

"What are you doing?" asked Taty.

"It's a bump key," P.C. said proudly. "It opens any lock. You just have to hit it with something."

"How do you know these things?" Taty asked him, in part sarcastically and in part impressed.

P.C. just smiled and swung the door open. P.C.'s eyes widened when he saw the large room filled with boxes of technology. He hurried in and quickly began inspecting everything. Together, we studied every possible crevice, including the employee break room at the back of the storage area, but found no secret entrances or doors.

When we gave up hunting, it was well after midnight, and we were all hungry and exhausted. I found a Butterfinger in my bag which we split among the three of us, but it wasn't very filling.

After I finished my portion, I sat down, feeling suddenly dizzy.

"You okay, Leah?" I heard Taty call.

The wall of the employee break room opened, and John and his colleagues emerged. Two of them were carrying a large, heavy sack, but despite its weight, they carried it effortlessly. The four of them remained silent, their faces expressionless, as they walked through the break room and entered the door to the main store. They crossed purposely through the door to the exit. John punched in a code to deactivate the store's alarm system, and then he and his colleagues left into the night.

I shuddered when the vision ended. I knew who they were carrying in the bag.

"Yes!" P.C. exclaimed. "Jackpot. What did you see? You're drooling again."

I wiped my mouth. "I saw...the wall of the store open up—I mean, of the employee break room. And...John and his colleagues were carrying a—a large bag, like big enough to put a body in.

They were headed for the cemetery.” I started to tell them more but then stopped myself. I was too shocked to say more.

Taty’s eyes widened. “You’re sure that’s where they were going? Did they say that?”

“They didn’t say it, but I’m sure,” I told her.

“When?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Soon, I think. As soon as it happens, you two have to slip behind the wall somehow and see what’s back there. Can you do that without them noticing? They don’t look back. They just go straight to the door of the store.”

P.C. had not yet recovered from my story. “The wall of Apple opens to reveal a secret lair? That’s incredible,” he breathed. It did sound like something from straight out of one of his science fiction novels, I had to admit.

“Um, you’re not coming with us, Leah?” Taty asked.

Before I could answer her, we heard noises and movement coming from the storage room, where, thankfully, P.C. had remembered to close the door again. I motioned to P.C. and Taty to run to the closet, and I knelt behind a display of some kind. It wasn’t a very good hiding place, but I knew John wouldn’t be looking around. Just as I’d seen, they walked purposefully toward the exit. I counted to ten and then slipped out the door behind them. A car sat idling a little ways up the street, and two of John’s colleagues dumped the body bag in the trunk, then all of them entered the car and disappeared.

Our bikes were parked two blocks away, and I sprinted toward mine. The cemetery wasn’t far, not more than three miles from here, and I could bike and run faster than most. If I hurried, I’d arrive before John and his men left the cemetery. Then I’d be able to see what—or who—was in the bag. I already knew, but I wasn’t sure I’d believe it until I saw it.

I pedaled quickly, the cold wind burning my cheeks. I felt reassured every time a car passed me, the warm headlights lighting the street. It felt better not to be completely alone.

I threw my bike down a little ways from the entrance to the cemetery and jogged the rest of the way, trying to make as little noise as possible. I saw them in the distance, their backs to me. There weren’t any trees or anything for me to hide behind, but there were a few larger tombstones sprinkled throughout the graveyard. I found one that I could duck behind, but it wasn’t as close to John as I would have liked. Still, I could see that one of them was definitely shoveling and preparing to bury something...or someone.

I shivered. Had they killed someone then? Was the person in the bag dead? I knew their experiments on Dante were sick, but I hadn’t thought they’d kill anyone.

My breathing grew heavier as my fear mounted, and I tried to calm myself. I slid into a sitting position behind the tombstone, staring away from John and his colleagues. I concentrated on my breathing for a couple of minutes, hoping to slow it down before I turned around to get another look. I was just raising myself up again when a hand clamped hard on my shoulder. I nearly screamed, but the sound caught in my throat.

I turned to see John, his face completely calm and emotionless, his grip tightening on my shoulder.

“They heard you,” John told me calmly. “That’s a problem because they’re not supposed to know you exist. No one is supposed to know you exist.”

I just stared at him. I was alone in a graveyard at night, and an angry murderous alien was gripping my shoulder so hard it hurt. “I…” was all I said.

The corners of John’s mouth curved into a smile. I knew he was only doing it to scare me. He felt no emotions, so how could he smile? But he was clearly learning from his research. He was learning how to fake it. And it was working. His evil smile made me shiver.

Calmly, so calmly it frightened me, he spoke. “I thought I made it clear before that it’s bad for me—very bad—if anyone finds out that I created you, and what’s bad for me, Leah, is bad for you—and your mother.” He paused and looked at me. “I shouldn’t have created you, I suppose. My colleagues would say it was dangerous, that I was getting too involved in your world. But I don’t regret it. I…enjoy studying you. You are fascinating.”

His words reminded me of Kai’s, and the similarity made me feel sick.

“Who’s in the bag? Who are you burying?” I asked, finding my voice at last.

His lips curled into his practiced evil smile again. “Not this time, daughter. Tonight is not a question and answer session. Run along to your friends, now, before anyone sees you.”

John released his hold on me and threw me to the ground. I put my hands down just before my face hit the dirt. He was walking back towards his colleagues nearly as quickly as he had come, explaining something to them. He was probably telling them what he had been doing in this part of the cemetery, making up some story so they wouldn’t suspect anything.

Then, I crawled. I slinked along the grass and dirt, through gravestones, too terrified to stand up and run. I didn’t want anyone to see me. I was terrified of John’s threats. I knew he was distracting them to keep them from looking in my direction, and it felt like time moved so slowly until I was finally outside of the cemetery gates and sprinting towards my bike.

I was too shaken to go back into the Apple store, so I called Taty and P.C. on the walkie talkie and asked them to meet me at a park by my house.

I arrived at the park first and sat down on a swing, staring into to space and replaying the scene in the cemetery in my head.

I heard Taty and P.C.'s voices before I saw them arrive. They were arguing with each other about something, but when Taty saw my face, she was instantly silenced.

I shook my head to indicate I wasn't ready to talk yet. "Tell me what you found out first," I told them.

P.C. glanced at Taty, who still looked worried, and then launched into his story. "It's a whole lab down there, Leah. It's their hideout where they conduct their research and study the results. Imagine! A whole secret alien lair in Apple! But you'll never guess this—all the technology is completely modern. There's nothing advanced or interesting in there, nothing at all to show that it's an alien lair."

I nodded. "Maybe they're trying to keep it undercover. You know, so that if they're ever discovered, they just look like normal people."

"Or maybe you don't know what advanced technology looks like," Taty stated pointedly.

"Taty," P.C. began, as if she were a small child, "The computers used Windows Vista. That's like something Rick would have on his computer."

She rolled her eyes.

"So it's not aliens after all, Leah. We must have been wrong on that one. Clearly it's some kind of government agency, like the CIA or FBI, performing strange tests on young children."

"That doesn't make any sense!" exclaimed Taty. "Why would a government worker have no emotions?"

"Maybe they're from the IRS," P.C. suggested.

"And that doesn't explain why Leah's so much smarter and more athletic than everyone else," Taty persisted.

"Hm. Maybe we were wrong on that one too," P.C. suggested.

"You don't have bio with her, and you've never seen her play soccer. We're definitely not wrong on that one," Taty informed him.

I thought about what P.C. said. Maybe I wasn't any different than anyone else. Maybe it was just the government. Maybe I had been so tired of not fitting in that it had excited me to think that there was a reason that I was different, even if that reason meant I was the daughter of some evil alien. It did sound a little silly, now that I thought about it.

“Maybe he’s right,” I mused.

“Not you too?” asked Taty. “I can’t believe *I’m* the only one who still thinks Leah’s an alien. I don’t even read science fiction.”

“Well, that weakens your case already,” P.C. pointed out. “There just wasn’t anything in that lab that suggested higher intelligence. Leah, did you see anything in the cemetery that made you think they were aliens?”

Taty punched him a little. She hadn’t wanted him to make me talk before I was ready, but I couldn’t put it off any longer. I had to talk about it. “No,” I answered. “I guess I didn’t.” I paused for a minute and took a breath to steady myself. “I—John found me there. He threatened me again and told me to leave before anyone saw me, so I did. I chickened out I guess.” I had felt brave when I’d first had the idea of following them by myself, and it had seemed like a good plan. I didn’t want Taty or P.C. to get hurt. “But before he found me, I saw them digging. They were burying something—I don’t know what, but I know there was a body in that bag they were carrying to the car. I *know* it.”

“Did you see them burying the body?” P.C. asked.

“No, it was too dark. But, what else could they have been burying?”

“Oh my gosh...Dante...” said Taty.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t Dante in the bag.” My voice shook a little. “I—I knew who it was after I had the vision. It was Kai.”

Chapter 15

I heard Make-Up Girl talking about Kai near our lockers the next morning.

“I know, like, what’s that about?” she told one of her friends. “He, like, was totally supposed to call me, and he always calls when he says he will.”

“He’s, like, so wrapped around your finger,” her friend remarked.

“Isn’t he though?” Make-Up Girl responded, smiling and twirling her hair.

“I’m sure he has a good reason,” her friend reassured her. “I mean, come on, he’s, like, so in love with you.”

“True. Who isn’t?”

And in spite of everything, I almost felt a little sorry for her.

Kai wasn’t in biology that day, either, not that I expected he would be. Neither Taty nor I mentioned his name. I think we both wanted to pretend that last night hadn’t happened or that

there was some other explanation for what John had been doing in the cemetery. I had a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach that wouldn't go away, a kind of sadness that tugged at me and made it impossible for me to forget that Kai might never come to school again.

Taty didn't go to lunch with Rick that day. She stayed and ate with us, even though it was the first day that she and Rick were officially together. P.C. didn't make any comments about Rick's intelligence, or lack thereof, like he usually would have, and that seemed to show that none of us were in a very joking mood.

"Should we call the police?" Taty asked, after we'd been avoiding the subject all day. Her eyes looked worried and sad.

I shook my head. "We don't have any evidence. I don't think a psychic vision would convince them. And, maybe John didn't... I mean, maybe that's not who John was burying. Maybe Kai's just sick today or something." I felt weighed down and ill. None of us thought Kai was home sick.

"What we should do is obvious," said P.C. "We should go to the graveyard after school today and exhume the body, whoever's body it might be."

"Ugh! You mean dig it up?" asked Taty. I was a little repulsed myself.

"That is what exhume means, yes," P.C. replied. "I'm not certain how we'll learn anything if we don't dig and find out what's under there. If something did happen to Kai, then we need to act right away to make sure that nothing like this happens to anyone else."

Taty and I both nodded dully, not because we wanted to go digging around in the cemetery, but because we couldn't think of what else we should do.

The lunch bell rang and we trudged slowly to class. The day seemed to be dragging on and on.

"Leah!" I heard a voice call from behind me, and we all turned.

My eyes widened. Taty gasped.

"I missed you!" the voice called, and suddenly I felt strong arms circle my waist. "I was sick this morning, and my mom made me stay home, but I convinced her I was well enough to come this afternoon. I just didn't want to be without you any longer."

My heart was thudding violently. Was I awake? Was this real?

"Kai!" Taty gasped. "You're—uh—you're okay. We, um, were worried about you this morning."

"Oh, hi Taty," said Kai, as if he hadn't noticed her earlier. "Yeah, sure, I'm fine. Leah, can I walk you to class?"

I nodded, staring at P.C. and Taty in disbelief. P.C. looked strangely sad, but Taty smiled encouragingly at me. Then Kai laced his fingers through mine and led me down the hall to English.

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After English, Kai was waiting for me outside to walk me to Spanish, and after Spanish, he was waiting to walk me to soccer practice. And he only left me at the door of the girls' gym to change once he'd given me his number and made me promise to call.

And every part of it was wonderful. We passed Brianna on the way to Spanish. Her jaw dropped when she saw his fingers wrapped around mine.

"Kai," she said, stopping us in the hallway, "you didn't call last night," and her eyebrows furrowed in pain as she studied our linked hands, and for a minute I felt sad for her. That was until she spoke again. "You're kidding me," she snorted, returning to her normal, confident tone. "You don't seriously like *her*, do you? Gross. And I thought you had taste. Ew. It's over between us, Kai."

Yeah. Like she was the one who decided that.

Kai smiled at her innocently. "Okay," he told her. "And, to answer your question, yes, I'm *very* into her." And then he looked at me and smiled, like he was proud to be standing there with me at that moment, and gave my hand a gentle squeeze. I felt giddy and happy, and the world seemed perfect. Almost perfect anyway. I knew Kai's sudden obsession with me seemed...not right, but I tried not to think about it for now.

He tried to kiss me at the girls' locker room after school. It would have been my first kiss. And part of me really wanted him to, but I turned my head away. "I'll call you," I told him instead, hugging him good-bye.

"You're amazing," he told me. He'd been saying things like that all day. I felt like a character in a cheesy soap opera, but, still, it made me feel like I was amazing.

It wasn't until after practice when we met P.C. in his secret lab that I was forced to confront what I already knew was true. Taty hadn't mentioned it at all at soccer practice, but of course she was thinking it too.

"You know that it was Kai in the body bag, Leah," P.C. began nervously, and it was perhaps the first time I'd ever seen him nervous. "I mean, you know that your vision wasn't wrong."

I nodded, staring awkwardly at the ground. I knew.

"So you know that...well...that John can manipulate Kai's emotions now and make him, you know, feel things for people," P.C. continued. Then he spoke very clearly, so I wouldn't miss his point. "You know John can make Kai like you, don't you?"

I nodded again. I knew.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew, since, you know, it must feel really good to have the person you like suddenly start to like you...” His voice trailed off.

“It does, but...I’m not stupid. I know,” I admitted.

“No,” Taty broke in. “We don’t know that. I mean, Kai might really like you.”

No one responded because we all knew it wasn’t true. There was a moment of awkward silence, and I didn’t like them feeling sorry for me. “Let’s, um, go to the graveyard now,” I said, wanting to change the subject.

“Are we still going?” asked Taty. “I thought—I mean, it doesn’t seem like they buried Kai after all, right?”

I shrugged. “They buried something. We might as well find out what it was.”

“Yes!” said P.C. “I was hoping Kai wouldn’t ruin the plan.”

We grabbed our backpacks and biked there mostly in silence, with some occasional fighting from Taty and P.C. I wasn’t listening, though. I was thinking, mostly...about Kai. Today had been fun. I’d never had a boy walk me to class or hold my hand before, and it was nice. And Kai was so much fun to talk to. He wanted to know about what I was doing and thinking while we were apart, and he just seemed so completely interested in me. He asked about my family, my friends, my favorite foods, my favorite movies and just wanted to know everything about me. I felt guilty sometimes when I realized that, well, none of it was real, and I knew it would only last until John and his colleagues grew bored and started experimenting on someone else. But I guiltily hoped it would last at least a couple of weeks, and I couldn’t wait to call him tonight like I’d promised.

We parked our bikes a little ways from the cemetery and walked in, being careful to hide as much as possible in case John or one of his colleagues were here, but we seemed to be alone. I led P.C. and Taty to the spot where I’d seen them digging. P.C. slipped off the rather large bag he’d been carrying. I think both Taty and I had been afraid to ask him what was in it. He removed a long strange looking object and began fiddling with it.

“I’m afraid to ask,” began Taty, “but what is it?”

“It’s a metal detector, of course,” P.C. answered reasonably.

“You think they buried something metal?” she asked.

“Well, they didn’t necessarily bury a body, and so it might have been something metal, yes. We can’t just randomly dig holes throughout the graveyard, so I thought this would help give us a hint of where to start.”

“Huh. That’s actually rather smart of you. You actually brought something useful this time,” Taty mused, and she looked genuinely surprised.

P.C. beamed. He felt the full force of this compliment.

P.C. clicked on the metal detector and started moving it across the dirt. He reminded me of one of those old men at the beach who walk around with metal detectors while the detectors make random, annoying beeping noises around the sunbathers. Also, watching P.C. with the metal detector worried me a little bit.

“Um, it’s a good idea P.C.,” I confirmed, “but, well, if someone sees us with that thing here, won’t they think we’re planning on stealing metal jewelry off of the corpses?”

“Ha! I knew there must a catch!” Taty laughed. “It all seemed too...normal and smart for you.”

P.C. gave me a look of annoyance but resumed moving it across the ground, while I glanced around and made sure no one else entered the graveyard and mistook us for grave robbers. Suddenly the contraption did start beeping, though, and P.C.’s eyes widened at me and Taty, as if to say, “I told you so.” He immediately threw the detector down, removed a shovel from his large bag, and started digging.

This made me even more nervous. We had a metal detector, shovels, and a large bag. We looked awfully suspicious, and if someone caught us, I just didn’t think we could give them a story about having seen aliens bury something here the night before.

P.C. had to dig for what seemed like a long time, but we finally found something. It was a metal capsule. It didn’t look old or rusted, so it was possible it had just been buried the night before. We all eyed it suspiciously. It looked so...normal.

“You open it,” Taty told P.C. I think we were all scared it was going to blow up or something.

P.C. was torn between protesting and wanting to be macho and brave, so slowly he twisted the capsule. It opened easily. He peered inside and smiled. “It’s pages of code! They’re burying some kind of message here. I wonder who it’s meant for. Code! I knew it! I knew it was a large plot by the government and the CIA.”

Taty and I moved closer. P.C. was right. It was a long, rolled up paper spotted with strange symbols and markings that could only be code. What a mystery. Why would they *bury* this code? It all seemed so strange.

“So what do we do with it?” Taty asked.

“I’ll take it back to my office at school and have the Information Society work on it,” P.C. responded.

Taty looked at me to interpret, so I told her, “He’s going to run it through one of his school computers over night and see if the computer can crack the code by morning.”

“Excellent idea. Thank you, P.C.,” Taty told him, and, again, his whole face lit up, but she didn’t seem to notice. After a pause, Taty continued, “It can’t be the government that’s doing all this, though, P.C. How could the government make someone...you know, fall in love with someone else?” She stared at the ground after she said it, embarrassed.

P.C.’s eyes widened and he looked at her very seriously. “Never underestimate the power of the government,” he told her.

Chapter 16

Kai was waiting for me at my locker the next morning when I got to school.

“You didn’t call me last night,” he said immediately when I arrived.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I got busy, and then I thought it might be too late.”

“It wouldn’t have been too late,” he answered seriously. “You can always call.”

I nodded.

I was lying. It hadn’t gotten too late. I’d wanted to call him as soon as I’d arrived home. I’d even started to dial his number a dozen times, but after I punched six numbers, I always hung up. I just started thinking about how none of it was real and about how much I desperately wanted it to be real, and...I just couldn’t do it.

Kai changed the subject then. “I was thinking I could take you out tonight. We could grab a meal and maybe see a movie. What do you think?”

I looked at him. I tried to will myself to say no. None of it was real. I’d feel like a fool when it was all over. Say no, Leah. Say no. But I couldn’t. I smiled and said, “I’d like that.”

I looked up and saw Taty approaching us then, holding hands with Rick. This was weird. She never brought Rick around us. I thought it was some sort of unspoken agreement between her and P.C. that P.C. would never have to interact with Rick.

“Rick said he wanted to meet you, Leah,” Taty said happily, “and he wants to talk to P.C. too, of course. Hi, Kai.”

Kai smiled at her and nodded towards Rick. They already knew each other.

“Hi Rick,” I said. “It’s great to finally meet you.” I glanced around nervously. I didn’t really want P.C. to come to his locker now and have to endure this meeting. He’d been handling everything so well lately. Did Taty really not know how he felt about her? That seemed a little impossible, but, then, some girls really don’t know.

“Hi, Leah,” said Rick. “Taty talks about you and P.C. a lot. It’s great to meet you, too.”

I nodded. Silence. Hm. What to talk about. I suddenly remembered the jacket Taty sometimes wore. “Uh, so, you play football, right, Rick?” I asked. It was sort of a lame conversation starter, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he answered. “We have a game tonight. You should all come.”

“Actually—” Kai began.

“What position do you play?” I asked quickly, cutting Kai off. I knew Kai was going to mention that he and I had had a date, but for some reason, I didn’t want him to tell them. I think I felt embarrassed telling Taty. I mean, here was this guy who actually wanted to date her, talking to my pretend boyfriend who only liked me because his emotions were being manipulated. It *was* a bit embarrassing...and lame of me for letting it continue, really. But I liked him, so it was hard to break it off.

Rick was answering my question when I saw P.C. approaching. P.C. saw me and sped up, clearly eager to tell me something. He couldn’t see Taty or Rick from his direction, so I tried to motion for him not to come here, but he didn’t understand my gestures.

“Leah!” called P.C. when he arrived. Somehow, he didn’t notice Kai, Taty, or Rick. It was strange, but he never seemed to notice much around him when he was excited about something, and he was definitely excited now. “Leah, I used every computer in the district. Over 300 computers worked all night to crack the code, and they couldn’t solve it. Can you believe it?” He stopped, then, when he saw the look on my face and turned slowly around.

“Oh, Taty,” he said, and his face turned white.

Taty looked nervous now. Perhaps it was just now occurring to her that this meeting wasn’t the best idea. “Um, P.C., I wanted you to meet Rick,” she said, forcing her voice to be casual. Of course Rick and P.C. already knew each other. They had probably gone to school together for years, but I think Taty was just nervous.

P.C. was silent, staring for a long time at Rick and Taty holding hands. At that point, we all felt a little uncomfortable. Kai must have understood how awkward the moment was, too, because he tried to break the silence by giving P.C. something to talk about. “So what were you saying about the computer and some code, P.C.?” asked Kai. “You are the computer genius in this school.”

I smiled. That was nice of Kai to make P.C. feel confident right now, but then my smile faded. Kai wasn’t my boyfriend. I didn’t really have any right to feel so proud to be with him.

Still, Kai's comment did wake P.C. up a little. "What?" he asked. "Oh, nothing. It's not a big deal, actually." Then, after a short pause, he continued, "So, Rick, you into computers?"

"Uh, no, not really," Rick answered.

P.C. nodded. "Computer technology is a growing field. It's really the wave of the future. Eventually, there won't be jobs available to the computer illiterate."

I wondered if he'd read the term "computer illiterate" in one of his technology magazines somewhere.

"Right, well, I wouldn't call myself computer illiterate," Rick began.

P.C. nodded again. "Good, so I assume you've mastered the basics of the Microsoft products, like Word and Excel."

"Uh, yeah, I use Word," Rick answered, confused by where these questions were leading. The rest of us shifted uncomfortably. I wasn't sure where this was going, either, but it couldn't be good.

"And if you care about your future at all," P.C. continued, "I'm assuming you've fooled around with web design. You've probably made a website or two, and of course you know some computer languages so that you can program. You must know the basics of Java, at least. That's good. It's good to hear you're preparing to enter a job market that targets people with computer skills."

"Uh, okay," said Rick, and the rest of us remained silent.

"Because, really," P.C. continued, ignoring Taty's angry looks, "in the end, Rick, it's men like Bill Gates, Sergey Brin, and Steve Jobs that all the women want to marry." He turned around abruptly, then, and walked to class.

"Well, that went well," Kai joked after he was gone. I laughed a little because I was nervous, but Taty was angry and refused to laugh.

"I always thought he was a weird one," Rick mused. He still didn't get what P.C.'s lecture had really been about.

The bell rang then, thankfully, and we all walked to class.

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I was excited about our date. I can't lie. Wouldn't any girl be? I'd waited for months for Kai to notice me, and now here he was, wanting to spend time with me. And he was *fun*. I mean, at first I still felt shy when he walked me to class, and I didn't say much, but after a while I started

to feel more comfortable with him. He was very easy to talk to, and he made me laugh. If it didn't make me feel guilty and deceitful, it would have been heaven.

I didn't tell my mom I had a date. I didn't want to lie to her and pretend that Kai really liked me, so instead I lied and pretended I was going out with Taty and P.C. Mom still seemed to think I was secretly dating P.C. anyway, so she didn't question me too much.

I went to Taty's house to get ready. She helped me pick out something to wear. I loved it. I felt like...like a normal high school sophomore, and it felt good.

Kai picked me up at Taty's house so my mom wouldn't suspect anything, and he brought flowers. He looked so handsome, and I felt so lucky.

We had dinner at a little diner downtown, and it was the first time we had more than about fifteen minutes to talk to each other. I was a little nervous we wouldn't be able to hold a conversation for that long, but Kai seemed so comfortable and confident.

"That was crazy with Rick and P.C. today, wasn't it? What was Taty thinking when she thought those two would be friends?" Kai asked. I loved it that he was interested in what was happening with my friends.

"I know. I was thinking the same thing," I responded, but then suddenly stopped myself. "Wait, why did you think Rick and P.C. wouldn't be friends?" I suddenly felt guilty that I'd given away P.C.'s secret.

"Because P.C. obviously likes Taty."

Oh. I guess I hadn't given anything away. "I didn't realize that was obvious," I answered. "I didn't think Rick picked up on it."

"Yeah, well, Rick probably thinks that learning Java means drinking more coffee," Kai joked.

I laughed. "You sound like P.C."

"I'm glad you came tonight," Kai said suddenly, reaching for my hand under the table.

I felt my heart suddenly beat faster, but I felt worried, too. This would definitely have to be the first and only date.

"What's wrong?" Kai asked, looking concerned.

I thought for a minute. "Kai, why didn't you ask me out before?" I don't know why I was torturing myself, but I wanted to know.

He studied my face. "I don't know," he answered finally. "I was with Brianna, and I didn't want to end that relationship and start something new. I noticed you and thought you were cool,

but you were so shy all the time, you know? You didn't talk to me much. We didn't really have that kind of relationship, Leah, and I didn't think of you that way...then."

That was true. I knew he didn't think of me that way. And I had tried to talk to him as much as I could make myself, but I was shy. Still, it would have been nice if he'd thought that my shyness was, well, cute. "Why did you like Brianna?" I had to know. "Do you still like her? I mean, you broke it off with her very suddenly."

He looked embarrassed. "You know...she's a good looking girl. She was pretty cruel to people sometimes, but, you know, she's insecure. Some girls are just really insecure. Of course I don't like her any more though. I could never like anyone but you, Leah. I mean, come on, she's pretty, but you're amazing."

I didn't feel warm or tingly when he complimented me this time. I figured that's why he was with Brianna. She is beautiful. I think I had just hoped he had a better reason. I had hoped he wasn't so...shallow. I just wanted him to notice me in the normal way, the way a normal guy notices a normal girl. I really couldn't keep pretending.

"Leah," Kai interrupted my thoughts. "What's wrong? I mean, are you upset that I dated Brianna before you or what?"

He wasn't mad when he said it, just confused. "No, it's not that," I told him. I had to break up with him. Right now. How could I keep dating him when I knew none of it was real? Honestly, I had to respect myself and him more than that. I started talking quickly, then, so I could say what I needed to say before I lost my courage. "The thing is that I've liked you for a long time, Kai," I began. "You must have known that. I've felt excited whenever you talked to me and thought about everything you've said and done, and I *really* like you. I mean, I could make a list of real things I like about you. What I mean is that I like it that you're so nice to everyone, even people who aren't cool or popular. And I love it that you're so considerate and try to make people feel good about themselves, like the way that you tried to make P.C. feel confident today when he was talking to Rick. I like it that you're so observant, such as when you noticed that P.C. had feelings for Taty or that I had already filled out my worksheet that one time we were working together in biology. I like the way you ask people questions about themselves and sound genuinely interested in the answers. I like it that you're honest—like when you said just now that you only dated Brianna because she's pretty. Do you see what I mean? I could make this whole list of specific things I like about you, and I know you can't make that list about me. You can only say general things like your comment just now that I'm amazing, which is great—I love it when you say things like that—but you don't know me or like me the way I know and like you. You really didn't notice me before yesterday, Kai."

I felt strangely calm after my speech, like I'd finally said what I'd needed to say. I hadn't told him everything, but at least I had told him something. He looked at me and continued rubbing my hand with his thumb under the table. His eyes were so beautiful.

"You're right, Leah," he finally said, and I felt suddenly sad. I knew we shouldn't see each other anymore, but I hadn't pictured it being so easy to convince him. "I don't know as much about

you as you seem to know about me,” he continued. “Maybe I haven’t noticed you as much as you’ve noticed me, but I still like you, Leah. I enjoy hanging out with you, and if you let me hang out with you more and get to know you better, I will be able to make a list like that about you. You just have to give it some time. You’ll give me time, won’t you?”

He looked at me earnestly, then, pleading with me with his beautiful eyes, and it seemed like such a natural and sincere request that all I could do was nod.

Chapter 17

My mom woke me at nine the next morning to tell me I had a visitor, and she was dancing around the room and laughing so much that I knew it must be John. I felt my stomach clench. The capsule...did he know? P.C. had said he was going to put it back in a day or two. We didn’t think they’d be looking for it before then. I dressed quickly and hurried downstairs to find John sitting on the couch waiting for me. My mom was sitting so close to him she was practically on his lap. She was touching his hair and curling it around her finger. I felt sick.

“Hi John,” I said flatly.

“Daughter,” he nodded at me. I was pretty sure he only called me that because it annoyed me.

“Why don’t you call him Dad?” my mother asked me. “John sounds so cold and distant.”

I looked at her without responding.

“Leah will call me Dad when she’s ready,” John responded confidently. He smiled at my mother then, and his face looked so full of love that even I was nearly convinced by it. My mom felt it, too, and fluttered her eyelashes at him flirtatiously.

“Oh, John,” she gushed. “I can tell you’re learning so much from your research. Your smile is *so* convincing. It makes me really believe you love me.”

“Darling, of course I love you,” he told her, and he said it so sincerely that for a minute they looked like the picture of love. I had to look away.

“Look,” I said, eager to break their happy moment, “did you want to talk to me or what?”

John’s face returned to its normal, emotionless state then as he studied me. He looked at me so long that it made me uncomfortable, and I had to look away. Then he turned to my mother, and abruptly his features relaxed, making his face look soft and kind again. “Honey lips,” he said to her, “do you mind if Leah and I have a moment alone to talk and bond? You know, a father daughter moment.”

Mom ate that up. The thought of John and me bonding was some kind of dream to her. “Oh, of course! Silly me, sitting here and keeping you two apart!” she cried. “I’ll just see you later, then.” She caressed his face one more time before leaving us alone.

“Honey lips?” I said to John when we were alone. “Can you tell me why you decided to make her fall in love with you? Was that just an ego boost or something?” Ever since I’d seen Kai’s change in behavior towards me, the reason for Mom’s obsession with John had been clear. John was definitely manipulating her emotions so that she would love him.

He didn’t answer me, though. He had a different agenda. “Leah, I know you took the capsules. You stupid fool, you don’t know what you are interfering with. It’s quite possible that my supervisors will send more people back to end our operation now. And if they find out about you, which they might, it will be very dangerous for all of us, including your mother. Your foolish little friends will not be safe either. After the first capsule was taken, our supervisor was concerned and worried. We buried the next capsule in a different place. But then the second one was stolen, too, and our supervisor was hostile. How did you find our new location?”

I hadn’t known we’d taken more than one capsule. P.C. must have gone back by himself, then, and stolen another one. If they had buried the second capsule in a new spot, how did P.C. know their new location?

John watched me, and when he had decided I wasn’t going to reply, he continued, “It doesn’t matter. It’s done now. If I really wanted to know, there are methods of making you talk.”

He wasn’t pretending to feel emotion now like he had when my mother had been here. He said the last statement so matter of factly that it gave me chills.

“Daughter,” he continued calmly, “I may still be able to smooth all of this over and make my supervisor believe that we are still in charge of this operation and that there will be no further problems. If I can convince him of that, he won’t send anyone back to end our operation. If our operation is allowed to continue, your friends and your mother will be safe. *Do not* take another capsule. If you do, I will be forced to dispose of you, Leah. You interest me very much, and I want to continue to study you, but your existence, if discovered, will get me into trouble. I don’t like to get into trouble. Am I making myself clear?”

When he said that he would dispose of me, he meant that he would kill me. That was clear; I nodded dumbly. I hated feeling so powerless. I glared at him and scoffed, “You don’t scare me.” It sounded childish when I said it, though, and I immediately felt stupid. I sounded like I was reciting a line from a cheesy thriller movie. It just seemed like John always appeared out of nowhere to threaten me or the people I loved, and I wanted to say something back to him that might annoy him slightly. His expression didn’t look annoyed, though. His face was the same, expressionless mask that he always wore with me.

He surprised me by smirking then, an evil smirk that looked very convincing. I wondered who he’d learned it from. “Did you really think you’d be able to crack the code?” he asked, referring to the capsules. “What did you think it would say? Did you think it would be our plans to take over your world?”

I didn’t answer because I had thought that. P.C. and Taty had too. I mean, come on. It is the plot of every alien movie ever filmed.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” John mused. “Maybe it’s Kai you want to talk about then. Are you enjoying his—what shall we call it?—change in personality?”

I felt hot tears running down my face then, and my cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I hated it that I was crying in front of *him*. Any reference to Kai just excited a whirlwind of emotions in me—guilt, frustration, excitement, sadness, and I’d been holding everything in for so long that now my emotions spilled over into tears.

John leaned forward. “You’re crying,” he said, his face still emotionless, but I knew he was intrigued. Although he showed interest, I had learned that wasn’t the same as emotion. It didn’t feel as passionate or warm as emotion, anyway. John continued to stare at me, stating, “Fascinating. Tell me why. I would have thought our little experiment would have made you happy.”

“It makes me feel terrible,” I practically yelled. “I wish you’d left him alone.” Again, I felt like such a child.

“That’s amazing,” John mused. He leaned even closer to me. “But I’m certain you liked him. Every time you were near him, your heart rate increased and your blood pressure rose. All of my research indicated that you had feelings for that boy.”

It disturbed me that he somehow knew about my heart rate and blood pressure. How was he learning so much about me without my knowledge?

“I do have feelings for him, but I wanted him to like me on his own. I didn’t want it to be forced,” I explained. How could he not know that?

“Leah,” John began. His face didn’t show it, but I knew none of what I said made sense to him. “In the world and time in which you live, no one has the power of free choice. You are all products of your environment and your genetic code. Your genes and the way in which you are raised determine all of the decisions you will make. No one is free, so what does it matter if, in my experiments, I decide to make Kai have feelings for you? His choices weren’t free anyway.”

I shook my head. “You’re so...twisted. Of course it matters. Even if none of us have free choice, which I’m not sure I believe, I’d still rather you’d left Kai alone. I’d still rather he liked me based on his genetic code than because my alien father decided to tinker with his emotions.”

“Fascinating,” John repeated, and I felt like he wanted to start taking notes on my reactions right then. “Very well. It matters little to me. The boy isn’t terribly interesting to study anyway. We’ll leave him alone and choose a more interesting test subject. I don’t know why you chose him anyway. You have super human intelligence, Leah, and yet I’ve rarely seen you use it. I wonder why that is.”

He spoke of his test subjects so calmly that it made me shift uncomfortably in my seat. He rose to leave then, as if he suddenly had no further use for me. “Remember what I said,” he warned

me. “Leave the capsules alone. And, Leah, you might want to warn your other little boyfriend to be careful. I won’t try to protect him when my supervisor finds out about that he’s the one who’s been snooping. And my supervisor will find out; don’t doubt that. You know which little friend I’m talking about?”

I nodded.

“John,” I called out suddenly, moving in front of him to block him from leaving. “Release my mother.”

He stared at me for a minute, perhaps thinking that, yet again, this reaction was fascinating. “No,” he finally said. “She is much easier to manage this way, and there are still things I need from her. Give her my love, won’t you?” he said, and his face twisted again into his evil smirk, and then he left.

My mom appeared almost immediately after John left. “He didn’t leave, did he?” she asked, looking very lost and sad. “But he didn’t even say good-bye.”

The pain on her face made me want to comfort her. “He said to give you his love,” I told her, and she brightened immediately.

“Oh! That was sweet of him, wasn’t it? He’s such a wonderful man. Did you two have a good talk? You must realize by now why I absolutely couldn’t resist him!”

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said. “He’s something else. Look, I’m going to run to P.C.’s house. I’ll be back later, okay?”

She smiled a sly smile at me. She still thought that P.C. and I had some sort of secret relationship. “Of course, honey. Be back for dinner.”

“Sure,” I told her and then ran the three blocks to his house.

P.C. answered the door when I knocked. He was wearing all black and carrying a large bag. I asked him to go for a walk with me, and he agreed. I didn’t want his parents to hear any of our conversation.

Once he’d shut the door and we were outside, he looked at me with concern. “What is it, Leah? Was it your date with Kai?”

P.C. hadn’t wanted me to go on the date last night. He’d felt it was dishonest to Kai. I’d thought so too, of course, but Taty had convinced me that it wasn’t really doing any harm and that it was what Kai wanted anyway.

“No,” I told P.C. “It’s John. He was just here, and he knew about the capsules. He said that he’d kill or torture us both if we took any more. He kept talking about his supervisor sending someone back. I didn’t understand it all the way. P.C., he knew you’d taken two capsules

already. When did you take the second one, and why didn't you tell us? We would have come with you."

P.C. looked at me for a minute while he digested all of this information. I had been talking quickly and excitedly. Finally, he answered, "I didn't take it yet, Leah. I had just decided that we should steal another one when you knocked on my door."

"Then how...? Did someone else take it?"

"I don't know," said P.C. "But last night I planted a microphone in their Apple lair, and I heard them discuss where they planned to bury the new capsule. It's at the park near the elementary school."

The park was just over a mile away, so we walked to it together. Neither of us spoke much on the way. We were too deep in our own thoughts. When we arrived, P.C. led me to the spot and then bent to remove a shovel from his bag. He dug for ten or fifteen minutes while I watched and, finally, we saw a small sliver of something metal peeking out from underneath the dirt. He dug more carefully than before stooping to pick up the second capsule. We stared at each other without speaking for a long time.

Chapter 18

P.C. and I both agreed to think everything over and talk about it tomorrow at school. It was all too eerie for us to discuss at the moment.

I called Kai that night and asked him to meet me in the park. We talked for hours. I don't even remember much of what we said. I just remember that it felt so comfortable and so easy. When it was dark and time to go, he walked me home, stopping in front of my house. He put his arms around me and ran his fingers through my hair. I pulled his head down towards mine and kissed him, a long, slow kiss, my first kiss. He smiled at me afterwards. "I'll see you tomorrow, Leah. I can't wait," he told me.

"I'll miss you," I told him, and I meant it. I would miss him.

At school the next morning, I saw Kai standing by my locker. For a happy second I thought that he was waiting to see me, that John hadn't finished his experiment, but then I saw Make-Up Girl standing behind him, caressing his cheek. She rolled her eyes at me when she saw me approach. "There's your little girlfriend, Kai. What did you ever see in her?" she asked him, smacking her gum as she spoke.

He gave her a confused look, so she changed the subject. "Tell me you love me," she told him. "Tell me you love so much and that you're sorry you tried to leave me because no one else could ever compare to me." She was putting on a show because I was there, but at least she was jealous of me. At least she saw me as competition. Something about that made me feel good.

“Brianna,” Kai seemed very confused now. “I told you I never left you. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe I was really busy or something.”

She eyed him suspiciously then. “Look, you don’t have to lie. I don’t care if you realized that Leah is gross and not as pretty as me. She probably bewitched you with her weird voodoo or something.”

Kai looked at me then, longer than he should have, and for a second I almost thought he remembered. Then he shook his head and spoke, “Leah, tell her she’s crazy. When would you and I have ever dated?”

I looked at Make-Up Girl and then back at him. “Some girls are just really insecure,” I shrugged, echoing what he had told me about Brianna on our date. I hurried to get my books, then, while Kai continued to stare at me.

Make-Up Girl scowled at me and then turned back to Kai, pulling his face so that he was looking at her again. “Fine,” she snapped. “You don’t have to tell me anything.” Then she made her voice gentle again. “What matters is that you’re with me now, only with me. Now I have you completely to myself. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Kai responded. The whole conversation was a little disturbing and for him. “Look, Bri, I’ll see you after class, okay?” he called hurriedly, suddenly wanting to be gone, and scurried away.

I smiled a little. He would have walked me to class. So there.

“What are you smiling at, freak girl?”

I’m smiling at how you feel like you’re his second choice now. I’m smiling at the memory of kissing him in front of my house last night. I’m smiling at how you’re going to quiz him for details on his relationship with me, and how he honestly won’t be able to tell you a thing, and how that will frustrate you endlessly.

I didn’t say any of that, actually. I didn’t say anything at all.

Make-Up Girl moved really close to me then, until she was almost pinning me against my locker. “Listen, freak, I know you think you won, but he’s with me now. He barely glanced at you just now. He doesn’t even remember you, and why should he when he has me? So go lick your wounds in the corner and stay away from him; got it?”

It was just a competition to her. I doubted she even liked Kai; she just wanted to prove that she’d won and I’d lost. My back was against my locker, and her face was just inches from mine. “Are you done now?” I asked her. “Because your breath smells.”

She pushed me against the rows of lockers then, and my head slammed against the metal. She flipped her hair and walked away, her shoes clicking noisily on the floor as she left. I

straightened myself up. It hadn't hurt. I was more embarrassed than anything, and I glanced around quickly to see if anyone had noticed. No one seemed to be looking at me though.

"You're getting gutsier, Leah Vera. I never would have heard you say something like that to her earlier in the year," I heard a voice near me say, and I jumped with surprise.

"P.C.!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know you were there. Thanks a lot for jumping to my rescue," I added dryly.

He shrugged. "You seemed to have things under control. So have you made sense of any of it yet? I've been thinking about it all night."

He was talking about the capsule last night. I was still thinking about Kai. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "Yeah, actually, I do have a theory. Want to talk about it at lunch? I think it will take a while."

He nodded, although I could tell he didn't like the idea of waiting. I saw Taty coming to meet us then. She looked concerned. She must have seen Kai and Make-Up Girl together, and I hadn't told her anything about yesterday's conversation with John yet.

"It's okay," I cut her off before she had time to say anything. "I'm okay with it. It all felt too weird anyway. I'll tell you everything in bio."

"Not *everything*," P.C. interjected, not wanting to be left out of the loop.

"Right, not everything," I agreed. "Can you meet us for lunch, Taty?"

"Oh! I wanted to talk to you both about that," she gushed. "Rick wants to have lunch with all of us."

Whoa. Love really is blind, I guess. Had she not noticed P.C.'s reaction the other day?

P.C. shook his head firmly. "No, Taty. I will not have lunch with him."

She looked confused and hurt. "Why not? He's important to me, and you're important to me, so why not?" she asked sincerely. I think she meant it, too. I really think she wanted them both to be a part of her life.

P.C. looked at her very seriously then. "You know why not." Taty started to say something then, but P.C. cut her off. "Don't make me say it aloud, Taty. You know why I don't want to be friends with Rick. I'll be your friend. I'll even tolerate it when you talk to Leah about him while I'm around. I'll pretend I don't care that you're dating a guy who spends hours trying to alphabetize M & M's. But I won't hang out with you and watch you cuddle and hold hands. That's asking too much." He slammed his locker shut then. "I'll see you at lunch, Leah, and you, too, Taty, if you're not with Rick." Then he trudged slowly down the hall away from us.

I was proud of him. *That* was gutsy. Taty stared after him for a while and didn't say anything, so I touched her shoulder and said gently, "He's right. It's too much to ask of him, really. You knew that, didn't you? And you know why, don't you?"

She nodded. "I guess I did. I just...I imagined we'd all be friends, but I see now that wasn't fair to Rick or P.C. Honestly, Rick didn't really want to come today anyway."

Yeah, I had wondered about that one after P.C.'s last interaction with Rick. "It is tough," I told her, "but you already balance different groups of friends. We don't hang out with your other friends." I didn't call her other friends the popular ones because I knew she wouldn't like that and because, well, after talking with Make-Up Girl, I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of that crowd anyway.

"Yes," Taty agreed, "but he's my boyfriend, so I wanted him to see the different parts of my life, but it's okay. I get it. I can see I was being naïve." We walked toward biology, and, to change the subject, I told her about yesterday, and she agreed to meet us for lunch without Rick.

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P.C. was already at our lunch spot when Taty and I arrived. I knew he was eager to talk about last night, but he played it cool when he saw Taty show up without Rick. He pressed his lips into a straight line and nodded at her. "Hi Taty," he said calmly and formally.

"Oh, P.C.," Taty responded, rolling her eyes. "OK, I'm sorry. You were right, alright?"

Then he gave her a half smile to show that, even in this case, he liked being right, and her admitting that she was wrong meant that all was forgiven. He became animated then, and I knew he'd been containing his excitement in his attempt to be cool and aloof earlier. "So, how do you think they pulled that trick off last night?" he asked, referring to the buried capsule. "I figure John must have been lying to you, must have made the whole thing up to trick us, but why? Or, if it wasn't a trick, maybe they're not from the government after all, but I don't think they're aliens either...maybe they're wizards or something. Maybe they're, like, Voldemort, except that Voldemort's dead, so maybe they're just like an evil wizarding family, like the Malfoys or something."

"Or maybe they're robots sent from another planet to seek out and destroy computer hackers," Taty said very seriously, although I knew she was teasing him.

P.C.'s eyes grew wide. "I thought of that, too," he admitted, "but I thought you'd both think I was stupid if I said it."

OK, this weird discussion had to stop. I broke in, "I think I know. I mean, I've thought about it, and I'm sure I'm right. I'm just worried you'll think my explanation sounds just as weird as some of what P.C. just said."

"I don't think you can get weirder than Voldemort reincarnated," said Taty, and P.C. scowled at her.

I took a deep breath. Here goes, then. “They’re not aliens. They’re us...in the future. I mean, not us—but people who were born and live in the future who have traveled back in time.”

They both just stared at me in silence, so I continued. “I mean, think about it. John is my father, so that means he must be pretty human. And look at me—I look human—I mean, I am human. It doesn’t really make sense to think that they’re aliens, but if they’re humans from some future time, then I would imagine that they’d be super smart and strong and, well, they are.”

Neither of them responded, so I kept talking. “I mean, like I said before, I can’t bend steel with my teeth or anything. I’m not so different that you can’t believe I’m human...right?”

Again, I was met with silence.

Finally, P.C. defended me. “Maybe you’re right. But your intelligence and physical abilities are superior to most people. In the future, perhaps people have perfected mixing genes. Maybe that’s what explains your enhanced abilities, Leah.”

P.C. began to brighten as he thought more about my idea. He continued, “OK, I see where you’re going with this. So, maybe people can travel back from the future, but they can’t travel forwards. That’s why John and his colleagues bury the capsules of information. It’s a time capsule, waiting for the future to come when people will dig it up. And *that’s* why none of their technology is advanced. They’re using our technology because they couldn’t or didn’t want to bring any of theirs back with them.”

“Right, I don’t think they want to draw any extra attention to themselves,” I said.

“I see,” Taty chimed in. “That’s why John kept saying his colleagues were coming *back*, like you told me, Leah. They’re coming back in time. Huh, maybe you’re right. How else would John have known P.C. took the capsule before he actually took it—unless the people from the future had already contacted him to report it was missing...because in the future, it was missing.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, relieved that they agreed with me.

“Wow, Leah,” noted P.C. “That was actually kind of smart for a girl.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said, although I didn’t feel complimented. “I’ve been thinking about John’s threats, too. You know, how he said that he’d well, um, kill and torture you both.”

“I’ve been watching *Terminator* a lot lately,” P.C. confided. “I’ve picked up a lot of new moves, so it’s really Taty you should be concerned about.”

“Right, uh, okay,” I responded. “The thing is, though, I don’t think they’d really kill either of you. Like you said, P.C., they use old technology. Nothing in their lab was from the future, and when Yesenia was in danger, they left as soon as I said something. I don’t think they want to

draw any attention to themselves at all. I think if they do, people will come back from the future to clean up the mess. I do think they'll use the brain scramblers on you to erase your memories, though, like they did to Kai. I figure they'll do that pretty soon. I'm not sure why they haven't done it already, honestly." I felt very alone after I said it. I hated to think that, in a week or so, my two best friends wouldn't remember any of what we'd shared.

"Really, Leah, do you think you're working with an amateur?" P.C. asked me. "Of course I've already thought of that, and I've been speaking into an audio recorder for weeks, now. I carry it with me at all times, and I've hidden encrypted backups of the files in several locations on the web. All I have to do is listen to it, and I'll know everything that's happened these last few months. Don't worry, Taty, I've made copies of the files for you, too."

"Thanks, P.C.," she responded, and she meant it. "What about Leah, though? Won't they erase her memory too?"

"Oh no," P.C. replied confidently. "No one knows she exists except John, and if anyone found out, John would be in a lot of trouble. If John feels like his supervisors from the future are aware of Leah's existence, he'll just kill her. He'll have to be very discreet about it, though, because if anyone finds out he's killed her, he'll be in a lot of trouble."

"Uh, right," I answered. "That's what I figured would happen too, but I don't think I could have said it so calmly."

"Don't worry," P.C. soothed. "I've been watching Arnold, remember? It's all under control."

"Right," I said, as the lunch bell sounded.

Chapter 19

P.C. was waiting on the field for Taty and me after soccer, nervously biting his finger nails and pacing along the sidelines. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look scared.

"What is it?" asked Taty when she saw how pale he looked. "Is everything okay?"

He just shook his head but wouldn't say more, and we followed him in silence as he led us to his office. Wordlessly, he swung open the door to reveal a disaster. Papers were scattered everywhere. Drawers were pulled open and emptied. The computers and scanners and printers were thrown on the floor and smashed. Broken technology was littered everywhere.

Taty gasped as we stared at the mess. "It was...John?" she asked.

P.C. couldn't speak, so I answered. "John knows we have the capsule and can't read it. He could just make another copy of the information. No, it was someone else who wanted to find that information, someone who wanted to make sure we didn't have it."

P.C. mumbled words we couldn't understand.

“Say something,” Taty said nervously. “You’re scaring us.”

“Gone. Everything is gone,” P.C. responded, and his voice sounded so far away.

I bent down and started gathering some of the papers, and Taty followed my lead, picking up one of the desk drawers and fitting it back into the desk. P.C. watched in silence for a while, unable to move, while Taty and I continued to work. Then Taty picked up some strange, large, black plastic mask and began to examine it before putting it away. That jolted P.C. back to life.

“That’s my Darth Vader mask!” he cried, trying to grab it from her hands. She moved it out of his reach.

“Look, is there some toy shelf then where you keep it?” She slipped it on her head then and started breathing loudly, imitating Darth Vader. “Luke, I am your father,” she mimicked in a deep voice.

“It’s not a toy,” P.C. scowled, ripping it off her head and putting it on, well, the toy shelf.

“And this weird red man?” I asked, grabbing another toy. I was hoping to distract P.C. from feeling so down. “What’s his deal?”

“That’s Magneto,” P.C. replied, rolling his eyes at my ignorance and grabbing the toy from my hands. “I should think you’d like him, Leah. He’s big on defending the rights of mutants.”

I gave him an annoyed look but said nothing. I didn’t want to make him feel any worse.

P.C. seemed to relax a little then and started helping us pick up. We worked in silence for a while, until P.C. finally spoke, “They didn’t get any of the Information Society’s research. I have it programmed to delete all information in cases of break ins.”

“You were worried about a break in?” Taty asked.

P.C. gestured around the room, indicating that he had reason to worry about such things. “The Information Society has many secrets to guard,” he told her. “It was John’s supervisors from the future, Leah. They’re the only ones who would do this. Like you said, John knew we had the capsule and just didn’t want us to take any more of them and alert his supervisors of our presence. He didn’t want it back. He wasn’t scared of us. But the people from the future...they were worried about who would find the information, and they wanted it back.”

I nodded. I’d figured it was them, too. I wondered what that would mean for John. “They found the capsule here, right? I mean, they got what they wanted from this office, didn’t they?”

P.C. stopped suddenly and shook his head. “No,” he said. “It was in my room at home. My mom is at home...”

We all looked at each other for a minute and then hurried to P.C.’s house.

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P.C. burst through the door of his house, screaming his mother's name, while Taty and I followed behind him. "Mom! Where are you? Are you okay?" he called.

A short, barefoot woman walked out of the kitchen wearing an apron and holding a wooden spoon. "What do you think you're doing entering the house like that?" she asked him.

"Mom!" P.C. cried, visibly relieved. He then began scanning the house to make sure everything was in order.

"That's no way to enter a house!" the woman continued. "Were you raised by wolves? Now you go back outside and enter again in a more civilized manner."

"Mom!" P.C. said, suddenly turning red and looking embarrassed. "I need to check my room to make sure the humans from the future haven't been here to steal back their time capsule."

Perhaps she was used to strange statements like this from her son because she ignored him. "I don't care what you think you have to do. Go back outside right now."

P.C. obeyed. Taty and I waited awkwardly, sort of staring at the floor until he came back.

"That's better," his mom said upon his return. "Now why haven't you introduced your friends yet? Is this Taty? Taty! How grown up you look. Why, I remember seeing you in middle school and you were just a little girl. You were pretty then, too. You've always been a pretty girl."

"Como estas, Senora?" Taty responded shyly with a smile.

"Bien! How very cute that you are speaking Spanish to me! Are you dating my son?"

"Oh, ah, no, ma'am," Taty responded.

"Hm," P.C.'s mother grunted in disappointment. "And who's this?" she asked, gesturing to me.

"Hola, soy Leah Vera," I introduced myself. "Much gusto."

"What? You think I can't speak English or something? You think every woman you see that's Hispanic must only speak Spanish? Is that what you think? Is that what they teach you in school these days? My family has been in this country for three generations. Even my grandmother spoke English."

"Oh, I didn't mean—I mean, I was just trying to be friendly," I answered quickly.

"Hm," she responded, and I started playing with my hair self consciously. "You're the one that has visions," she continued. "A bit weird, that. Well then. You'll all stay for dinner."

“No, mom! Stop! I told you, we have to check to see if the people from the future have been here.”

“No one’s been here, P.C., just your old mother. Honestly, every day you ask me if the aliens have been here, and they never have.”

“Let me at least check my room, though,” he pleaded.

“You know the rule. No girls in your bedroom. I don’t run a brothel.” Then she turned to us and said, “No offense, of course.”

“Of course not,” we both responded.

P.C. rolled his eyes. “Talk to her for a bit, will you?” he asked us, and then dashed up the stairs to his room.

P.C.’s mom led us back to her kitchen and busied herself with preparing the meal while Taty and I stood awkwardly in the corner, not sure what to do.

His mother looked at me. “You dating my son?” she asked.

“Oh, no, ma’am,” I responded.

“Hm. Don’t know why no one’s dating my son,” she mumbled. “He’s a good boy, a very smart boy. Did you know he won the spelling bee in the fifth grade? Well, did you?”

She seemed to be talking to Tatyana, who answered, “Yes, ma’am. I remember. He did a very good job.” Then she added, “Loads of girls at school like your son, you know. He’s just very busy with school and his Information Society. He’s a very focused student.”

His mother’s eyes widened at Taty’s words. “Well, you are such a beautiful girl!” she exclaimed, and we were saved from discussing P.C.’s love life any further. I felt grateful to Taty.

The clock kept ticking. What was taking P.C. so long? Finally he arrived at the bottom of the stairs. “It’s gone,” he whispered. “And my room is...it’s worse than the office.”

“They came while your mother was here?” Taty was incredulous. Why were we discussing this as if P.C.’s mom wasn’t right here?

“Um, maybe we should discuss this later...” I ventured.

“Don’t worry,” said P.C. “She never listens. For instance, I told her you were an alien once, and she didn’t remember.”

“Course I remember,” his mom chimed in. “I just think it’s rude to ask people about their families unless they want to talk about them. Did you want to talk about your alien parentage, Leah?”

I shook my head. I really hadn’t figured P.C. would be one to share so much with his mother. He usually seemed so...secretive.

P.C. rolled his eyes. “She’s not an alien any more, Mom.”

His mother stared at me until I felt uncomfortable and looked away. “Didn’t think so,” his mom confirmed, as if she could deduce such things. “Now, mijo, why aren’t you dating Taty? She’s a pretty girl. I always thought you liked her.”

P.C. turned very red then. “Look, Mom, we have to go. Don’t go in my room, and don’t talk to strangers. The people from the future are after us.” He started for the door then.

“Oh no you don’t!” she called after him. “You’re eating dinner here at home with your father and me!”

P.C. walked outside with us, ignoring her, shutting the door behind us. “They trashed everything,” he confided then. “Everything was overturned and destroyed, and both capsules were gone, and I had them each in very good hiding places.”

“So what’s this mean?” Taty asked.

“It means that they know where he lives and where he goes to school, even about his office,” I responded. “But they don’t want to hurt us, at least not yet. They could have done that already if they’d wanted. It also means that they’re very good at what they do. I mean, your mom was home the whole time and didn’t even know they’d been there. It’s all pretty frightening. Do you still have your notes on everything saved somewhere in case they erase your and Taty’s memories?” I asked P.C.

“Of course,” he confirmed.

“Good,” I told him. “I think you’ll need them.”

“This doesn’t really make sense,” Taty cut in. “If your memory is erased, how would you know to check this information you stored for yourself?”

“I told my mom to ask me key questions every morning. If I can’t answer them correctly, she’s been instructed to tell me to listen to the information to restore my memory. Honestly, Taty, you’re such an amateur at science fiction plots.”

“And you’re so good at them, it’s disturbing,” she responded. Nervously, she added, “So what do we do now? I mean, there’s nothing we can do right now, right?”

“Yeah, I guess not,” I answered. “I’ll just have to wait until John contacts me.”

She nodded. “Okay. I, um, have to go meet Rick tonight.” She looked a little embarrassed about it.

“And, uh, I guess I’ll go have dinner with my parents, like my mom wanted,” P.C. said sheepishly.

So we each split up. I wasn’t really going to wait for my father to find me, though. I jumped on a bus headed for downtown and exited at the stop near the Apple store.

Chapter 20

I wasn’t sure what I would say to John when I got there, but mostly, I wanted answers. I had the feeling he was just as afraid of these supervisors from the future as I was, but at least he’d have some information for us. I’d probably have to wait there until closing time so that I could go to the back and look for John when no one was around. I hopped off the bus when it reached my stop and jogged toward the store. I yanked on the handle of the door when I arrived, but it didn’t budge. All of the lights were off inside, but it was well before closing. I looked up then and noticed a sign hanging in the window that read “Closed for Renovation.” I leaned closer and peered through the windows. The store looked strangely vacant.

I worried on the bus ride home. The only explanation I could think of was that John was scared, so he and his colleagues had destroyed their hideout quickly before they could be discovered by their supervisors from the future. I stared out the window, deep in thought.

I tried to force myself to have a vision, but I didn’t really know who or what I was trying to see. John? Or these strange supervisors? I didn’t even know what they looked like. I was too agitated to concentrate very well, anyway.

When the bus arrived at my stop, I realized I didn’t want to go home. I walked to P.C.’s house instead. Maybe he’d be able to help me figure out a plan.

I knocked on the door and waited. P.C.’s mother opened it and eyed me suspiciously. “What is it? Are you selling something? We don’t want anything,” she told me, starting to close the door.

“No, Mrs. Castillo. I was just hoping to talk to P.C. again. Is it too late?” It was only seven.

“Hm,” she said. “Are you dating my son?”

Hadn’t we already had this conversation? “No, ma’am. I just wanted to ask him a question. I won’t be long.” I was beginning to think I should have just waited to see him at school tomorrow.

She examined me for a long time until I felt uncomfortable. “Very well,” she finally said, and I started to step forward, but she closed the door on me.

I shivered as I waited for P.C. in the cold. When he arrived, he only opened the door a crack and looked at me curiously. “Yes, my mother told me you wanted to see me?” he asked.

“P.C.,” I began. “You won’t believe this but the Apple store is closed. There’s a sign that says ‘Closed for Renovation,’ and all the lights were out. What do you think it means?”

He thought for a moment. “The Apple store downtown? That’s terrible. It’s my favorite store. I always thought they did good business, and I hadn’t heard of any plans to renovate. Did they send you to tell me because I am often in the store? That’s a nice service. Thank you. Do let me know if there’s a going out of business sale of any kind. I would like that very much,” he began to close the door then.

“Wait,” I said, shoving my foot in the door. “What’s wrong with you? John’s lair, remember? It means that John and his colleagues must have needed to destroy their hideout and fast, and that’s why the store’s closed for repairs. It means that whoever broke into your office and your room must be scaring John and his colleagues, too.”

He stared at me but didn’t try to close the door again. Finally, he asked, “Who are you and how did you know about my room? And what happened in my office? Are you from the CIA?”

I shivered. “You don’t know me,” I suddenly realized. “Your mom didn’t know me either. P.C., they’ve erased your memories...have they done it to Taty too? I wasn’t gone more than two hours.” I felt a little sick inside.

He raised his eyebrows then. “What about Taty? What’s happened to her?” He glanced back inside his house. “Look, if you’re from the CIA, let’s go outside and talk. I don’t want my mom involved in this.”

I nodded and he stepped outside with me. He still remembered Taty, then, but he didn’t remember me. Maybe that made sense, though. The supervisors would only have erased what they needed to. Perhaps they’d only erased all memories up until John and his colleagues came to town and that, of course, was when I moved to town—so of course P.C. didn’t remember me. Neither did Taty. But they’d remember each other and all of their memories together before this year...just not me. I suddenly felt very depressed.

“P.C., do you remember anything about the last three months?” I asked him, hoping to test my theory. “I mean, can you tell me about any projects you’ve turned in for school, or anything you’ve said or done?”

He concentrated for several seconds. Finally, his eyes widened, “What have you done to me?” he asked in fear. “Is this about the Information Society? Is it because of Project A-5? I knew we were on to something important with that one. You’re legally required to show me some identification, and I won’t say any more until I have a lawyer present.”

I made a mental note to myself to ask P.C. about Project A-5 if ever recovered from this memory lapse. “No, P.C., I’m not from the CIA. Look, your memory has been erased. You used to know me. We expected this would happen. I just didn’t expect it to happen so...soon.”

“That’s impossible,” said P.C. “I don’t know you. If I’d been expecting this to happen as you say, I would have taken several precautions to guard against it.”

“Exactly,” I reasoned with them. “What would you have done?” Maybe I could reason with him and convince him somehow that he used to know me. Maybe we could be friends again, eventually.

He remained silent. He didn’t trust me.

I tried again. “Would you have told your mother, possibly, and instructed her to tell you where you’d hidden any information about what’s transpired the past few months?”

He still said nothing, so I continued, “Her memory’s been erased, too, P.C., so your plan failed. Don’t you see?”

No response. I thought for a moment. How could I make him believe me? “Look, you’ve got to trust me. I’m Leah. We’ve been friends for three months, starting with when you lost your memory.”

“That’s convenient,” he finally responded. “You’re probably an alien spy sent to take over our world, and you think you can fool me into helping you because of my super human intelligence.”

“No, I know things about you only a friend would know. I know you have a Darth Vader helmet in your office, along with ghostbuster traps. I know you like to work at the Apple store because you think the government might be tracking your searches. I know your mom always asks girls if they’re dating you, and it makes you blush. See? Do you believe me now?”

“As I said,” he responded stubbornly, “you’re an alien spy. Is this your real form or have you taken over a human host? You’re a Klingon in disguise, aren’t you? Show your true self, Klingon!”

I sighed in desperation. There really was no convincing him. I decided to try another tactic. “OK, nevermind. But you do realize your memory’s been erased. You can’t tell me a single thing that’s happened these last three months. Where would you have stored information for yourself, P.C.? Can you think of some places? I think you said they were online somewhere.”

“Of course. There are several locations, but I’m not going to tell them to you.”

“Fine, do me a favor and go check them out right now. Jog your memory as best you can, and then help your mom and Taty too. They may have gotten Taty too.”

He nodded. “I’ll do that, but not because you told me to. Go back to where you came from, Klingon. You won’t find us surrendering that easily!”

I turned and left then. And I felt very alone.

P.C. was waiting for me at our lockers when I got to school the next day, but he didn't smile with recognition like he used to.

"Leah Vera," he began.

"Yes," I said warily.

"It's true then. We do have lockers near each other, and since you were walking last night, you must also live by me. I suppose some of it might be true then."

I nodded, feeling a little relieved. The heavy feeling in my chest lifted a little bit. "That's right. You remember then?"

"No, but I didn't sleep last night. I stayed up all night poring through the different information I saved. I now know what happened every day of the last three months, but I don't remember living any of it. According to my sources, I was erroneous in my accusation last night that you were a Klingon. My apologies."

"It's alright," I said. He was talking to me so formally, the way he did when we'd first met. It all felt so different and overwhelmingly sad. "Have you, um, talked to Taty?" I didn't really want to see her and have her not recognize me.

"I have not, but I have all the information she needs on this," he said, holding up a flash drive. He left abruptly then, and I wondered if things would ever be the same.

"Leah," a familiar voice called then, and I felt my heart start to pound faster.

"Hi Kai," I responded, trying to sound casual.

"Hey, you got a minute?" he asked.

Actually, I had several, as I didn't currently have any friends who remembered me. "Sure," I replied.

"So, uh, this is going to sound kind of weird," he rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Did you and I—I mean—were you and I hanging out last week or something? I don't remember anything, but Bri won't leave me alone. She keeps asking me why I dumped her for you. I thought it was just one of her weird crazy kicks, but I mentioned it to Ty, and he got really quiet and wouldn't say much. It made me think, you know, that Bri wasn't so crazy after all. But this must sound so strange to you. I don't even know why I'm asking." He shook his head then. "The thing is, I can't remember anything about last week, you know? It's weird."

Hm. So John had erased only one week of Kai's memory because that was all he'd needed to erase. It made sense, then, that just the last three months of P.C. and Taty's memories would be gone.

I looked at Kai and struggled to find an answer. I didn't want to reveal too much. This memory erasing thing wasn't as clean and effective as it should have been, since the people around Kai still remembered what had happened. I really didn't know what to say. Yes, we were perfect together, but your emotions were being controlled by my sinister father? That just didn't really sound right. I decided to lie. "Um, you know, we just talked once or twice as friends last week, nothing out of the ordinary. Bri probably saw that and got jealous. I think someone started a rumor about how we'd make a good couple, and Bri and Ty are probably just thinking of those rumors." That sounded convincing enough.

Kai nodded. It was a good lie. He was buying it, and something about that made me even sadder. "Yeah, okay, maybe I remember that," he said, and I felt sorry for him. How strange it must be not to be able to remember days on end.

Kai was still looking at me, concerned. He continued, "The thing is, Bri is convinced I dumped her and walked you to class, holding your hand."

"Uh..." I stalled. I sighed and launched into another lie, "She's just imagining things. Maybe she just saw us walking down the hall together and imagined you holding my hand or something. It's definitely all in her mind. I don't really think Bri's ever liked me. I think it's just some weird jealousy thing...not that she has any reason to be jealous of me."

"Jealous of you," he mused, then nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. Right." He reached up and touched my hair for a minute then, stroking it lightly, and smiling at me. I stared at him, shocked. Was this really happening? He stopped suddenly then and dropped his hand, as if he'd suddenly realized what he'd been doing.

We stared at each other for a minute, and he fidgeted with embarrassment. "Uh, ok, so see you around then," he said, moving away from me quickly. He practically ran away, almost crashing into P.C. and Taty, who were approaching. "Oh, hey guys," he said awkwardly. "Yeah, so Leah's over there, probably waiting for you. We were just talking and stuff. I gotta go now, though. I have to meet Bri. Okay, so, see you then."

He took off quickly then, and I touched my hair in the spot where his hand had been.

"This is Leah Vera," P.C. said in his same stiff voice, gesturing towards me. He and Taty stood in front of me. "You were good friends with her, or so it seems."

Taty looked confused. "P.C., if you're playing another one of your games about the CIA being out to get all of us, it's not funny." If three months of Taty's memories were gone, she and P.C. hadn't hung out much since seventh grade. They didn't have a strong, trusting friendship to fall back on, so it wasn't surprising that she distrusted his strange story.

“It’s not a game this time,” he confirmed. “Do you know what you did last night?”

She thought for a minute. “I’m just drawing a blank right now,” she stalled.

“You helped me clean out my office, and then you came to my house with Leah,” he explained, then looked at me for confirmation. “Is that right, Vera?”

I nodded. “We talked with his mother for a while.”

Taty looked a little scared then. “That doesn’t even sound familiar,” she admitted. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

He put his arm around her then. “Don’t be scared. I’ll fill you in on everything. It will all be okay.” She didn’t pull away, perhaps because she really was scared that she couldn’t remember last night, and he began to lead her down the hall. Before he left, he turned around and smiled at me—I think it was because he needed someone to share the moment with—and it reminded me of the way things used to be.

Chapter 21

It was a strange day. P.C. took Taty somewhere and filled her in on everything during the school day. I ate lunch by myself; I wanted to be alone. Taty showed up for practice, though, and she tried to talk to me and be friendly with me. It felt like when we were first meeting each other, though. I tried to fill her in on past conversations, ones we’d had when P.C. hadn’t been around, and she warmed up to me a little then—not because she remembered, but because she became more convinced that we’d been friends before. She didn’t say much whenever I mentioned Rick, though, and I didn’t tell her they’d been dating. I don’t know why I didn’t. I figured P.C. would fill her in when he felt she was ready. I did feel a little better after practice. Talking with Taty reassured me that things might gradually build themselves back to normal. I was afraid that the supervisors would find out about what P.C. and Taty knew, though, and erase their memories again or...who knew what else they would do?

My mom was sitting on the couch when I got home from practice, which was weird, because she isn’t usually home that early. It made me uncomfortable. I didn’t want any more problems today.

“Mom,” I greeted her nervously. “You’re home.”

“Leah, it’s your father,” she responded with concern. I shivered. I wished she wouldn’t call him that. “He’s on the TV, on almost every news channel. He’s a wanted criminal, Leah. It must be some mistake, right?” Her eyes were red from crying.

And at that moment I knew he would be arriving at our house momentarily. I didn’t have a vision, but I felt it with the certainty that I usually feel after visions. There was a light knock on our back door then, and Mom scrambled to open it.

“Maybe it’s him,” she whispered desperately. From the back of the house I heard her call, “Oh, John, thank goodness. You’re safe here. We’ll protect you.” She brought him to the front of the house, holding him by the hand.

“Mona,” he called to her and caressed her face. I looked away quickly. I wished I hadn’t seen it.

They sat together on the couch, and he held both her hands in his. “Mona, you must help me,” he told her. He ignored me, although he was aware of my presence in the room. I stared at him with indifference, but he continued to focus his attention on my mother, who was glad to give it to him.

“My supervisors have come back from the future,” he told her. “We’ve been forced to abort our mission. *Somehow* our data was stolen,” he paused and glanced at me briefly, “and the supervisors decided our mission was no longer safe. They worried about who was finding the missing data, so they sent the clean-up crew back to us to end the mission. We had no warning.”

I watched my mother’s face to see if his information surprised her, but she looked only scared and worried. She’d always known he was from the future then. Why had she let me believe he was an alien?

“Stolen?” my mom asked. “What do you mean? And what does the clean-up crew do?”

“One of our data capsules disappeared. They told us, and we changed the location, but the second disappeared as well. They were both intercepted by” he cleared his throat and looked at me “unknown sources from an unknown period in time. The capsules could have been taken any time between your time and mine. After the second capsule disappeared, the supervisors felt we had been compromised and immediately sent the clean-up crew.”

“John, darling, what does this mean? Oh, it’s so terrible.” Tears streamed down her face. She was very affected by it all. I hated the power he held over her.

He continued to explain, “We were unprepared for the arrival of this clean-up crew. We had no idea the supervisors would act so quickly. They captured all of my colleagues and erased their memories. My colleagues were given new memories and new identities. They all now believe that they belong in this time frame. They will live the rest of their lives here, working and starting families, never knowing they were born in a future time.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So if they find you, they’ll erase your memory too?” That might not be such a bad ending to all of this. “How terrible,” I said drily.

John looked directly into my eyes. “No, daughter,” he began, and his words were like ice. “I ran. I’m a fugitive now. The penalty for that is death. They won’t simply kill me, though, because if I ran, I must have something to hide. They’ll torture me until I tell them everything, and then they’ll kill me. That means find out about you, and there is no way they will let you live. You saw how quickly they came to clean up our operation, and that’s only over two

missing capsules. They want no evidence that we ever existed in this time period. A hybrid child would be no small matter to them.”

“John,” my mom’s face was white. “You said she’d always be safe. You said you’d protect her.”

“And I will, darling,” he answered, his voice sugary sweet again. “I just need a little protection first. I need a new identity, and I need money. The identity I was given, John Miller, won’t work for me now. They’ve told the police I’m a criminal. If the clean-up crew doesn’t find me, the police will do it for them.”

“Take everything in my purse,” my mother answered immediately. “And we can go to an ATM immediately and get more. But, John, how long can you run from them?”

“I only need to stall for thirty days. The clean-up crew members all took a pill that will erase their memories at the end of a month and replace them with new memories that make them believe that they’ve always lived in this time period. That way there will be no evidence that they were ever here. The crew has thirty days to complete their mission and send a message back that they were successful. But if I can outrun them for thirty days, maybe I can intercept their message and send my own false one. Then I could make the supervisors from the future believe that the clean-up crew succeeded in terminating me.” He paused. “Leah, I need an identity. I know your little friend P.C. can do it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you can manufacture a new identity for yourself.”

“My lab has been destroyed. Besides, I’m a psychologist. Falsifying identities isn’t in my job description. There were scientists and engineers on my team, but as I’ve said, their memories have been altered now. Daughter, are you going to help me or not?”

I hesitated. “Leah, do it!” my mother cried frantically. “If not for him, then do it to save yourself. Please, I can’t lose both of you.”

Her words made me desperate. I nodded. “OK,” I said, but I choked on the words. I reached for the phone and punched in P.C.’s number before I had time to change my mind.

It only rang once before he picked up. “Your number is one of only five programmed into my phone,” he said immediately upon answering. “The only others are my mother, Taty, the Mexican Embassy, and the White House. If your number made the list, then clearly we were good friends.”

“Uh, yeah, we were,” I answered. “I thought you knew that by now.”

“A man can’t be too careful,” he answered. “Are you calling with a mission for me?”

This was too weird. “Look, I didn’t used to call with missions for you. I used to call you just to talk or hang out, like friends do.”

He paused. He must have been thinking about that statement. “Very well,” he responded. “Do you want to talk or hang out then?”

“No,” I replied awkwardly. “I, um, have a mission for you.”

“Yes! Where should we meet? Do you think this conversation is being recorded?”

I would have laughed if the situation hadn’t been so serious. “You’re right. Anybody could be listening in. I’ll meet you in the park by our houses, the one near the elementary school. We’ve met there before,” I added, thinking of when we’d dug up the capsule together. That felt so far away now, instead of just days ago. Then I mentioned, “Taty used to do this kind of stuff with us. If this had happened before yesterday, she wouldn’t have wanted us to leave her out.”

“Will it be dangerous?” P.C. asked.

“Yeah, it will.”

“Then let’s leave her out of it,” he decided.

I thought then about how P.C. and Taty had to rebuild their friendship now, too. They’d known each other before me, but they hadn’t been hanging out together. It didn’t seem like they’d really said much to each other since seventh grade. Three friendships destroyed in a moment, and now there was nothing left but pieces and remnants. I ended the call.

Neither John nor I wanted my mother to come. I was worried she would be hurt, and John knew that one more person would just make it easier for the clean-up crew to find us more quickly. She was insistent on helping us, so John lied and told her that the crew would be able to sense his great love for her if she was in the same room as he, and that would surely give everything away. I thought it was a pretty cheesy story, but she bought it and wished us luck, crying and hugging us as we left. She gave John an old hat to wear that he pulled down over his face as much as possible. It wasn’t much of a disguise, but it was something. She gave him all the cash she had in her purse, too, which made me cringe with disgust.

John drove us quickly to the park and then crouched beneath the seats while we waited for P.C. to join us on foot.

“John,” I said finally, breaking the silence. “If I’m going to help you, I deserve some answers.”

He didn’t respond, so I kept talking. “Why can’t you just zip yourself back to the future? Why do you have to stay here and hide?”

Still there was silence, and it seemed to stretch and expand and fill the car. I forced myself to wait for an answer.

“Fine. I suppose it doesn’t matter what you know now. It’s all unraveling anyway,” he finally answered. He turned to face me, “No one can go forwards to the future, Leah. We can only

move backwards in time. Once we're here, we're here for the rest of our lives. That's why the clean-up crew has to take pills and assimilate, and that's why my colleagues' memories were replaced."

I blinked. So I was stuck with John forever? I remembered P.C. had once guessed at what John had just said. "Why?" I asked, baffled. "I mean, why can't you go forwards?"

"I'm not a scientist, Leah; how should I know? You don't have to know how the technology works to use it. Does the average person know how a modern day computer works?"

"But you must have brought some kind of technology back with you from the future. Don't you have anything that can help you escape now?" I couldn't believe he had really traveled to our time without any form of defense.

"No technology comes back from the future. It's one of the rules. We can only use the materials you have here to make things. Otherwise it would be too easy for us to be caught or to significantly alter what happens in the present and therefore change what happens in the future. Small changes are inevitable, but no major changes are allowed.

"As you see, there are a multitude of rules and laws to prevent anyone from knowing that we're here and to protect the future. Even the cerebral formatters used to erase memories are made from modern materials from your time period."

"Oh," I said softly. His predicament was becoming more real to me now. I was beginning to see that it would be impossible to save John. I felt my body tense with stress. I had a thousand more questions, and I wanted to ask them before P.C. came. "Why don't you have emotions in the future? I mean, what happened?"

He sighed. "It's a long story, Leah, but basically people started mixing genes to make stronger and more intelligent humans. A group of scientists in Japan figured out how to eliminate human emotions, and these new emotionless humans were far more productive. They didn't get scared or sad or fall in love. They had none of the emotional distractions that the people of your time experience. These new humans were amazingly efficient, clear sighted, and sensible. They learned faster and retained information longer. As these new humans became more and more in demand in the workforce, more parents wanted children without emotions. It started slowly, but eventually the whole human race lost their emotions. Even those who opposed the movement had to conform if they wanted to be at all competitive in the changing world."

I nodded. "I see, so now you've come back to study our time because you want to find a way to get your emotions back."

"No, what a silly notion," he responded. "We just wanted to study humans of this time period. We've forgotten what it was like to have emotions, so my team was sent to conduct research and experiments. But no, we would never want to go back to this era in which productivity and efficiency is so completely lacking and when wars erupt almost daily. Things are far more

peaceful when there is no pride, anger, or fear. The world runs much smoother in my time. We are far less barbaric.”

Kidnapping children to play with their emotions seemed awfully barbaric to me, but then, I suppose John would have argued that his subjects were inferior humans, not really humans at all in his mind. Still, I’d have to think more about his words later. I wasn’t sure what to make of them now, and I still had more questions to ask before P.C. came.

“John,” I paused. I felt silly asking my next question. “If you made me by mixing your superior genes from the future with my mom’s genes, then...why aren’t I beautiful?” I’d rather imagined that genetically superior humans were beautiful. If Taty were here, she would have lectured me on how I should think so negatively about myself. I missed her suddenly.

John took my question seriously, though. I suppose that’s one good thing about not having emotions. He couldn’t really laugh at me. “Beauty isn’t important any more, Leah. Why should it be? We have no emotions. How interesting that you have superior intelligence and physical ability, and yet you worry about your appearance. It’s just another way that emotions enslave you and force you to worry about unimportant matters.”

How strange. What must the future look like then, without beauty? I really couldn’t imagine it. How grim it all sounded.

I could see the figure of P.C. in the distance, and I still hadn’t asked the most important question. “One more,” I said. “Why do I have visions? Do people in the future have visions? Is it, you know, normal?”

“Visions of the future aren’t normal,” he said flatly, expressionlessly, and I felt depressed and alone, a feeling that I’d become used to these last two days. “It’s a good question, though,” he continued. “I don’t know. I’ve thought about it often, but I’ve never been able to study you as much as I’d like. I couldn’t very well take you to the lab because then my colleagues would have known about you. Still, I have my theories. You’re very unique because you have a foot in both worlds, both in this time period and in the future. There must be something about this unique mixture that produces your visions.”

I nodded. I had hoped he would have some kind of an answer for me. I had hoped John would say that in his time, visions were normal—that I was normal.

I glanced up to see P.C. in the park then. He did a dive roll across the grass and then hid behind a tree, probably to reenact a scene from a James Bond movie.

Chapter 22

“P.C.,” I whispered from the car. “We’re over here.” I didn’t really think I needed to whisper; I just thought it might add to the illusion that he was a secret spy. P.C. liked things like that.

He snaked towards us through the grass and then dove awkwardly into the car through the open window. “Ow,” he mumbled, as he tried to pull his long legs into the car.

“You could have come in through the door,” John noted. “It was unlocked.”

“Aha!” cried P.C., pulling himself into a sitting position in the backseat. “So you must be John. I’m told we’ve met before, evil villain.”

This was going to be awkward. John nodded at him curtly and said no more. I suppose that’s one benefit of having no emotions. He wasn’t angry or annoyed by the comment.

“You knew they erased his memory?” I asked John.

“I heard things to indicate that they probably would, yes,” John answered evasively.

“How did they know to go after him?” I asked. “I mean, if they don’t know about me, then they wouldn’t go after P.C. and Taty just because they’re my friends.” P.C. listened quietly to our conversation.

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked John. “He ran a search to crack the code in the capsule, and he used his home computer to do it. Of course the supervisors would think that was suspicious. They’d want to take care of anyone who was trying to hack into their information, and, even better, they knew exactly where he lived.”

“I see,” I answered. “He used the computers at school, too. That’s why they broke into his office at school and his room at home. That’s funny, P.C. You really should have done all your research at the Apple store so that no one could trace it back to you. Remember you said that and Taty made fun of you?” I started to laugh but then stopped. P.C. didn’t remember, of course.

I changed the subject quickly. “That doesn’t explain why they erased Taty’s memory, though,” I told John.

John nodded towards P.C. in the backseat. “The boy had a box labeled ‘Taty’ in his room. It contained letters and knickknacks from the girl. The crew didn’t know if she was involved or not, but they erased her memory just in case. The clean-up crew is very thorough, Leah.”

I felt a little sad, suddenly. I mean, I didn’t want P.C. to make a box of letters and shared memories labeled “Leah” or anything, but I wished there had been something around to indicate that we knew each other and were friends. I guessed we really hadn’t been friends that long, though.

“How do you know this?” P.C. broke in. His cheeks were red with embarrassment. Obviously, he remembered that box.

John turned around and stared at P.C., perhaps debating whether or not to answer his question. Finally, he replied, “I had field agents on my team. They found out information for me. They weren’t good enough, though, because they were caught.”

I felt suddenly nauseous, then, and everything in front of me began to fade into darkness. I was glad I was sitting down already. I closed my eyes and allowed the vision to come.

There were four men, moving stealthily through the park towards our car. They moved inhumanly fast and carried strange contraptions that looked almost like guns. Fear gripped me, and none of us even tried to leave the car.

“It’s over for us. There’s no use resisting now,” John said flatly. “The clean-up crew is trained assassins. They kill with precision. Once they find you, you can’t escape. We’re all dead now.”

Four of the men moved closer to the car until there was a man at every door. One of them stuffed an object into the exhaust pipe to prevent John from driving away. Then each of them smashed the windows. The one nearest me reached inside and laid one of his gloved hands over my mouth. With his other arm, he scooped me out of the car in a firm grip that made it impossible for me to scream or struggle.

When the vision faded, both John and P.C. were staring at me intently. “It’s true, then,” P.C. said seriously. “You have visions, and they make you drool. Awesome.”

“What did you see?” John asked, leaning towards me. For a minute, John and P.C. seemed very similar.

I wiped the drool from my face. “The crew...they find us, here in the car, right now.”

John started the car and punched the gas then, squealing the tires as he peeled away from the curb.

“Yes! A car chase!” P.C. cried with excitement, as John tore through the residential streets at freeway speeds. I gripped the seat nervously.

“Leah, your vision saved our lives,” John commented calmly, as he squealed around another corner. He entered the freeway then and moved quickly into the fast lane. “This is disturbing,” John continued in his same eerie expressionless voice. “They’re good agents, but they shouldn’t have found me so fast. I must have a tracking device on me somewhere, planted underneath my skin. There’s no other way.”

“It must be made using technology from our present time, though, right?” I asked. “You said that no technology from the future is allowed to come back to this time period.”

John nodded. “That’s right, but it could be planted anywhere on my body.”

“It could be, but if it is using modern technology, then it’s probably in the back of your neck. That’s where vets plant chips in animals,” P.C. offered.

John turned to study P.C. thoughtfully, giving him a long look. It was a little disturbing since John was still driving at speeds in the triple digits, weaving in and out of lanes to avoid slower vehicles.

“OK,” I mused. “Does that help us though? I mean, we still don’t know how to remove it, right?”

“I’ll call Taty,” P.C. said simply.

I looked at him, confused. “How will that help?”

His eyes widened. “Her father’s a vet, and she sometimes works in the office. She has a key. There must be something in that office that will help us remove the chip. I would have thought a good friend of Taty’s would have at least known what her father did.” He said it very suspiciously, as if he were questioning the truth of everything about me.

I looked away, annoyed.

“We can’t all have shrines to her in our rooms,” John murmured, and I glanced at him in surprise. Did he say it to make me feel better? He wasn’t really one to care about people’s feelings.

P.C. didn’t respond. He busied himself with dialing Taty’s number on his cell, but his cheeks reddened. “Taty, we need the key to your father’s clinic,” he stated as soon as she answered. “No, I can’t tell you why...no, you can’t come...it’s too dangerous for you...because I know how to battle assassins and you don’t!...Listen, I said no and that’s final. End of discussion...Right then, we’ll be there in a few minutes.” He flipped his phone shut and looked up awkwardly. “She’s, um, coming with us,” he muttered. “She wouldn’t give us the key unless she could come.”

P.C. gave John directions to Taty’s house then, and when we arrived, Taty was waiting outside. She eyed John suspiciously when she entered the car.

“This is John, Leah’s evil father from the future. You’ve met him before when he kidnapped Leah and used mind control to manipulate our thoughts,” P.C. informed her.

Again, John made no response.

“Uh, hi John,” said Taty, and I was glad she didn’t add, “Leah’s evil father.” John nodded at her while peeling loudly away from her house.

Taty directed John to the vet’s office, while P.C. debriefed her on what was happening. He described it like the script for an action movie, like it was fun and exciting, instead of, well, real and scary.

“So we’re going to the vet so that I can remove the tracking device in John’s neck?” Taty clarified when P.C. had finished.

“Of course,” P.C. told her. “Meanwhile, I’ll jump on one of the computers and lay the framework for creating a new identity for the evil John, whom we’re forced to help. Then we’ll prepare for our inevitable war against these cruel, future beings, thus saving the planet from their hostile plans.” I wasn’t sure about that saving the planet bit, or even the war, but I decided not to say anything.

Taty stared at him for a while, then turned to me. “I can’t tell if this is real or not,” she said finally. “I can tell he thinks it’s real, but he believes a lot of unusual things.”

I hesitated before answering. I considered telling her he was exaggerating a little, but then I realized she might not believe the bigger points. It was better to just assure her the whole story was true. “It’s...um, well, real, actually,” I admitted. “Everything P.C. says is right.”

P.C. beamed.

“Never say that again, even if it’s true,” Taty warned, and her words reminded me so much of an earlier conversation we’d shared that I felt a wave of depression when I realized she wouldn’t remember it.

“So...if this is all real,” Taty continued. She still wasn’t convinced we weren’t playing an elaborate joke on her, not that I blamed her. “If this is real, how are we supposed to fight these people from the future? Aren’t they supposed to be able to control our minds?”

“Mind control is a new science in my time,” John cut in. “It’s still being experimented with, and because of this, it only works on the weak or unsuspecting. You’re all expecting it, so that at least is in your favor.”

“Are you saying that we are weak, villain?” P.C. asked, a little too loudly. “It is evil that is weak, and good that triumphs.”

No one responded to this outburst, and Taty continued with her questions as if P.C. had never spoken. “Um, and how do you think I’m going to remove this chip from John?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve often done it before, or at least seen your father do it,” P.C. answered confidently.

“Almost never, actually,” she responded. “People don’t ever ask for the chips to be removed from their pets. What would be the point? Plus, we don’t even know for certain where on John’s body the chip is located.”

“You’ve never removed a chip before?” John cut into the conversation. Yes, from his end, I could see where that information could be disturbing...that is, if he were able to feel disturbed. As it was, he was just evaluating the facts.

“I saw it done once,” she answered him nervously. She might not have remembered the kidnapping episode, but John was still scary. “Some lady was convinced the government was tracking her little pug, so she wanted the chip removed. It’s not really a normal procedure, though, and I’ve definitely never done it myself.”

We were all silent for a moment. I’m not sure why any of us thought Taty would know how to remove the chip, but in the worry of my vision about our impending deaths, we forgot to worry about this part.

Finally John stated, “There is no other way. You’ll have to try. I’m dead if you don’t, and so are the rest of you because you’re with me.”

Again, the silence engulfed the car. This time it was broken by P.C., who began in a funny little voice, “Try not. Do or do not. There is no ‘try.’”

Taty rolled her eyes. “Thanks a lot, Yoda, Jedi Master,” she told him, and P.C. looked pleased with the title.

Chapter 23

We skidded into a parking spot at the vet’s office, and John threw the car into park and killed the engine in one fluid motion.

While Taty fiddled with the lock outside her father’s office, I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. I started to sit down, but P.C. reached out and ushered me quickly inside the door before the vision started.

The four of us were inside the veterinary office, each filling needles with clear liquid. We then taped them to the waists of our jeans, pulling our shirts and sweatshirts over the top of them so that they weren’t visible.

And that was all I saw. When I came to, I was sitting on the floor of the office, just inside the door, and everyone was staring down at me.

“Well?” P.C. cried at the same time John asked, “What was it?”

I blinked, a little confused. “Um, we’re supposed to fill the needles with a mixture of anesthetic and...and, um, something John gives us, and then hide the needles under our clothes. We’re planning to use the needles as weapons.”

“Brilliant,” P.C. mused. “It was my idea, wasn’t it? In your vision, I instructed all of you to fill the needles, didn’t I?”

I smiled. “That’s funny. I don’t know whose idea it was. I just know we do it.”

“Ah, a paradox, because how could you have seen it unless someone thinks of it, and how can we think of it if you see it first?” P.C. mused. “That’s good, Vera. Every good time travel sci fi novel has a paradox.”

Taty immediately went to a shelf and removed the anesthetic her father used. John took it from her and studied it.

“Let’s use it,” he consented. “It must have been the cerebral formatter Leah saw us mix it with. I brought it so that we could erase the assassins’ memories. The formatter is powerful, rendering a man unconscious almost instantaneously. I wouldn’t have thought we’d need anything else,” he said, studying the anesthetic again, “but perhaps this will help them stay unconscious longer. The formatter wears off rather quickly, and we do need time to manufacture new identities for these men—that is, if we’re successful. I don’t doubt my daughter’s visions. Let’s mix it, like you saw, Leah.”

We all nodded. Silently, Taty gathered the needles for us and showed us how to fill them. Then we slipped them under our clothes and taped them to our waists, just as I’d seen.

Next we turned our attention to John. Taty looked nervous.

“Uh, so...um, I’ll just get the surgical equipment together, then,” she mumbled and immediately began rummaging through drawers. She made a lot of banging noises and took more time than she needed. When she had it all arranged, she stated, “Right, then, I’d better clean it all to make sure it’s sanitary.” We waited longer, then, while she set about washing it, and I felt nervous. We had to hurry.

Taty turned to John, then, and realized there were no further ways for her to stall. “I guess you should, um, get on the surgery table and lie on your stomach.”

John complied. P.C. and I stared at Taty. “So I figure I just start to cut and rummage around in there, then,” Taty muttered.

“Hmmm,” I responded. “Aren’t the nerves in the neck a bit important, though? It’d be a bit inconvenient for our escape if he were paralyzed.”

John looked up at us calmly and then fixed his gaze on Taty. “Don’t paralyze me,” he said with morbid calmness, as if it weren’t already tense in the room.

“Right, good thing you told me,” Taty replied. “I might have done it otherwise.”

P.C. stepped in, then, and pushed John’s head back down. “Be a man, John!” he cried. “She’s just going to cut into you a bit. A real man wouldn’t flinch.” Then, turning to Taty, he stated, “Go ahead, now. He’s ready.”

Taty inched closer. She lowered a sharp looking tool toward his neck to make the first incision, and I had to look away.

“Is that the local anesthetic you’re injecting now?” John asked.

“Oh, um, yeah. Anesthetic...good idea. Let me get some of that,” Taty answered, her hands shaking. She returned with a needle. “This will just numb the region for a little while,” she told us. She again began lowering it towards his neck, but suddenly she dropped the needle and cried, “Are we sure he even has a tracking device in there?”

We all looked at each other guiltily. Suddenly, no one was sure. “Is there any way you can, you know, check for one without cutting?” I asked hopefully.

Taty shook her head. I could if he was a dog and the chip had his owner’s identification on it, but you’re talking about a GPS device. We don’t exactly put those in dogs normally.”

“But it’s not a bad idea,” P.C. mused. “After this is done, perhaps we should market that. Then people could track their dogs’ whereabouts online.”

“They found me too quickly,” John responded, ignoring P.C.’s comment. “They must be tracking me somehow.”

“But they didn’t find you at my house,” I considered. “And you were there a while. They found us in the park—or at least, that’s where I had the vision. P.C., how long were you in the park waiting for us?”

“I don’t know,” he responded, “maybe 15 minutes or so, but you’re not saying...”

“You’re right, daughter,” John nodded. “The boy’s being tracked, not me. They must have bugged him when they erased his memory. I should have realized it myself.”

P.C. inched away from us then until his back was against the wall. “Oh no,” he told us. “You’re not cutting into *me* with anything. Stay back, all of you!”

“Be a man,” John told him. “A real man wouldn’t flinch.”

P.C. scowled at him, and Taty and I looked back and forth between the two of them. “Look,” Taty intervened. “There must be another way.”

“Of course there is,” John said, finally looking away from P.C. “After erasing memories, the clean-up crew generally uses the GPS in the victims’ cell phones to track them. They’re tracking us through the boy’s cell phone. That’s how they found us. I just wanted to see if the boy would stand by his words. Apparently, he won’t.”

“Oh...right,” P.C. responded, taking out his cell phone. “Er, that was a funny one, John. I’ll just flush it down the toilet then, okay?”

“Should I do the same?” Taty asked.

“It’s too late,” I responded solemnly. “They’ve already found us.”

“Whoa, did you have another vision?” P.C. asked. “Or do you have an ESP connection with them because you all have the same futuristic genes?”

“Um, no,” I admitted. “I hear footsteps approaching outside the door.”

We all stood there nervously, glancing at each other and then at the door. There wasn’t much point in hiding or running at this point.

“Um, just out of curiosity, what will they be using to fight against us?” asked Taty.

“They won’t have weapons because they will expect to overpower us easily. They’ll have needles, like us, filled with a serum that will cause the victim to lose consciousness instantly. The serum won’t kill us.”

“That’s good news,” Taty said nervously.

“Because they’ll want us to be alive so that they can torture us for information later,” John finished.

Taty turned white.

“Good luck, friends,” P.C. interjected bravely. “May good prevail,” he paused, “even though we have John on our side.”

The doorknob turned, then, and we watched in silence as four men slid noiselessly inside. Their attention and gaze rested exclusively on John.

“John,” one of them spoke. “You ran. You know the consequence.”

John nodded curtly, “if you capture me,” he responded, and if he hadn’t stated it so emotionlessly, as if it were just a logical truth, it would have sounded like a threat.

The man nodded then, understanding the challenge, and the four of them advanced.

I felt slightly nauseous suddenly, and I tried desperately to will it to go away. This wasn’t the time to black out and have a vision. The vision came anyway, though, and I saw one of the men speeding towards me and stabbing a needle into my neck. When I opened my eyes and the vision faded, the man had not yet advanced.

Knowing exactly what was to come, then, I fell to the floor and rolled to the side just as the man was rushing toward me. I managed to knock his advancing foot with my hand so that he tripped. Hurriedly, before he regained his balance, I stabbed one of the needles I had loaded into his leg.

The man spun around and was on top of me before I knew what was happening, pinning me to the ground, the needle still protruding from his calf. I struggled violently but his strength was overpowering. Slowly, though, his grip began to weaken as he lost consciousness. Finally he blacked out, and his body slumped heavily over mine. With effort, I forced him off of me.

Again, the nausea accosted me, and I had a vision of another man coming from behind me, grabbing me violently by the hair and then kneeling me in the gut. When the vision faded, I drew out my last needle without turning around and flung it behind me, hitting the attacker in the eye and squeezing in the serum. He screamed and staggered backwards before falling to the ground.

I was weaponless now. I could feel my heart beating loudly in my chest. I looked around. P.C. and Taty were both slumped to the ground, unconscious, with needles sticking out of both of their chests. The two remaining assassins were advancing on John. His superior reflexes had allowed him to evade them so far, but they were quickly pushing him into a corner.

Both assassins eyed me now, though and, without even communicating, one of them left John to pursue me. I backed away nervously, moving towards Taty and P.C., but instantly the man was so close to me I could feel his breath on my cheek.

Something happened then, and suddenly the visions came even quicker than they had before, almost automatically. I didn't feel nauseous; I just saw instantly what was going to happen moments before it did. I saw the assassin grabbing my head and banging it against the nearby wall so that I fell, unconscious, to the floor. The vision cleared quickly, and just as the attacker's hands reached for my head, I ducked and slid away from the wall.

I saw the man's fist fly towards my face next, and I raised my arm to block the blow before he even began the punch. There was a cracking noise as his fist hit my arm, and I winced in pain, realizing too late that I should have ducked instead of blocked the punch.

I saw a series of blows then, the first to my gut, the next to my chin, the third to my right cheek. Twisting my body to the side I missed the first, and then throwing myself to the ground, I dodged the remaining two.

I knew I had to get to P.C. and Taty, so I rolled towards them across the floor, pain shooting through my arm whenever I put pressure on it. I reached Taty first, and with my left arm I fumbled awkwardly under her sweatshirt for the needles taped to the waist of her jeans. My right arm hung uselessly and painfully at my side.

I heard my bones crunching before I felt the pain. I looked over to see the assassin standing on my right hand, two or three of my fingers splayed in unnatural directions. The blood drained from my face when I saw it, and I thought for a minute I might throw up.

"I didn't make the decision to step on your hand until now," the assassin told me calmly. "You didn't expect it, did you?"

I didn't answer, and he pressed harder with his foot. I looked away in pain as more disgusting crunching sounds followed. I shook my head to answer him.

He nodded. "I thought it was unusual," he continued. "You were responding so quickly, yet you're from this time. It was almost as if you knew what I was going to do before I did it. But now I realize, you did know. How could you possibly know?"

I tried to think of an answer quickly, worried he'd crunch my hand again, but I realized he wasn't expecting an answer. He was looking at me, trying to solve the problem on his own.

My left hand was resting on Taty's abdomen, gripping the base of the needle, hidden by her sweatshirt. If I launched it into his thigh, he would see and react in time to bat it away easily.

"It's in my eyes," I told him. "The secret to my visions is in my eyes, but you have to look closely." I thought my words sounded stupid and my plan obvious. I thought he would see through me immediately, but he didn't. He was intrigued and unafraid.

He stayed where he was, still studying me. He wasn't afraid of me. Confidently, he lowered his body and bent his face close to mine, looking deep into my eyes. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his breath on my forehead. I would have shuddered with disgust if I hadn't been so afraid. Gripping the needle, I moved my hand below his line of sight and thrust it towards his calf. He reacted quickly, gripping my neck with both of his hands. I dropped the needle and tried to pry his hands off of my neck, but he was too strong. I gasped unsuccessfully for breath, my throat making desperate noises. Slowly, darkness came, enveloping me. I fought desperately to stay conscious, but his grip was too strong.

Chapter 24

When I regained consciousness, I felt weak, and my arm and hand throbbed. The body of the assassin who had recently strangled me was slumped nearby, a needle sticking out of his back. Had I done that? I couldn't remember. My left wrist, I suddenly realized, was handcuffed to the cabinet behind me.

Panicked, I scanned the room. John was a little ways away, unconscious and handcuffed to another cabinet. P.C. and Taty were still lying near me, with the last assassin grabbing Taty's wrist to handcuff it. I squirmed and struggled, but I couldn't free myself.

Suddenly P.C. lurched forward, gripping his needle tightly. "Hasta la vista, baby!" he called, flying towards the assassin, his needle extended. Time seemed to stand still for a minute as P.C. and his outstretched needle flew towards the unsuspecting assassin, who was still turned towards Taty. I watched in silence. Was P.C. going to save us?

The assassin turned and effortlessly threw P.C. on the ground with a loud thud.

Abruptly, the assassin stiffened. He stumbled a moment before falling forward, a needle protruding from his rear end.

My eyes widened. “Taty?” I asked, surprised to see that she, too, was fully conscious.

“It was all part of my plan,” P.C. called from where he was still lying on the floor. “I lobbed her an easy, underhand pitch so she could hit it out of the park.” He sat up, rubbing the back of his head.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re okay,” Taty exclaimed to me. I blinked. I couldn’t believe they weren’t unconscious.

“I was worried he’d strangle you before he passed out, but I was too scared to move,” Taty continued. She reached down to hug me. I winced. My arm and hand throbbled with pain. “It was John who saved you,” she whispered to me. “He ran to you when he saw you were in danger, and after he saved you, the assassins stabbed him easily.”

I considered her words. I was surprised he would sacrifice himself for me, but then, he did consider me a lifelong science experiment. Perhaps he hated to see all of his research exterminated so quickly. I certainly didn’t think he did it out of love or kindness. He wasn’t capable of that.

“Don’t celebrate yet,” P.C. said solemnly. “The assassin strangled her. There may be brain damage. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Five,” I answered.

He shook his head. “Four fingers and a thumb,” he corrected.

I might have smiled if my arm didn’t hurt so much. “What happened?” I asked confusedly. “I thought you were both unconscious. There were needles in your chests.”

Taty blushed. “We were wearing bullet proof vests. The needles didn’t actually penetrate, but we pretended to be unconscious. I was scared. The assassins moved so quickly. Less than a minute after they entered, the needle was in my chest, and I knew I could never move or react as quickly as they did, so I pretended to be unconscious. P.C. did the same.”

I nodded. I wasn’t mad. That made sense. “But where did you get the vests?” I asked. “And why didn’t you mention that you had them?”

Taty blushed again, so P.C. answered. “The vests were mine. We couldn’t tell you about them because I only had two. But why shouldn’t we wear them?” he asked defensively. “John has super human strength, and you have that plus your visions, but Taty and I are mere mortals.”

“Oh,” I answered, a little hurt. “You could have told me, though. I wish you’d trusted me. You used to trust me.”

P.C. paused and looked at me thoughtfully. “You’re right,” he said finally. “I should have told you, especially now that I’ve seen how bravely you fought to protect all of us. I was wrong.”

“We were both wrong,” Taty seconded him.

I smiled a little. “Thanks,” I breathed.

“What should we do with your villainous father?” P.C. asked to change the subject. He’d had enough of the mushy moment.

I gestured for us to move into the back office. I didn’t want John to wake up and overhear anything. When I stood up, I stumbled a little. I felt weak, and my arm and hand were throbbing. P.C. scooped me up gallantly and carried me, being careful not to touch my arm. I was embarrassed, but I didn’t protest. Part of me liked it that he wasn’t treating me like a stranger any more. Taty followed us to the back, and then I whispered, “We should inject John with the cerebral formatter.”

P.C. narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure? He’s handcuffed. We could torture him and learn all kinds of things about the future. He can tell us what stocks to invest in. We’ll be rich.”

Taty looked at me. “He saved your life, Leah, and he’s your father.”

“I know, but...the other things he’s done are not forgivable. My mother and I aren’t safe if he remembers us, and neither are you or P.C.”

Taty nodded. “You don’t have to convince me. I think he’s a scary man. I just wanted to make sure that you were sure.”

“I’m sure...and, thanks,” I smiled at her.

“Perfect. Let’s inject the sucker,” Taty confirmed, in a very P.C.-like statement.

“We need to do it together, in case he wakes up,” I said. “P.C., are you with us?”

P.C. was hesitant. “We could learn about future technologies and invent things before anyone else. Plus, evil villains deserve to be tortured, and I’ve never actually gotten to torture anyone before.” Taty and I both gave him a look that silenced him, so he shrugged. “Fine. Inject him. You two have no imagination.”

We filed out of the office then and back into the main area where John and the assassins lay unconscious. Taty gasped. John’s handcuff was dangling from a cabinet. I felt a shiver run down my spine. “He’s gone,” Taty cried.

“I never made him another identity,” P.C. said in disbelief. “But I guess he has time to make his own now that the assassins are taken care of.”

“How’d he wake up so fast?” asked Taty. She sounded scared. If I hadn’t felt exhausted and weak, I would have been scared too. What would my life be like with John still on the loose? Would he leave me alone now that his operation was over?

“Do you think he was wearing a bullet proof vest too?” Taty asked, still looking worried.

“I have no idea,” I answered, shaking my head. I winced again. Pain was shooting all along my arm and hand.

“We’ve got to get you to a doctor,” said Taty. “What should we do with these guys?” She gestured to the unconscious assassins.

“They don’t have identities either,” mused P.C. “Should we load them in the car and dump them along the side of the road somewhere? Or call the cops?”

“The thing is,” I mused, “we’re not sure how much of their memories that cerebral formatter erased. I mean, you two can remember everything before John and I moved here. What if these guys remember something and try to find us? But John did tell me that in thirty days their memories will be entirely erased because of some pill they took, so, really, we just have to stall for thirty days.”

Taty nodded. “Then we shouldn’t dump them on the side of the road. Calling the police sounds like our best bet. That way, we can get you to a hospital quicker anyway.”

P.C. called the police, and we worked out the details of our story while we waited for them to arrive. We didn’t have to wait long. Three officers entered the building, surveyed the four unconscious men, and then eyed us suspiciously. “What happened here?” one of them asked.

We had agreed that Taty should do the talking, so she answered, “My friends and I were just driving in the neighborhood, officer,” she began, “when we saw these four guys breaking into my father’s office. We pulled over to check it out.”

The officer nodded for her to continue.

“The men were fighting amongst themselves, officer,” she continued. “I think they intended to rob the place. They hurt my friend here very badly. They were arguing, and they stole some of the anesthetic and some needles from the back and starting injecting each other. They knocked each other out, see, and we called you immediately.”

“I don’t think they’re too mentally stable,” P.C. put in.

The officers still looked suspicious. It was a strange story. They handcuffed the men and told us the paramedics would take me to the hospital, but they continued to question us distrustfully. We were told to come to the station later for further questioning.

Chapter 25

P.C., Taty, and I spent a lot of time at the police station, and in the end, the police had to believe us. After all, they had no other story. The assassins didn’t say anything. I’m not sure if the assassins remembered anything or not, but the four of them were separated, so even if they could

remember, they weren't able to agree on a story together. Each of them chose to say nothing, and the case is going to trial. That, of course, will take a while.

My mom met me at the police station and cried and held me a long time when she saw me. She pressed her lips to my hair and whispered that she loved me over and over. For the first time in a long time, I felt safe.

I haven't heard anything from John. I suppose he somehow manufactured a new identity for himself and fled to another city or even country. I've been trying not to think about him, honestly. My mom thinks of him often, though, and his memory makes her teary eyed. I'm hoping that will fade with time.

Taty, P.C., and I stayed together for most of the weekend, talking about what had happened. I told them more about the times we'd shared together, and they listened and seemed to believe me. Things were starting to feel...normal again. I was grateful.

When I arrived at my locker on Monday morning, Kai was there. He wasn't waiting for me. He was talking to Make-Up Girl, of course, but I still felt myself blushing from even being near him. They were fighting. I tried to open my locker quickly, but it was hard to do since I had to use my left hand.

"Look, we're over," I heard her say. "You're so, like, distant and weird now. That Leah girl messed you up. I don't need a man who can't remember what happened to him last week. Like, ew."

He stared at her for a while, then shrugged. "Okay." He started to walk away.

"Wait, that's it?" she asked, and he turned to face her again.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked. "Every day you ask me if I like Leah. I don't, okay? We're just friends, right, Leah?"

"Yeah, um, just friends," I answered.

"Really?" Make-Up Girl asked him, softening and moving closer to him. I could tell she didn't really want to break up with him. She wanted him to fight for her, to convince her to stay.

"I don't need all of this drama," Kai said, shaking his head. "You're beautiful, but this is too much. Sorry, Bri. I can't take any more. See you in bio, Leah," he gestured to me, and I nodded. He turned and walked away then. This was going to be a wonderful day.

Bri's face was red and her eyes were watery. I felt a little sorry for her suddenly. She turned on me then. "Don't you dare go spreading stories about this, you little eavesdropper," she snapped. "I broke up with *him*, got that?"

"I don't care enough to gossip about you," I told her.

She narrowed her eyes. “What happened to your arm?”

“I hurt it at karate practice,” I answered. That was my story. P.C. and Taty had helped me make it up. I liked it. I thought it made me sound tough.

“You’re such a freak,” Make-Up Girl answered. She leaned closer to me and started talking through gritted teeth, a menacing edge lacing her words. “I don’t know what you did to him, freak girl, but you haven’t won. This war is far from over. Life has been pretty good for you at this school so far, hasn’t it? Don’t expect that to last. I haven’t even begun to fight.” She continued to stare coldly into my eyes until I lost my nerve and took a step back. She smirked at me then, an unsettling, confident smirk. Then she flipped her hair in my face and walked away.

I sighed with embarrassment and shame. I could battle strange assassins from the future, but mean, popular girls still intimidated me.

When I looked up, I saw Taty and P.C. coming towards my locker, arguing about something. I was hoping they’d come. I smiled at them and tried to forget about the incident with Make-Up Girl.

“He won’t leave me alone, though,” Taty was saying.

“Just ignore him. Don’t talk to him at all. He’ll get the hint,” P.C. told her.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked.

“Rick Stevens,” said Taty. “He came up and put his arm around me, and we barely know each other! I kind of pushed him away, so he left without saying anything. Now he keeps looking over at me. It creeps me out, you know?”

“How strange,” I said, looking at P.C.

He avoided my gaze. “That guy? He couldn’t pour water out of a boot if the instructions were on the heel. He’s probably just staring into space and you think he’s looking at you.”

Taty nodded. “Maybe you’re right. He just weirds me out a little. And the thing is, I always thought he was cool, kind of cute even, definitely not stupid or creepy. Look, I’ll see you in bio, Leah. I have a couple of things to do before class.”

I nodded. “See you there,” I told her. As soon as she was gone, I turned on P.C. “You didn’t tell her!” I accused.

“She doesn’t need to know,” he answered, but he still wouldn’t look at me.

“You’re lying to her.”

“I’m not,” he defended himself. “Omission is not the same as fabrication.”

I stared at him, and he shifted uncomfortably. Finally, he said, “Leah, I was talking to him about C++ once, and he said he figured a guy like me ought to earn A’s.”

I laughed. “Okay, but not everyone is as into computers as you are, and I still don’t think you get to decide who she dates.”

“I’m not stopping her from dating anyone. If it’s meant to be, they’ll get back together. Isn’t that what girls think? Destiny, and all of that?”

“It still doesn’t seem right to me.”

He stared at me. “I don’t see you telling Brianna that Kai and you *did* date for a while, and that Brianna’s not crazy for feeling jealous of you.”

“That’s not the same. Brianna’s mean and...not right for Kai. He’s better off without her...” My voice trailed off. He had a point. It was almost exactly the same. I supposed I didn’t a right to choose who Kai dated either.

“Mmm hmmm,” P.C. answered knowingly. I stared at the ground, embarrassed. It was true what Taty often said—it was annoying when P.C. was right.

I smiled up at him then. “Omission’s not the same as fabrication.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay,” I told him. “Deal. I won’t tell Taty about Rick if you don’t mention anything to Kai about Brianna.”

“I knew the force was strong in you, Vera,” he said, and I laughed.

Notes:

Problems: mind control—If you think about it, they can't control your mind. Put that in somewhere.

grade 10

1st: Bio

2nd: Math

5th: English

Timeline:

Day 1: 1st day of school & Yesenia Vision

Day 2: Meets PC, Kai, & Taty - has vision of Taty's mom

Day 3: Walks home with PC and tells all. Meets John

Day 4: Works with Kai. Tells PC she is an alien. Gets Dante Vision and goes to forest.

Day 5: Kai kisses Bri. Taty gives Leah pep talk. Leah dissects pig with Kai and faints. Ch.12