

Novels by D. Andrew Campbell

Catharsis

Catalyst

Catastrophe (Coming 2015)

D. ANDREW CAMPBELL

CATHARSIS

D. Andrew Campbell

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CATHARSIS

For my family,
For my students,
And for my grandfather.
None of this is possible without you.

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PROLOGUE (the before-everything- begins part)

Since waking up in the alley, my memory has been nearly perfect. I believe it is a side effect of what happened to me. Or whatever that old man did to me before he died...or I killed him...or however it happened. I can remember everything that's happened to me since waking up covered in blood. Whenever I close my eyes, anything I've experienced since then comes rushing back to me as if I'm viewing the full-color pages of a book. It's spooky. I don't know if the memories will last forever. I'm still learning the full extent of what I can do.

It bothers me that I can't remember the hours before I woke up. Looking back, I suspect I know what might have happened to me, but there's no point in speculating. I'm no longer the same person I was that evening. Actually, I'm not sure I even still count *as* a person. But I'll get to that soon enough.

For now, let's begin with that dark alley. That's where the nightmare began.

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PART ONE
-DISCOVERY-

CHAPTER ONE

The blood wakes me up. I'm aware of little else as I open my eyes and see the gray bricks and dark pavement around me. The dark scent rising from the pool of blood clashes with the rumblings in my stomach from hunger and a lack of food. The idea that I haven't eaten in hours surprises me with its urgency, and I try to swat it away as irrelevant. I can't remember the last time I had any food, and my stomach muscles are kicking like I'm carrying a ten pound infant.

My hands and face are sticky. There's dampness on my cheeks and when I try to reach up to wipe it away my fingers won't immediately respond. To my surprise, they are gummed to the ground with a viscous fluid. Freeing them with some concentrated effort, I touch my face and hair and encounter only more of the slime. It reeks of copper and decay. It is not a pleasant sensation.

I'm surrounded by weak light that makes discerning what the metallic smell might be rather difficult. My first thought, once those elusive things start filtering into my brain again, is that I've stumbled into old battery acid.

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The metallic smell reminds me of Duracells and Energizers. I know that can't be true as the slime isn't hurting me at all. Well, it isn't *hurting* me - only freaking me out a bit.

Sitting up, I lean against the metal wall behind me. The "metal" of the wall becoming apparent from the solid *CLANG* I hear when I bump into it. I notice the metal wall also has an odd, hollow sound to it. As my eyes begin to adjust to the darkness around me, I realize the wall is actually the side of a large green dumpster with REYNOLDS written in yellow letters just behind my head.

Looking around, my slowly-developing night vision fills in my surroundings. Large dumpster behind me. Tall buildings around me. Off to my right I hear the reverberated echo of cars passing what has to be the end of an alley. I even see the occasional headlights streak past. High above me I see the glowing smog canopy of the city, and just to my left is a large lump of clothes laying in the dark gooeey liquid.

The lump monopolizes my attention once I notice it and quickly arrests the visual tour of my temporary home. Crawling over to the lump, I realize the "lump" is a man. He's older than me judging from his gray mop of hair and fancy, darkly pin-striped business suit. I can't make out much more about him aside from that he's lying in a rather uncomfortable position.

Leaning forward slightly, my eyes finally adjust enough to let me see that the dark liquid that covers both him and me is blood. A stagnant pool of congealed blood.

CHAPTER TWO

The realization startles me, and I jump backwards slamming my head against the dumpster. The loud *GONG* of the ricochet hurts my ears and rings off down the alley like a bell tolling on a dark night. I have never seen so much blood in my life. I think there might be more blood here in this one spot than I've seen in all the fifteen years of my life combined.

Leaning back against the cool metal dumpster with its yellow letters and looking up at the faintly glowing night sky, I concentrate on not looking at the man lying next to me (Is it called a "corpse" now? Or is it just a body?). It's creepy sitting next to something like this. Closing my eyes, I work on relaxing. Even though I know freaking out won't solve anything, it's an incredibly tempting option. In an attempt to distract myself, I take a moment and relax. I want to analyze what's happening and not just react to it. "Reacting without thinking" is my sister's vice, not mine.

Visualizing some questions, I begin to orient myself.

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Do I remember why I was in the alley?

Nope. This situation has scored rather high on the ol' what-the-heck-is-happening meter.

What's the last thing I remember doing?

Eating dinner last night at the Chinese restaurant, Great Walls, with my family.

Anything else register as weird in "memory land"?

Pausing for a moment, I try to think of all the clichéd things that happen in movies when a character can't remember something (Do I actually have amnesia? I always thought that was fake.).

My name?

Check. Catarina Perez. Although I tend to just go by "Cat".

My home?

Old, brick house near the canal, downtown. I have my own room. Younger sister has her own room. Both parents at home and happily married.

School and friends?

I can remember all of them (Or at least a lot of people I categorize as friends. I don't know if it's *all* my friends, but it's enough to allow me to check off this category.), so I guess that means there aren't any obvious blanks.

My memory is consistent up until last night's dinner (I had the Four Seasons plate for the first time. More expensive, but I was betting on dad relenting and being nice to me.). Then it gets blotchy. I remember an argument at dinner, and someone getting mad.

A small growl tickles the back of my throat. This is frustrating. And stupid.

To answer my previous question...nothing is out of the ordinary aside from the lack of details after dinner.

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Maybe I had some bad seafood. I did have scallops for the first time last night (They were delicious. Like eating fish-flavored dice.). Maybe they had gone bad, and I'm experiencing a severe case of food poisoning.

Yeab, right, I think. Food poisoning so bad it makes a random stranger erupt in blood next to you. I'm sure that's completely common. Speaking of blood...

...I check myself to see if there are any new holes in me. It hadn't occurred to me that the blood could be mine. I had just assumed the old guy was responsible for all of it (That's weird. Why'd I assume he was old? I've barely even looked at him so far.). Then again I also remember what my nana used to say about "assuming" things.

After a quick, but thorough, inspection, I conclude that the blood didn't come from any holes in my body. I have the correct number and in all the normal places. My wrists ache more than they should, but I can't find anything wrong with them aside from some scrapes and old scars I don't remember. Re-examining my arms I see the scars look old and mostly healed. It makes me wonder. Why, if I remember everything prior to last night, do I not remember ever getting these scars?

Shrugging, I figure odd scars are the least of my concerns. Glancing down, I turn my attention to the old, white guy lying on the pavement.

*"Old white guy"...*my own choice of words makes me pause. How do I know his race? I've barely looked at him. Why did those words pop into my head?

Crawling the few feet back down the gray alley (Is it getting lighter out? It doesn't seem as dark anymore.), I crouch next to the body. He hasn't moved at in the last few minutes. The details about him are easier to see

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now that my eyes are adjusting to the dark (Even better than expected considering how dark it should be this time of night.), and my heart is calming down a bit.

His black suit, red shirt and dark tie are rumpled and no longer orderly or tucked in. Concentrating on his clothes, I work to not look at his face or skin. I don't want to accept his shriveled, pale visage yet.

Seeing skin will creep me out, I think and then pause. *Well, seeing dead skin, at least.* Looking at his clothes is making this experience a bit easier.

The clothes are expensively tailored. Dad wears suits for his job, and I've shopped with him a few times. He was kind enough to give me an education on *fancy man clothes* the last time we were out. This guy's clothes look much higher quality than anything I saw at the Men's Warehouse with my dad. Given I'm not an expert on "spiffy ensembles", but they are nice. Not I'm-in-the-mob nice, but better than buy-one-suit-get-one-free nice.

Examining the guy's hands (Baby steps. Dead person hands are better than dead person face.), I notice I was correct about him being a white guy, but his hands aren't old-man hands. The skin is smooth, and there aren't wrinkles anywhere. There are some rings on his pale and hairless fingers. One ring is an intricately-carved wide gold band, and the other is a dull silver with three green stones set into it.

Glancing at his feet, I buy myself more time before looking at his face. Black leather loafers. No tassels or strings. Dark socks. Several scuffs on the toe of the right one. The scuffs are white and appear to have been made recently.

Sighing, I close my eyes. I don't want to see his

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face. I contemplate just standing up and walking away. Maybe I'll flag down a police officer and just report that I found him here. Remembering the blood on my arms and shirt (and its stickiness), I realize they might be tough to explain. Even being pretty good with words, I might have a difficult time explaining this particular scene. I'm not sure what looking at his face will do to help the situation (Help reinforce my imminent nightmares?), but I also have the fear that *not looking* will eventually haunt me.

Blowing air out of my nose, I grunt and open my eyes.

Looking at his face, all I see is a mass of gray and black greasy hair. The guy's hair had gotten tousled at some point (Is that the right word for this situation? Isn't "tousling" what aunts do to little kids when they see them?), and now it's draped across his face obscuring everything except the tip of his chin and his nose. There's no way to see what he looks like without moving that follicular bush, and that means touching him.

Poop! (Curse my good upbringing. Even in a situation like this my brain can't drop into a more vulgar mode. I'm staring at my first corpse, and the worst my brain conjures is something a toddler would mumble? This is what happens when you have parents that love you.) I don't want to touch him. It's not paranoia about corpse cooties or anything; I just don't want to cross the touching-dead-people bridge, yet. Or ever, honestly. I have a decision to make, and I don't like either option. I can leave the old man alone and flag down a cop without ever knowing what the guy looks like, or I can touch a dead body. Both choices are equally appalling but for completely different reasons.

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After sitting and staring at the guy for a few moments (Still no breathing on his part. I had been quietly harboring hopes of him spontaneously re-animating.), I decide to proceed with my previous plan: seeing what he looks like.

I consider pulling my sleeve down over my hand first, but I end up dismissing the thought. I'm not going to leave fingerprints on his hair if that's my worry (It isn't.), and if I'm worried about getting icky-dead-guy germs on me (I am.) then a shirt probably won't do much. At least that's what I tell myself.

Reaching out and brushing the hair back behind his ear and neck, I expose his face. The guy has an impressive amount of hair (Or is it *bad* now? I'm not well versed in my deceased-guy verb tense.). My grandfather would be envious of him (Except for the fact that my Papa is alive, and this guy isn't. That might help cull the envy a bit.). As I push it back, I notice it's only chin length, but it had appeared much longer.

I'm having trouble discerning his age, but I'd estimate him to be in his late forties or early fifties. That's younger than my dad, but something about him feels older. It makes me think of the Hollywood stars who manage to look young even as they age. His skin isn't wrinkled, but it isn't young-person skin either. Of course that might just be a side effect of his severe case of death! I have no idea what being dead might do to a person's overall skin condition, so I give up trying to place his age and move on.

His eyes catch my attention. They are black. Deep black. Scary, horror-movie black. I can barely see any whites in his eyes, and the sliver of blue around his pupils is nearly invisible. Both eyes are open and

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completely dilated (Is it a side effect of death? Or was he like this before?), and it registers a ping on my creep-o-meter. I suddenly feel it's better to look anywhere than at those awful eyes.

Glancing at his grinning mouth, I realize I was wrong. There is a worse place to look than his eyes.

Seeing the blood-covered teeth barely hidden behind his upper lip, it strikes me that I've stumbled upon a much worse place to look at than his *eyes*.

CHAPTER THREE

Quickly deciding it's time for another round of strategic self-distraction, I shut my eyes as tightly as I can and do my best to ignore what I just saw. I think of rainbows. Butterflies. Ponies. Unicorns. Llamacorns (A weird llama/unicorn crossbreed my sister dreamed up.). Anything that isn't what I just saw. Anything that isn't a creepy old man mouth filled with brilliant white teeth spattered with brownish-red blood.

No good. His demonic visage overwhelms whatever vision I dream up (Do anything aside from mythological demons have dark black eyes, skin that resists aging and mouths full of blood?). Abandoning my avoidance of him, I slowly open my eyes again.

Still there. Still creepy. Still staring at me. Still grinning at me. Giving in to what I know must eventually happen, I resign myself to bending down for a better look.

The light in the alley has grown strong enough that I now see him perfectly. Well, as perfectly as you'd want to see something like this. In an empty alley. At night.

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By yourself.

His mouth is bathed in red. He either bit somebody or somebody hit him in the mouth. Hard. With like a bowling ball or something. I can't tell which it is with his mouth mostly closed.

Reaching out a finger, I pry back his upper lip enough for me to see that his teeth are red...well, the teeth are white, but they are caked in red gore. I assume it's blood (a safe enough bet at this point). His gums are also red. Ok, pink covered in red, but I think the point is understood. Moving his upper lip back and forth and checking out his teeth (I guess I got over that touching-a-dead-guy ickiness quickly enough.), I see nothing unusual aside from the copious amount of blood.

Moving his bottom lip down, I check his other teeth. Covered in blood, but relatively normal. All his teeth look relatively unscathed. I don't see any obvious reason for the blood in his mouth.

But what was I expecting to find? An open wound? A large hole in his mouth (aside from the throat, I mean)? Missing teeth? Well...ok. Yeah, that last one would have made sense.

But his mouth is fine as far as I can tell. I doubt the blood came from his own mouth. Which means...

...the blood came from someone else. That doesn't make me feel much better. I'm guessing he went all *crazy-brain-eating-zombie* on somebody and got himself beaten down for the effort (just my first guess as to a feasible explanation). It makes sense at least.

Except the "who did it" part still bothers me? Is a theoretical beating enough to kill a man with no obvious marks on him? More importantly than that, though, is why was I lying next to him?

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Slowly another piece of the puzzle clicks into place for me. A piece that connects the "why" of "why am I here" with the "what" of "what happened to him". And it's a piece I don't like. One I don't like at all.

What if *I* was the person he bit with his monster-movie reject teeth? And what if I'm the person who gave him the life-ending beat down? That would certainly explain why I woke up here in a sticky puddle of blood. And why I can't remember what happened tonight (Or I just don't want to.).

CHAPTER FOUR

Calming myself down (Though it's only after I check my body for bite marks or wounds and find nothing outside the mostly healed scars around my wrists.), I reassess the situation.

The pool of red liquid hadn't come from me since I don't have any new holes in me that would allow for the creation of that volume of blood. That leaves two possible solutions that I can think of: the blood was from a third person that has since vanished, or it came from the old man.

No viable method comes to me on how to see if another person has left the blood (How can you examine what isn't there?), so that leaves checking the man for over-sized blood-producing perforations. It's not the most appealing of tasks, but I also don't want to approach a police officer and report a crime that I may or may not have been involved in (or even the cause of). Having at least some information seems like a better start, even if the gathering of said information means frisking a dead person.

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Taking a moment, I marvel at the steady progression of my rationalizing. A short while ago I had been nearly paralyzed with fear at the sight of this guy, and here I am only minutes later willing to check him for newly-developed lethal holes. Oh, how my night is progressing.

"You can do this," I whisper to myself. "He can't hurt you now." I pause and look at the still, black form again. "Right?" The body looks harmless and still, but something had to cause that volcanic explosion of blood magma pooled under him.

Looking around the alley again, I notice it has gotten brighter. It almost feels like daylight, and I know it shouldn't because I can sense that it's late at night. It's after eleven o'clock at least, and maybe even closer to midnight. The two of us and the dumpster are at least forty yards from the street; the only visible lights coming from a street lamp. A street lamp that's become so bright it's hard for me to even look at it. My eyes hurt when I try to focus on it. Blinking, I look back down at the ground and the pain subsides.

Wow, I think and shrug. *My eyes must have really adjusted to this darkness.*

Standing, I stretch my hunched frame. My five foot two-inch body straightens (Did I mention that I'm a bit...let's call it *petite*? I inherited my lack of body mass from my dad. I love him, but he's not a physically imposing fellow.), and I reach up toward the stars. My back cracks several times, and it's nice. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I experience a little tingle as my circulation accelerates and pushes nutrients to neglected parts of my body. I must have been sitting more uncomfortably than I'd thought. The scene looks

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just as macabre from a standing position as it had from a lower one, but after a few more minutes of stalling I lower myself back down to a crouch (I might have mentally decided that touching a dead body was the logical next step, but my body didn't fully agree on the vote.).

Using the tip of one finger to gently push the guy over on to his back, I reveal the part of him that had been hidden up until this point. And it isn't a pretty sight. The blood was his. The blood was definitely his.

Unless the chunk of steel pipe sticking out of his crushed chest cavity is completely unrelated to the massive amount of red gore decorating the both of us.

But somehow I doubt that conclusion.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Double pooppy," I say to the chilling night air and the creepy alley (Oh good, my upbringing has kicked back in. Just what's needed here: politeness.).

Examining the pipe and his chest a bit closer, I surmise that the pipe was likely the cause of death here (Have I mentioned that I'm kinda smart? At least I am with words and stuff. I tend to read a lot, and I've picked up "big words" over the years. It used to get me bullied until I stopped caring how the cretins of the world thought and just tuned their idiocy out. I bring it up now as I tend to get verbose when I'm nervous.). I can see about three inches of brownish-red metal pipe as thick as a baby's arm sticking out of his chest where a breast plate should have been. The pipe that isn't covered in rust is covered in thick blood, and it doesn't appear to be a "flesh wound" (As Monty Python's Black Knight was apt to say – I should also mention that I'm fond of old movies. Well, old in relation to me, anyway.). It looks rather severe. And lethal.

Grabbing the edge of the hollow, protruding pipe

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between my thumb and forefinger, I give it a wiggle (I do my best to not make enough contact to leave any finger prints.). It's solid, heavy, thick, and it barely moves in the guy at all. Although it's very well planted, it does make a slight and disgusting, *glurpy* sound as I ease it back and forth.

That answers any doubts. It's a real pipe in a real dead guy. That ups my current emotional state to "fully freaked out".

With that thought, I decide it's time to get out and find a policeman. Or woman. Or policeanybody. This is now officially over my head, and I'm ready to turn the whole thing over to somebody else with a whole lot more experience with this than me. Or any experience at all, really. Right now I'll settle for just somebody that isn't me.

Standing up, I step back from the guy with the creepy eyes (He's still spooky.). It's quite the impressive scene of gore and horror in front of me now. Black-pooled, pupil-filled eyes. Blood-filled mouth. Long, gray-black, greasy hair. Expensive dark suit with an added rusty pipe tie pin jutting from his chest. This moment is not going on my "happy, fun-time remembrances" list, that's for sure.

Turning from the body and heading towards the open end of the alley, I begin to jog to try and increase the distance between me and the mess of past humanity near the dumpster (I mean that *was* human...wasn't it?). I slow after several yards, though, as every step closer to the mouth of civilization at the end of the alley causes me a twinge of pain. After what I've gone through, though, this isn't the kind of pain I'm expecting.

CHAPTER SIX

The street lamps at the end of the alley are much brighter than I remember them being. They are much brighter than street lamps have ever been that I can remember. Still a dozen or more yards from the end of the alley I stop walking and turn my face away from the intense buzzing yellowness that is the safety of the street.

Wait, I think as the previous thought finally gets traction in my mind. *What buzzing?*

Pausing, I turn my head back towards the comforting darkness of the alley from which I'd just come and listen to the buzzing for a moment. The sound isn't so much a nest of hornets, as it is one giant, enraged insect. It's horrendously loud...and annoying. Everything is so bright; it feels like daylight washing over me. More than daylight. Flashing back, memories of the weekend I went spelunking with my uncle down south flood over me. We'd come out of a cave after being underground for hours and the overcast afternoon sun had been so blinding that it was almost nauseating.

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It's the middle of the night, though, and a simple streetlight is having that same effect on me. The persistent buzzing isn't growing any louder, but I can hear it just sitting outside the alley waiting for me to turn and look at it...whatever it is.

Steeling myself for whatever I'll see, I slowly...very slowly...turn towards the mouth of the alley. My speed, or lack thereof, is not due to fear (Which I oddly seem to lack at the moment, considering what I'd recently seen.), but it's to allow my eyes to adjust to the brightness of the overwhelming light an increment at a time.

Just under a minute later (I know exactly how long it took - forty-eight seconds - without checking my watch. How is that?), I turn enough to look out into the street and see...

...nothing. It's just an empty street and a few street lamps. There are several empty buildings around me - some deserted just for the night and others for what appear to be a more permanent lack of residency. I can't quite bring myself to look all the way up at the bulbs of the lamps (still too bright), but I can turn to face them enough to determine that the monster bumblebee I've been hearing is either trapped "inside" the lamp, or it is just the lamp itself buzzing.

I've heard lamps buzz before, both on the street and in my own home, but never to this deafening level. I'm surprised people aren't out here gawking up at them, or calling the police about the sound, or...my thoughts come to a halt as I realize there's nobody excited about these lights because there's nobody *around* to even notice them. The street's deserted.

"Ok," I say quietly to myself just to hear something aside from that stupid light above my head. "You're out

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of the alley. Step one accomplished easily enough. Now how do you tackle part two: getting your backside home before it's toast?" I say and pause as I think for a moment. "Or find the police? That's also a solid choice."

It might be best if I go home first and talk this over with my parents. Waking up next to a dead (possibly murdered?), scary, old white guy is a step beyond my normal range of every day dealings. I don't often want to turn to my parents for help, but if there was ever a better case of let-an-adult-handle-it, then I haven't heard of it.

But where in the Holy Heckfire am I?

Looking down the road to my left, I see little aside from buildings and our city's version of skyscrapers off in the distance. Turning to my right there are more buildings (I know it's North, but I'm not sure how I know that.), but nothing of exceptional height. In the distance, a white light in the middle of the road catches my immediate attention. It's a really bright white light, and it's growing quickly.

As I focus on the expanding light, the intensity of its whiteness becomes overpowering. Even worse than the light is the cacophony of sound pouring forth from it which is beyond any noise I've ever endured. Its existence just hurts, and all I can do is stare at it as it comes towards me. The pain and confusion I feel is overwhelming (What could possibly create this much light and noise on a normal city street?). Water wells up in my eyes as it approaches. I find myself starting to crouch lower to the ground for the comforting protection being in a ball brings me.

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As the thing passes in front of me, I can't take the nearness of it and jump backwards to get some distance. Not only does that single leap get some space between me and the mobile generator of the assault on my senses, but it is also enough to get me into the darkness and relative quiet of the alley.

Abbb, I think. That's so much better, but what was that thing?

My brain had registered it as a car right before I had closed my eyes and propelled myself backwards, so I pause and review the image in my mind for a moment. Black Caprice Classic. It was a large behemoth of a vehicle that's roughly the size of some trailer homes. It had dark windows - tinted - with sparkly chrome and an abundance of gold accents covering it.

And the sound? It was music, but horrendously loud music - loud to the point of ridiculousness.

And what was that last sound I had heard right after it passed me? It had sounded like a high pitched bird call. Or the squeal of a scared pig. Or the screech of...

Opening my eyes, I look down the alley. Those were tires I had heard. Tires screeching on pavement as brakes had locked them into place.

The mouth of the alley is a half dozen yards in front of me (How did that happen? I had only jumped the one time, and I'd been sitting still since landing.), and now that I'm listening for it I can hear the circus of horrible sounds slowly getting closer to the street lamp at the mouth of the alley.

The black Caprice Classic creeps into view moving backwards like an ominous, black brick. The noise emanating from the automobile suddenly drops in level,

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and I can pick up other sounds. Voices from inside the car trickle out.

They have to be yelling at each other, I think as I watch the ominous auto slide to a rest. There's no other way for me to hear them over the music from where I'm crouched.

The voices *aren't raised*, though. I can't make out what they're saying, but I can tell there are three of them in the car. I can also hear something in one of the voices (Curiosity? Fear?), but I can't quite make it out.

The voices continue for another minute (One minute and thirty-five seconds to be exact, and again I don't use my watch to know that.), and then the back door opens and a tall, white-skinned twig of a man steps out and onto the sidewalk. I stare at him for a moment as he gazes directly at me in the alley. Leaning back towards the open door, he says, "Fine, you stay in the car. I'm going."

He slams the car door (a painfully loud blast to my ears), turns back toward me and grins.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My first instinct is to shrink back and hide in the alley. This guy's older than me by several years, and he has a hardened-by-a-life-of-crime look that is outside my meager socio-economic norm. There are multiple tattoos peeking out from under his white, wife-beater, tank top, and I can see that his eyes are bloodshot even from a distance. Aside from all that, still something about him feels wrong. I can't quite place it, but I know there's something about him I just don't like (I mean other than the hillbilly-gangster vibe he's projecting.).

Even if he's several inches taller than me and probably has fifty pounds more mass on him, I realize I've already had a pretty crappy night and I don't feel like dealing with this. I'm pretty sure I've either recently killed a man or I'd been present when it occurred, and this crazy, midnight cracker isn't worth my worry or fear.

I don't feel afraid. My body is ready for whatever's going to happen, and that's weird since I've been in very few physical scuffles in my life (It's the benefit of being a girl...and a friendly and outgoing one at that.). Solving

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things as a pugilist hasn't been my normal first response (I have gone with my dad to several of his Krav Maga classes, but that hardly qualifies me as a midnight ninja).

But tonight I just stand where I am in the alley. I'm going to face this guy, this kid actually, and then just get home as soon as possible.

Walking towards the opening of the alley and the rooster-haired kid, I keep my hands loose and down at my sides. My goal isn't to fight (Could I even do that if I needed to? There's a difference between attacking a padded opponent in class and confronting a real bad guy on a city street.), but I have a feeling I can if that's what I need to do to make this encounter end quickly.

As I get closer to him, I hear his breathing speed up and his heart beat accelerate (That's weird. That doesn't happen normally, does it? It must be my nerves acting up.). There's a stench wafting towards me from him: sweat-soured gym clothes and burnt electricity. It isn't pleasant.

I can tell he hears my approach as his eyes squint slightly and his body hunches forward in anticipation of something's arrival. That something happens to be me. Stepping into the pale donut of light cast by the buzzing hornet of a street lamp, I smile my most friendly smile at the guy.

"What the fu-," he begins, but I cut him off. I know where he is going with that train of thought, and it doesn't mingle well with my good upbringing.

"Excuse me," I say over his outburst, "but I just woke up a few minutes ago in that alley back there, and I have no idea where I am. Could you help me? Maybe give me an idea of where exactly I am aside from north of the city? I can tell that much from the buildings over

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there." I point to the skyscrapers that can easily be seen over the buildings to my left, and he glances briefly in that direction following my finger.

"Or better yet, could you let me use a phone so I can call my parents? Or would you mind giving me a ride to my place? I can give directions. I'm a big girl."

He looks me up and down quickly, and I assume he is sizing me up and comparing my mass to his own and realizing my embarrassing lack thereof.

"What? No you're not. You're..." he begins and I cut off him once more.

"Hey! No need for that. I was speaking metaphorically. We don't need a short joke." I say and give him my biggest smile.

Just to be clear, I don't expect them to give me a ride. Or to let me use a phone. Or to give directions or even help me in any way. But I remembered some advice our instructor gave us last year, "If you lack a strong defense, cover for it with an unrelenting offense. Keep pressing and keep them off guard. If you're lucky enough, then they'll keep retreating and never notice you had nothing to back you up." And that's what I'm doing here.

"Who are you?" he rasps at me while his unpleasant sour odor gets even stronger in the confines of the alley (It's not quite in the scared-villain-on-the-roof-top way that Michael Keaton's Batman gets asked, but it would've been more fun if he had.).

"I'm Catarina, nice to meet you," I say as I step towards him with my hand held out in front of me as if I'm ready to shake hands and sell him insurance. The last thing I want to do is touch this guy as the smell coming off of him is unbearable, but it feels like the

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right move. Press forward and advance in order to make him be the one to retreat.

He looks briefly at my outstretched hand, shakes his head, and turns back to the growling car on the street behind him.

Smiling, I silently thank my old instructor for the solid advice. That worked out better than I'd hoped.

Taking another step forward (To press my advantage and make the show as convincing as possible.), I ask, "So does this mean you won't help me? That's not very nice." There's a new part of me that is getting slightly upset at his leaving. This part of me wanted him to advance. It wanted him to come at me, but I shrug that part off. It lost.

He opens the rear door and turns to me. "Forget it girl. You're on your own." He pauses with the door open, and I feel his eyes drift down and settle on my neck. They focus there as his disturbing smile comes back (Did I mention he had a particularly disturbing smile before? Well, he does. It's like a clown smile on a polar bear. Exactly. Try and imagine that and not have it haunt you afterwards.), and he slowly closes the car door. Except he's on the wrong side of it. He's still standing in the street.

Reaching up to touch where he's staring, I realize my mistake. My gold chain. The heirloom I inherited from my aunt when she died last August. That's what got his attention.

"Oh pooppy socks," I say softly. And that new part of me that I thought had lost earlier? I can feel it smile.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Hey *girl* (and I don't like how he stresses the word this time), is that gold?" He asks as he steps away from the car.

Really? After the night I've had (Or at least think I've had.), he's now going to try and rob me? This took a turn I wasn't expecting.

Ignoring his question (Press the offense, remember?), I continue with my own line of thinking. "So you'll help me? That's great. If I can use your phone, then I can call someone to get a ride. It'll only take a moment."

His smile widens (Imagine that polar bear now spotting a fish-shaped pie.). "How about you give me that necklace, and I'll let you use my phone?" His left hand produces an older-model phone from his back jeans pocket.

This isn't sounding good, but I'm not ready to concede my advantage yet (At least I thought I had an advantage.). "Thanks for letting me use your phone, mister (disarm with politeness...if possible). That's awful

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nice of you. But you can't have the necklace. It was my auntie's."

He continues to walk towards me grinning with the phone held loosely in his hand. His stench crawls ahead of him across the pavement as he approaches.

Looking down at my chest, I attempt to see the object of his obsession when I notice two things: one, it is virtually impossible to see one's own necklace (kinda felt like an idiot on that point), and two, I still have the old guy's blood smeared all over my clothes. The blood gives me an idea, and I decide to change my tactics.

I look up and catch his eyes when he is still about ten feet away, and I change my tone from "friendly kid" to "not-so-friendly bear".

"Stop," I growl at him, and to my amazement he does. "Are you an idiot? Look at me. I'm smaller than you. I'm lighter than you. Except for the fact that I'm browner than you, you have me beat in virtually every "street fight" category they hold a legitimate contest in. Despite all of that I'm not scared or running away. Doesn't that tell you something about me? You coming at me is just plain stupid. Plus," I continue, and I drop my voice an even deeper octave, "did you even notice I'm covered in blood? Did that even register with you?"

I wait for a response from him, but all he gives me in return is mild blinking to back up his disturbing grin. This is what our instructor called "re-establishing the offensive".

Just gotta keep pressing forward until he leaves, I tell myself. *Solid plan,* the scared little girl deep inside me echoes back. *I hope it works.*

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He counters my plan by reaching his right hand into his jeans pocket and pulling out a dark black, shiny object. I'm aware of his heartbeat speeding up (It's loud.), his breathing slowing down and his smell shifting more towards the soiled-summer-jock-strap spectrum of fetid odors. A slight shift of his thumb and a four-inch blade pops out of the object in his hand. Oh joy. A knife. I guess he just decided to make his own move for the offensive.

"Putá," he hisses at me and waggles the knife tip back and forth in what I assume he believes is a menacing fashion (Are you kidding me? I'm sure this is the only Spanish he knows, and it happens to be an insult to women? Just my luck.), "why don't you just toss me the necklace and we'll call it a night?"

I should be scared. I'm in a dark alley...well, actually now, I'm standing in the light of a buzzing street lamp (still so annoying), but I was in one moments ago...and I've seen my first dead body and I'm being threatened by an albino toothpick who's trying to mug me. But there's no fear in me. I feel calm and slightly annoyed. And hungry (The last thought sneaks in and surprises me.).

That new part of me – the small, unhappy-to-lose part - feels excited and eager for what's about to come next.

"That's not going to happen," I tell him simply. "Not tonight."

He steps closer to me with the knife (The phone is off to the side. I'm not even sure he realizes it is still in his hand.), but he doesn't seem real excited to put it into use, yet. Maybe he's sca-

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With little warning and only a twitch of his body, he makes his move, but it isn't the vicious, speedy swipe I had been anticipating. It's a slow wide slash towards my belly, and I simply step back as it gets near me (What was that? Is he teasing me? That couldn't have been a real attack?).

"Was that for real?" I ask and involuntarily chuckle at him. It was like watching someone swing a canoe paddle underwater.

He growls and lunges straight at me with the knife. At least I was expecting a lunge. All he gives me is another slow motion back step and a gentle pushing of the knife in the direction of my chest. I watch him come at me with his slow almost-gentle stab (Is he seriously just messing with me? Is this a joke?), and I step to the side and shrug as his hand continues to pass through the space I had been standing. I expect him to correct the motion and curve the blade towards me, but he doesn't. He pulls the knife back, shifts his body slightly and pushes the knife at my new position. I shrug again and return to my original spot. His knife passes harmlessly to the right, and he brings it back to his starting position.

That was weird. I may be new to knife fights, but I imagined them being more like the movies and less like a ballet performed in mud. Did he really expect me to just stand there while he slowly pushed a knife into me? Has that worked for him before?

"Really?" I ask him. "Are you playing some kind of game? Are you making fun of me? I don't get it. And if you're just doing this because I'm a girl, don't be insulting!"

"How did you do that?" He blurts at me. And he genuinely looks shocked. Maybe even a little scared.

CATHARSIS

"What do you mean? Do people normally just stand there and let you slowly puncture them? I'm sorry about that. I'm still new to this whole getting stabbed concept."

As a response, he swings his left hand up at me in a slow arc (It's like watching the Titanic pass an iceberg.) and lets go of his phone.

He releases it with absolutely no momentum behind it, and I expect the phone to just fall out of his hand as gravity takes a mocking tear at it. To my astonishment the phone leaves his hand and begins to creep towards me like a Motorola-powered balloon. Is this guy super-powered or something? How'd he manage to defy Newton like that?

I watch the gray and black object slowly rise towards my face before I simply reach up and pluck it out of the air. Once in my hand, it feels like a normal phone. Not inflatable. Nothing out of the ordinary. I make a mental note to ask him how he did that once all this is over.

Returning my attention to my assailant (Does he even qualify as that anymore? Isn't an assailant supposed to at least be moderately threatening?), he manages to surprise me again. His right hand is slowly coming around in an arc towards my neck. The shiny knife blade pointed right at me.

He had meant to distract me with the floaty-phone trick while he slowly jabbed me with the knife. Not a bad plan. It's just about the only way his elderly-coma-patient-with-a-valium-IV-drip-speed stabs would ever be effective. Although I still can't see the point in fighting like this. It seems silly.

I'm done with this, I think.

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Reaching out, I grab his right hand with my left making sure to wrap my fingers in a way that avoids the blade of the knife. He continues his forward pressure against my hand as if he plans to keep pushing the blade towards me. With some irritation, I give his hand a squeeze to let him know I'm serious. It's a good hard squeeze as it's been a long night, and I'm tired (I don't really feel tired, but I should be. It's probably just the adrenaline overcompensating.). As the muscles in my fist contract, I hear fireworks go off underneath my fingers.

He screams loudly. It hurts my ears, and I immediately release his hand and step back. The knife clatters to the ground, and I notice his hand. It doesn't look right. The word "mangled" would be appropriate, but all the fingers are intact. Nothing happened to it aside from my squeezing, but the way the fingers just dangle there is disturbing.

"What the hell, man?" he yells at me. "You crushed my hand. You crushed it." And he moans while he stumbles back towards the car.

"What are you talking about?" I know I've been taking Krav classes, but I'm far from some kind of hand-crushing-super-ninja. And not to insult myself, but I'm also a hundred pound girl. "I just grabbed your hand when you did that weird slow-ballet-knife-push thing."

"And how'd you move like that?" His stumble continues toward the car. His non-mangled hand reaching for the door handle. "Nobody can move like that. What are you?"

I pause. "I'm Mexican."

He opens the door, steps around it, looks back at me and introduces some words into our conversation

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that I'd rather not repeat, especially since none of them were all that creative.

The door slams (Seriously! That really hurts my ears.), and I can hear the voices inside it for a moment before the car pulls away from the curb and tears down the street.

Well, that was an interesting event. I'm not quite sure what all happened, but it was definitely interesting.

Music erupts in the air startling me. Looking around for the source, I notice it's coming from me. More specifically, from an object in my hand I hadn't even realized was still there.

I have his phone. And it's ringing.

CHAPTER NINE

Flipping the phone over, I check the caller ID. No name. Just a number, and not one I recognize. Of course if I had recognized the number that would have only added to the weirdness of the night.

Clicking the red END button, I silence the annoying tune of the ringer. I need a few minutes to think. Sitting down with my back against the light pole and facing the darkened alley, I give myself a few moments of calm to collect my thoughts.

But I can't.

I mean, I *can* sit down, but I can't calm myself with the annoying buzz being generated by the light right above me. Now that I'm looking at it (Or near it, really. It's too bright for a direct gaze.), I realize there's too much annoying glare around for me to relax.

After standing up and moving several yards back down into the alley, I find a relatively comfortable spot against a bare section of wall. I feel the need to stress the "relatively" part over the "comfortable" part here. I was still in an alley in a bad part of town, and I was

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sitting several dozen yards from a dead guy. Let's not forget that little nugget of joy.

Looking deeper into the alley towards the old guy, I realize I can make out his form surprisingly well. The alley's dark, but I can still see his ghostly visage staring up at the sky. That shouldn't be possible.

I'm starting to get the impression there might be something wrong with me. Or it's incredibly "right", depending on how one wanted to look at the situation. Essentially, I'm seeing in the dark. The old man is a quarter of a football field away, in a dark alley, on a dark night, partway behind a dumpster...and I can see him. I can see him clearly enough to recognize that his eyes are still open and staring at me. I shouldn't be able to do that. Nobody should be able to do that.

I'll have to file that interesting tidbit away for further speculation. Priority number one is getting away from here and getting home. Safely.

I have no desire to go to the police now. I'm not sure what's going on, but I am sure that whatever it is is over my head. Going to the police might be a solid idea later, but right now I don't want that.

You can't just leave the old guy sitting in the alley, I tell myself. That doesn't seem right, either. If I am the one responsible for killing him (Still not positive on that one, but it's not looking good for me. Especially in light of these other "developments"), then I really hope I had a good reason for it. Good reason or not, I can't just leave his body lying in an alley to be discovered by rats or garbage men or whoever else wanders the alleys in a city.

Dropping my head into my hands to think, I *DONK* my head against the hard plastic body of the cellphone still clutched in my right fist. Already I'd

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forgotten about that little thing, again.

And then it hits me like a, well, like a cell phone to the head. I can use the phone to call 911 and alert them to the guy's body. I certainly don't have to stick around for that. I can call them and then call a taxi and scoot on home.

"But what if they trace the number when I call it in?" I ask out loud trying to think of possible screw-ups to this rather simple plan.

"Not a problem. Not my phone. It won't trace back to me."

"But it will trace back to the albino stick-boy."

"So," I argue with myself. "That shouldn't affect me at all."

"But he's seen you. He knows you were here. He can describe you to the police if they question him."

"Good point."

Pondering on that for a moment, I continue. "I don't think that will matter. All he can describe is a short, angry Mexican chick wearing some nice clothes with blood on them. If he even remembers that much. His smell was pretty off so something tells me he won't be cognizant of too many details (Why would that even register with me?). Plus, he'll probably put my age as somewhere in the low double digits. That will keep me safe by a few years."

"But what about fingerprints on the phone?"

"I'm going to wipe it down, and then I'll throw it in the canal on the way home. That should kill any trace of it."

"If you call for a taxi to pick you up here, then the police can easily trace that back if they search for any connections to the old guy."

CATHARSIS

"Another solid point. I hadn't thought about that. Well, I mean, I guess I had since I'm arguing with myself, but whatever... It's been a long night already. Let's wrap this up." I pause. "Where was I?"

I pause and go back over my last few seconds of conversation in my head.

"Oh yeah. The taxi. Well, I can solve that by not getting picked up here. I'll just run down a few blocks until I get tired, and then I'll call from there. I'll try to get far enough away that there won't be a connection. And I won't have the taxi drop me off near my neighborhood. That will keep me clean on both ends."

"What about clothes?"

"What about them?" I look down and notice the front of my blouse is covered in blood. Blood I'm pretty sure isn't mine. It won't do to run down streets in a gore-soaked outfit. That's bound to attract attention regardless of which part of town I'm in.

Unbuttoning my nice blouse (Sorry Nana about your expensive birthday gift.), I take it off. My green Save the Narwhals t-shirt only has a few blotches of blood on it, so I turn it inside out. Not a perfect disguise, but it certainly works better than the splatter-paint fashion show I was sporting before. I briefly consider ditching the shirt into a trashcan, and then I realize that is exactly what stupid criminals do before getting caught (I've watched my share of crime shows.).

Stuffing the mobile phone into a pocket of my jeans (It's gone off twice. Same number both times, so I just put it on vibrate.), I step out into the baking yellowness of the accursed lamp to check for street signs.

Noting the names of the cross streets two blocks

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away, I judge the distance to the alley so I can give directions to the police.

As a last measure, I look around where I've been standing for any evidence of my stay. I notice the glint of the switchblade on the ground near the street lamp and consider picking it up. I haven't touched it yet, so I have no connection to it. No prints from me, and if I take it it will just become one more thing I have to worry about hiding or destroying. I leave it where it is and begin a slow jog north towards the outskirts of the city and my family's house.

After several minutes of jogging I stop and decide I've gone far enough to safely make the emergency call.

The call is quick and one of the more painless experiences of the evening so far. Once that is done, I make the decision to continue moving towards home. I figure I can just keep running until I get tired. That should be a safe distance from the alley for a taxi to pick me up without it being connected to the crime scene.

As I run I discover a problem with my plan: I don't get tired. Running for several more minutes and increasing my pace, I never even break a sweat. I don't even breathe hard. I've always been an athlete, but I'm not a natural runner. I'm too small for distance. I run for soccer and for the occasional Maga workout, but I am not known for endurance.

But this night I can run, and I don't feel anything holding me back.

CHAPTER TEN

As an experiment, I increase my speed to see if that will trip an internal governor, but my body adjusts to it easily. Running has become no problem at all for me.

It's not a problem, except for the small issue of lights and passing vehicles. Those are still awful.

I do my best to dodge the burning white halos of the streetlamps when I encounter them, and the empty streets facilitate this as I weave my way from one dark spot on the street to another. My leaps go further than expected which makes traversing the illuminated donuts thrown by the lamps even easier.

Vehicular headlamps are not as simple. The few cars that I encounter on my trip are more difficult to evade as their light fills the entire street. Several times I duck into an empty side road or doorway as I hear one approaching, and then I just have to wait until they pass. A few times I'm caught midblock with no easy retreat, and I have to stop and turn my back to the vehicle and shield my eyes to keep the piercing pain from crippling me.

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I'm sure I look suspicious to anyone who sees me. A short, dark-skinned girl in jeans and a t-shirt hiding her face whenever a car rumbles past? Nope. No reason for the police to suspect me of anything. Especially with a blood soaked blouse crammed into the back of my pants, and a stolen mobile phone in my front pocket.

Remembering my previous plan to ditch it, I pause at the next alley and step in to pull out the phone. I had meant to pitch it in the canal earlier, but I had been distracted with running and spaced it . The same number has called five more times since I started my journey tonight. I consider smashing the phone into Lego-sized pieces and throwing it into the nearest sewer drain.

I'm only a few blocks from my neighborhood now, and I'm running out of places to ditch it. I don't want to take it home and have to worry about hiding it, but smashing it feels arbitrary and mean. As long as I wipe the phone clean of prints, then there's nothing to tie it to me. I might as well return it to the owner and do a good deed (Even if he was directly involved in a misguided attempt to stab me.). It's a small act that won't cleanse my conscious of whatever happened tonight, but it might help me sleep later.

After peeking out of the alley to check for the closest street names, I flip through the phone's menus to find its text messaging function. I text the number that keeps calling and let them know the phone will be under a trashcan in the alley. I wipe the phone with my shirt multiple times (just to be safe) and scoot it under the red dumpster.

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With that problem solved, I move on to figuring out how to get into my room without my parents killing me. My dad will be waiting in the family room for me, and I'll have to confront him and try to explain things that I'm not sure I even understand yet. Not relishing that discussion, I decide to see if my newfound athleticism might prove more helpful in problem solving the issue.

I'm getting hungry, I realize. Distractingly hungry. All this running is taking a toll on my system (I've run more than eight or nine miles so far.). I need to replenish some energy. And soon. Thoughts of leftover Chinese food from last night's dinner motivate me to move a little faster.

Reaching my neighborhood within minutes, I walk slowly towards our family's run-down two-story house. Our street is mercifully dark with only a handful of easily avoidable streetlamps (This extreme light sensitivity issue is getting old. Fast.), but that darkness has allowed me to see that our front room's light is on before I've gotten too close. Out of desperation, I move to the back where my bedroom overlooks the retention pond.

Our home's sides are old, crumbly brick, and my room is on the second floor with no strong trees anywhere in sight (This is probably a safety measure to help prevent burglars from gaining access to the upper level, but it also makes sneaking in or out nearly impossible.). We have a number of windows on the second floor but most lead to either my parents' or sister's room. Only one of the windows opens into my room. What I need is a way to get to my bedroom: a place with no easily accessible entry points.

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Growling in frustration, I can see where I want to be - a mere eleven feet above where I'm standing - but I have no way of getting to it without alerting my father.

On a whim I decide to try something that shouldn't be possible. Climbing the bricks around our house has always been impossible in the past since their quarter inch cracks had only enough room to allow my fingertips to enter, and that wasn't enough for a useable grip (I used to try when I was younger and a bit more adventurous.). After tonight's craziness, though, climbing a wall with just finger strength almost seems plausible. At the least, it's worth a try before committing to the front door and confronting my father.

Stepping up to the bricks (still foreboding and tiny-cracked), I reach my right arm up as high as it will go and stick my four fingers into the thin crack above a brick. Plunging my thumb into the crack below that brick, I squeeze. My forearm tightens as I test the grip and pull backwards. It holds. Step one accomplished.

Following the same procedure with my left hand, I get a solid grip on the second brick. Raising my right foot, I dig the side of my shoe into a crack and push slowly upward until I'm standing on that foot. Pausing for a moment, I consider where I am: hugging a wall about two feet off the ground.

I break into an involuntary smile. This night just continues to be full of surprises.

Bracing my left foot into another crack, I gently release my grip with my right hand and reach up for another brick. Pinching my new handhold as tightly as I can, I pull myself up another foot. Left hand release, raise and re-grip. Rinse. Repeat.

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Once I finally give up doubting its ability to be possible, my progress speeds up, and I move more steadily. Reaching my window takes me less than a minute.

Removing the screen is a simple enough matter, and my bad habit (according to my mother) of not locking my window pays off wonderfully. I shimmy into my dark room, replace my screen and shut the window.

Stripping my foul clothes off, I hide them in an extra trash bag in my room, and I stuff that bag into an old, red duffel bag I had from a soccer camp I attended as a kid. I stuff that duffel bag into the bottom of my school backpack so that I can dispose of it all later.

After putting on a clean shirt and some shorts, I check myself out in the mirror in my room (All the lights are still off, but I can see myself just fine. That's an anomaly to be worried about later.). There are still smears of blood on my cheek and in my hair and on my hands. Grabbing a bottle of hand sanitizer from my dresser (Thanks mom for your constant germ paranoia.), I give myself a ghetto bath by scrubbing the alcohol into all the spots I can find. It does a decent job.

With that accomplished, I check the clock in my room. It's after two in the morning, but I still don't feel tired. What I do feel is hungry. Voraciously hungry. Eat-a-cow-down-to-the-bones-in-the-Amazon-River kind of hungry.

The plan I've concocted is to pretend like I've been in my room and in bed for hours. I'll act like I came home and didn't see anyone in the front room and just went to bed and fell sleep. I'll tell my parents I didn't feel well, and I didn't check the clock so I have no idea when I got home. I'm sure I'll get in some trouble, but it

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would have to be less than coming in the front door after midnight. It's as solid a plan as I can come up with on short notice.

Out of boredom, I try to find a way to pass the next couple of hours until it's time to get up for school. Lying on my bed, I stare at the ceiling and recount everything that's happened in an attempt to make some sense of it (Going over the night's events, I notice that I can remember everything that's happened down to the exact details. My memory is eerily perfect.), but I lose concentration whenever my stomach growls. It hurts.

If I go into the kitchen to get food and settle my belly, then I'll have to confront my father sooner than I had planned. But if I don't go in and get something to settle my stomach, then I fear I might actually get nauseated and not have to pretend to be sick. I'll feel sick enough for it to pass for the real thing.

I debate with myself for several more minutes before the hunger in me puts in its vote with a cramp strong enough to double me over. The hunger's vote marks the deciding tally. Standing up, I head out to the kitchen.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Opening the door of my room into the dark hall, I pause and try to get a sense of what to expect before continuing.

All the lights are off except for one down the stairs coming from the front room. That's good news for my sensitive eyes. The muted and reflected glow off the far wall is easily tolerable.

I can hear my father breathing in the front room; it's a soft and heavy *whoosh* of air that tells me he's calm and near sleep but still conscious (Why? Why do I know that?). I can smell subtle hints of fear and worry in the air mixed with an underlying tone of anger that stings my nose (Once again, how is this something I can smell?). He's been up all night, and he's not happy.

Sighing, I resign myself to whatever reprimands the next few minutes might hold for me. Moving down the stairs as quietly as possible (I make no sound at all. Literally none.), I step into the kitchen without turning on any lights. I still don't need to. Being able to see in this darkened room is simple.

Before my bare feet even touch the cold tile of the

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room, I notice the competing fragrances. The smells are everywhere, and they're overwhelming. I can smell every box of opened food in the pantry. There are faint hints of sealed foods that haven't even glimpsed the light of day yet. I breathe in the aromas and smile having never noticed the wondrous smells of our kitchen before. It's glorious.

After carefully getting out a plate and fork without making a noise (Any noise. At all.), I turn my attention to the refrigerator and its bountiful stores. If any food came home last night, it will be in there. Without thinking (And here I blame my tummy for its distracting effect.), I bend over and open the fridge door to get a peek at what's inside. This move puts my face level with the fridge's light that springs on as soon as the door opens.

Instant blinding pain shoots through my eyes and pierces the hair on the back of my skull. Howling a curse, I slam the heavy metal door back into place and tumble away from the horrendous appliance that just blinded me. I can't see anything except stabbing white flashes in my eyes followed by dancing black spots. The pain is dizzying. Sitting and cursing is all I can do until the pain subsides (Well, *my cursing* that is...poopy pickle, and crap hats, loaf-licker and the like. I'm still at home, and under my mother's roof. I'm not crazy enough to utter anything that would offend her on the off chance she might hear. I'm in pain and possibly going insane...not stupid.).

Within seconds of starting my crazed, gibberish-infused rant, I realize I'm no longer alone. I sense my father is next to me in the kitchen (I can smell his scent - Davidoff cologne mixed with laundry soap and old

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person pheromones - and I can hear his breathing.).

"Christ, Catarina!" He exclaims next to me, and I giggle a little on the inside. It always makes me smile when he puts my name next to the Lord's. Forgive me, but the alliteration of that particular sin just tickles me. "What is wrong with you?"

"Ugh," I reply as articulately as possible. My eyes are still watering from the blast, but they are clearing quickly.

In an attempt to be helpful, my father does the worst possible thing he can at that moment. What he does is more painful than anything I can remember in my previous decade and a half of life.

He turns on the kitchen light.

The room flares to a horrifying whiteness around me just as I manage to get my eyes open to look at my father. The intense wave of pain that washes through me is more than I can take.

My brain shuts down to protect itself from the attack, and that's the last thing I remember before my world goes black.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The light is still on when my stomach manages to rouse me from my narcoleptic plunge into slumber. The piercing light still hurts. Squenching my eyes together as tightly as I can, I turn my face towards the coolness of the kitchen floor.

"Light," I manage to get out through muffled lips smashed against my bare arm.

"I turned it on," replies my father. "Why?"

"Off," I continue. "Light off." I pause before continuing with, "please." I wait several seconds and hear no movement from my father.

"It hurts my eyes. A lot."

My father steps back towards the doorway, and there is a sharp *click* as the refreshing drape of blackness covers everything around me. Relief floods my nerve endings.

He doesn't move away from the light switch, nor does he return to where I'm lying on the floor. I can smell confusion on him now. It doesn't smell as strong as the anger or worry, but I can tell it's there.

"Are you drunk? Have you been drinking?" His

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voice is soft, the sternness of it lies just beneath the surface.

"No." (I've never touched alcohol. Addiction runs in the family, and it's kept me paranoid.)

"Are you hung-over? Is that why the light hurts your eyes?" My dad asks.

"No. No alcohol at all," I tell him, and then because I can sense the next question before he even has to say it. "And no drugs either. Of any kind. I'm completely sober." (As far as I know, that is.)

In a few steps, he closes the short distance between us and bends down so he is closer to where I'm lying on the ground. Air quietly whistles through his nose, and I'm surprised to realize he is gently smelling me. Well, the air around me to be accurate. Does he also have the super senses I have? Has he been hiding them from me all these years? Is he where I got all this from? Is it inherited?

And then I get a flash - a premonition if you will - of what he's doing. He's trying to see if he can smell marijuana or tobacco on me. I smile. He doesn't have *super* senses. He just has *parent* senses.

"You won't smell any smoke on me, dad. There's nothing there to find."

His body tenses next to me for a moment. I must have startled him by calling him out on it when he thought he was being sneaky.

"Can we get up, please?" I ask. "Maybe sit at the table and talk? I think that'd be good."

He nods and we both stand and move towards our heavy wooden kitchen table. Pulling out chairs, we sit down facing each other. Both of us are silent and just look at each other in the dark kitchen. Actually, I can

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see him just fine, but judging from how far his pupils are dilated I'm guessing my body isn't much more than a shadow-filled outline. I continue to stare at him and try to figure out where to start my story when my stomach throws in its grumbly vote again. I'd almost forgotten my whole reason for coming in here.

"Hey dad," I begin.

"Yes," he answers cautiously. He's guarding his response. Anger and curiosity are battling in him, but there's still some worry in there. It's just taken a back seat on our current trip down how-to-best-punish-my-daughter lane.

"Could you, uhm, I mean, would you mind," I stop for a moment. This is going to sound dumb. "Can you get me something to eat from the fridge?" I add meekly, "Preferably something from the restaurant last night?"

My father continues to stare at my dark shape in the oaken chair before replying, "Sure, I can do that, but is there a reason why you can't do that yourself?"

"The...uhm...fridge light hurts my eyes right now (Yup. It sounds dumb)." My shoulders sag after saying the words out loud. "But I can tell you what happened tonight if you'll get me some food. My stomach hurts. A lot."

He doesn't move. He just stares at me. I know he heard me. I watched his face twitch as he listened to my words, and I can still sense the anger on him.

"Damn right you will," he finally says and stands up to walk the few feet to our flower-magnet and school report card covered fridge. Those four words tell me a lot. My father never curses. For him to say that one word says everything.

I follow his movements to the fridge door in

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anticipation of something to calm my belly, then I remember the door light just as his fingers wrap around the vertical handle of the fridge. Turning my head, I clench my eyes shut to protect them, but the light doesn't seem as bad this time. Slowly opening them, I look at the far wall and the light is just fine. My father's silhouette moves in the lit rectangle of the opening. Looking directly at the light now is only mildly irritating; it's nowhere near the blast of pain it was earlier. Am I getting better? Is it because I'm farther away? Was it because it surprised me? These are questions I have no idea how to answer yet.

The smells the door has unleashed are powerful and intoxicating. I smell honey ham in the deli drawer. The artificial sugars of an opened can of Diet Pepsi my mom has put back on the top shelf hints the air. The smell of the Moo Goo Gai Pan in the enclosed foil container manages to reach me before my father even pulls it out. Smelling all of these things at once is wonderful, but it still doesn't strike me as normal.

"Do you want a Mountain Dew? You might as well have the caffeine. You have school in a few hours."

I nod my head as I sort through all the aromas hitting me at once. He turns away from my fridge-door-lit features and grunts before grabbing a green can from the middle shelf.

He sets the foil and plastic container down in front of me along with the can. The intoxicating smell of nourishment this close to me is more than I can bear, and I tear off the plastic top and scoop some into my mouth using just my fingers. It's cold, and I don't care. I chew and swallow, and start on a second bite before the realization catches up with me.

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I can't taste the food. I can smell it, but there's no taste. At all. I might as well be eating boiled cardboard for all the stimulation it's giving my palate.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I pop open my can of mountain-brewed green nectar and chug as big a gulp as my gullet can hold. Swallowing the mouthful of sweetened carbonated water, I wait for the expected burn in my throat, but nothing happens. No delicious lemon-lime bite on my tongue. No rush of joy that only a can of the best made Pepsi product can bring. Nothing but the bland taste of the water that was used to boil the cardboard that my food consisted of.

This is awful. Whatever happened to me tonight robbed me of the sense of taste. My tongue is useless, but apparently I can hear like a bat. According to my ability to see everything perfectly in pitch black, I must have the vision of a jungle cat on meth. I can pull scents out of the air better than a champion basset hound. I have the strength of a 'roided up Bruce Lee. But my taste? I have the taste buds of an English culinary school dropout (I heard once that British people boil everything and their food tastes awful. That was the best analogy I could come up with.).

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Sighing, I stare at the food in front of me and then continue eating it with my fingers, but much less enthusiastically. I might not be able to taste it, but there's a chance it could quell the deafening growls generating from my gastro-intestinal tract.

My dad watches me a bit longer before asking, "Is there something wrong with the food?"

"No. Yes," I say and then pause to organize my thoughts. "Well, no, nothing is wrong with the food. I think there is something wrong with me, though." This isn't exactly where I wanted to start, but I also don't want to ignore his question and leave him hanging. "I can't taste it. At all. It all tastes," I think for a moment for the best image to create for my father, "like Nana Maria's beans."

My dad flinches slightly. "Oh." (My father's madre is known for making the most tasteless refried beans anybody has ever willingly consumed. Her boiling and mashing and seasoning process somehow manages to rob the legumes of any possible hint of flavor. And she makes them all the time. Their existence continues to haunt my father.)

I need to tell him something about what's happened tonight. I don't want to keep all of this to myself. My original plan to keep all of this a secret and just make up a lie for my father about being in my room all night no longer strikes me as a good idea. Trying to not lose my nerve, I plunge forward.

"But that's only the tip of the weird-things-happening-to-Catarina iceberg tonight. I have a bit of a story for you, and I really hope you believe it more than I do." I smile at him after that, but from his reaction I'm

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not sure if he doesn't hear me or just doesn't find it amusing.

Not sure where to begin recounting everything, I start with a question that I don't know the answer to. "When was the last time you saw me tonight?"

He doesn't answer immediately, but when he does it is quietly. "When you stormed out of the restaurant."

That's news to me. "I did? Why?"

"Good question. You and Leyna were arguing about something, and your mother and I got involved. You got upset, yelled at us and walked out stating you'd meet us at home. Then several hours later I find you in the kitchen laying on the floor screaming. I'm a little curious as to how this 'unbelievable story' of yours is going to play out."

"I don't remember that. I don't remember any of the fight. I remember being at the restaurant, and I remember ordering, but then it all gets...fuzzy." This explains him still being awake and angry at me. That part at least makes sense.

"So you want me to believe you have amnesia? Is that it? And I'm assuming your memory didn't return until just a few minutes ago when you were lying on the floor. Is that what you want me to believe? That you aren't responsible for anything that happened tonight?"

While listening to him, I finish the rest of the cold noodles. I wouldn't say I feel the least bit satiated, but at least my stomach has calmed slightly. Enough for me to think moderately clearly.

I don't want to fight with him. Not after all that's happened tonight. I just want him to believe me and put his arm around me and console me and explain what's happening. That thought comforts me while I start to

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speak, and I hope some of my wishes come across in my voice. I want him to just be a father to me right now and not be an angry parent. But I can't ask that out loud. Not after what I've put him through. I can't ask it, but I can still want it.

"No," I begin. "My memory begins much earlier than the kitchen." Do I tell him everything? Or just most of it? Is throwing in a dead gringo a little too much? Maybe I should hold off on that part. See how he reacts to everything else before I drop that little knowledge bomb on him.

"So where does it begin then? Care to enlighten me?"

Breathing deeply, I stare longingly at the empty foil pan of Moo Goo remains. It didn't taste good, but it gave me something to do aside from talking.

"I was trying to organize my thoughts. Sorry. A lot has happened in the last few hours. The first thing I remember tonight was waking up in an alley. It was somewhere in the city (I can remember exactly where it was, but I don't think that will add to the narrative right now.). In a bad part of the city. I don't know how I got there or why or when." I pause and try to read his reaction, but his stoic expression gives me nothing.

"But that's not the weird part. That's actually in the realm of normal compared to the rest..."

From there I proceed to tell my father everything I can remember about the night (Which, with my memory, is everything.), including my newly-heightened senses.

And the guy who tried to mug me.

And running all the way home (This, by the way, was the first part that seemed to legitimately surprise him. The rest he could grasp. But me running? And

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for miles in a row? That he scoffingly laughed at. Sheesh.).

And climbing the outside bricks using my fingers.

And how my stomach won't leave me alone, and how its nagging brought me to the kitchen where the fridge light surprised me.

I told him about all of it. Except for the old guy. I still couldn't bring myself to mention that, yet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dad doesn't yell at me. Once I finish my story, it's nearly time for my mom and sister to get up, so we don't have long to discuss the events. I think he picked up on the please-be-on-my-side-and-don't-yell-at-me vibe that I was trying hard to send out. As I spoke, I had felt his anger ebb away and be replaced briefly by doubt. But even that mostly dissipated as I spoke and needed for him to believe me. The more I wanted him to believe me, the more he seemed to do it (I wish all our previous arguments had gone this way, but they never had. Probably for a reason.).

"Do you want to go to the police?" he asks me once I've completed telling him everything I'd planned to say. "I'm not sure exactly what we can tell them. You don't seem to have been abducted as far as I can tell (Only because I left that part out. And I don't think the police would have been any help to me. If anything, they would have been a hindrance.). You seem to be relatively healthy. No cuts, bumps or injuries. But we can speak to them if it'd make you feel better."

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"No. I don't see any point in going to them, but thanks," I say. "I really appreciate you offering. I don't know what happened last night, but I doubt they'd be able to help."

"So what do you want to do about today, then? Do you need to stay home and sleep? Do you want to go to school still? After all that you went through, I'll trust you to decide on what would work best. You're a big girl." He smiles at me, and I can see the smile reflected in his eyes. It's nice to see that softness return to him after being absent the last hour.

It's not an easy question to answer. I don't really want to deal with school today (Or any day for that matter. What kid does?), but at the same time a little normality and structure might be nice. Plus, I'm not tired. At all. My stomach's still growling, but it isn't as bad as it was previously. Maybe a couple of bowls of Lucky Charms will calm it down, or maybe being at school will serve as a nice distraction and keep my mind off of whatever's happening to me. There's no way to be sure, but it's worth a try.

"I think I'll go to school, but thanks for letting me stay home if I wanted to. After last night, I just want to get back to normal. And school is most definitely, and unfortunately, normal."

"Ok," he says. "But call me if anything gets worse. I'll make sure to keep my phone on me today."

He has stayed surprisingly calm throughout all this. I know I had wanted him to stay calm, and I had been thinking about it, but I didn't think he'd actually do it.

"And Cat," he says and stands up. "As far as your mother and sister go, let's not tell them anything about this. For all they need to know, you came home late,

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were yelled at, got grounded, and now you're remorseful."

Grinning, I nod. "I can agree to that."

He turns to leave the kitchen and to let me get ready on my own when I notice light coming from the far window in the living room. Daylight! And my eyes. That won't be good.

"Hey dad!" I stop him before he gets through the archway. "I could use a favor for today."

"Yes?" His voice has a patient, but slightly exasperated tone to it.

"Could you write me a note to wear sunglasses today at school. I'm worried about the lights and my eyes. I mean the teachers might not accept it, but I'll take it to Mrs. Pritchett, our school nurse. Maybe if I let her check out my eyes and I give her a note from you, she'll write me something to let me keep them on. With how my eyes were last night with streetlights and headlights, I'm a bit leery of the light in the classrooms."

"I can do that," he replies. "And get something more to eat. I can hear your stomach from here."

I hadn't been paying attention, but now that he's mentioned it I also notice my gut has been singing its own lonesome song. I'm not thrilled about putting more tasteless gruel into it, but I feel fairly certain that ignoring it won't fix it either.

Grabbing a box of leprechaun-inspired cereal and a bowl, I prepare myself for school.

And my last day of formal education. Ever.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The old pair of dark glasses I find under my bed do help with the light. I still have to squint a bit when in direct sunlight, but the autumn cloud cover helps the situation. At least nature is on my side. For now.

Dressing in a comfortable pair of old jeans, I dig out my purple smiley face graphic tee and an old, hooded sweatshirt that's worn and extra soft. The sweatshirt's a bit warm for the weather, but the hood might come in handy for light or sound dampening.

Apologizing to my mother and sister for my behavior the previous night (I'm still not sure what I did, but my apology does some good will toward placating them.), I get my backpack together for another rousing day of learning. With last night's clothes still crammed into the bottom of the bag, I make a plan to dispose of them at some point when it's safer.

As I lay waiting on our plush, stuffed brown couch for my sister to finish primping her hair and curling her nails - or whatever it is prissy younger sisters do in the

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morning that takes so long - I notice that when I'm still and not moving I can hear where everyone is in our house. I can hear them through the walls and doors. With some concentration, I pick out the soft tap of my sister's fingers on wood as she opens and closes drawers in her closet. I even pick out her mumbling to herself about some boy at school she wants to impress.

Shifting my concentration, I hear my mom's hairdryer in her bathroom. Under that sound, I hear my father talking to her about his meeting with his boss in the afternoon - something about a new contract with a loan agency that he feels will go strongly in his favor. Along with my father's voice, I can hear a sharp *snip* followed by a *tic* - sounds that repeat intermittently. I focus on that until I realize it's his nail clippers. I'm hearing him trim his nails. Through several walls. Over the sound of him talking. Talking over the sound of a hairdryer. That shouldn't be possible.

Stopping myself, I shake my head; I don't want to hear these sounds. I try not to think about them, but now that I know they're there I can't stop hearing them. It's aggravating. If this continues, it'll drive me insane.

"I'm going out," I yell over my shoulder and stand up. "I'll be outside. Love you. See you this afternoon."

I know my parents hear me because their conversation shifts to me and my actions the previous evening. Not wanting to eavesdrop anymore, I quickly cross our small family room and take off down the front walk towards the bus stop.

Being outside only slightly alleviates the problem. I no longer hear my family, but their babbling is replaced by the sounds of traffic on the road a half mile away. The chittering of squirrels under the maple trees and the

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bonk of Canadian geese overhead is startling in its loudness.

Walking towards the bus stop out of habit, I stop while still twenty yards away. I can hear the half dozen kids from my street's stop as clear as if I was standing next to them. I don't want to talk to any of them yet. To be more clear, I don't want to *hear* any of them yet, and it troubles me that their noise can be heard from this far away.

My first doubts about the success of the school day begin creeping into my head as I stand there on the sidewalk staring at my peers. If I don't want to be this close to six kids, then how am I going to deal with several thousand all compressed into the square footage of a couple football fields of brick and mortar?

Might as well ease myself in slowly, I think and grit my teeth as I begin moving towards them.

Not having friends in the immediate area had always been a pain in the past, but this morning it makes my life easier. Conversing with people at the stop was not part of my normal morning M.O., so ignoring them now doesn't really stand out. I walk up to within a few feet of the nearest kid, a younger boy named Nico, and do my best to look tired and distracted. My attempt at blending in would have been accomplished more easily if I wasn't wearing dark sunglasses on a cloudy fall day, but that's a thought I'll just have to shrug off.

Closing my eyes, I absorb my surroundings as much as possible with my remaining senses. At first, I just hear and smell chaos. Cars starting and doors slamming in the nearby driveways. Then the noise of the kids talking to each other in morning mumbles blends with the birds in the trees above which blends

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with the cars going by on the road in the distance. There are too many different things going on at once and focusing on just one is proving insurmountable.

Mixing in with the sounds around me are all the things I can smell that I haven't been able to in the past. The grass has been cut recently enough that I smell the fresh release of chlorophyll as people move their feet across it. The cloying scents of soaps and perfumes and mouthwashes and body odor wash over me every time a breeze kicks past the small group of kids standing a few feet away.

As I try to sort out the smells and sounds I begin to pick up on emotions and thoughts as they bubble and pop in front of me like a witch's cauldron filled with kid anxiety. Someone's angry, but their anger is tinted with guilt. A girl to my left is nervous, and the powerfully tart smell of it causes me to shuffle away from her a few steps. A dark, bothersome scent I connect to lust punctuates the air with increased heartbeats and a change in breathing in the boys nearest me. Floating behind the boys' smells is a sharper splash of what I sense to be jealousy. I think about the scents for a moment and try to make sense of them (I'm not even sure how I can put the names of emotions to smells. It's just something my brain is doing.).

"Hey Cat," a deep voice near my shoulder startles me. "Are you ok this morning? You look pale." I crack my eyes open briefly to see James smiling down at me. "And that's not easy for you to do."

The emotions I had sensed before make sense now as I look up at the boy's impressively large frame and dark brown skin. His appearance may be imposing, but it's also gentle enough to attract any girl, and his

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personality is the type that makes other guys not only want to be friends with him, but want to *be* him, too. James is one of those rare kids who deserves every bit of popularity he has achieved.

"Thanks Jay. It's been a long night. I'm sure I'll be fine." I consider his second comment a moment before replying, "And compared to you, I'm always going to be pale." But I smile as I say it.

It's enough to make him laugh, and its soft boom is one of the few sounds I've heard this morning that hasn't attacked my ears.

"Why the glasses, Cat? It's not sunny." He leans closer to me and frowns, but the twinkle of his eyes never dims. "Are you on drugs?"

James and I are not what I would normally call friends. We know each other from school and the bus stop, but we don't move in the same social circles. But that has never stopped James "People just call me 'Jay'" Stewart from having a conversation with somebody. It's one of the things people love about him. He's confident, and treats the world like everyone is just a simple "hello" away from being a close friend. How can you not like somebody like that? James and I have never really joked around in the past. We don't have a "history", but that doesn't stop him from just approaching me and talking about my apparent unknown drug habit. The ballsiness of it just about breaks me. I smile for the first time that I can remember today.

"No," I tell him with a light chuckle. "I just have a migraine or something and the light has been hurting my eyes. I didn't want to miss school, though. Hence, the

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sunglasses." I gently tap the side of the frames next to my temple for emphasis.

"Ouch. My cousin gets those. They're awful." His massive fingers land delicately on my forearm (My hair doesn't even crest his shoulders. I'm so much smaller than he is. It's like he's a chocolate giant compared to my, I don't know, Minnie Mouse or something.). "Well, if I can do anything to help, then just ask. I hate seeing someone in pain."

For all I can tell, and sense from him, he means it. He's that kind of person.

"Thanks. I appreciate it, but I'm sure I'll be fine once I'm in class."

"Okay, Cat." He smiles and walks over towards one of the girls who I'd sensed thinking about him earlier, and their conversation turns to some television show I've never watched. With James' attention no longer focused on me, I allow myself to tune out again.

Closing my eyes, I concentrate on what was my first pleasant experience since this whole ordeal began some nine hours ago.

Was it only that long ago I was waking up in an alley? Wow.

A deeper rumble than any of the cars I've been ignoring suddenly breaks my concentration, and even though it's still several streets away I can tell the bus has arrived. I spend the three minutes before it arrives in a deafening roar of choking diesel fumes trying to separate and categorize as many sounds and smells as I can. My final count is close to thirty before I give up and submit to the bus's stench and cacophony of noise.

Standing outside near a half dozen kids had been distracting, but it had become tolerable.

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The bus ride in a cramped space with almost fifty other humans all yelling at each other with their smells flinging about like invisible odor-filled water balloons? It's too much. The olfactory overload is so debilitating that I'm pretty sure at one point I get a chance to knock on the door of insanity and peek inside the house. I feel sure I'll never make it to school, and I've never been so happy to arrive at the building as I am that morning. I swear to myself I'll never get on that yellow coffin of sensory torture again.

And because of what happens less than an hour later, I'm right.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

My first class of the day is Physical Education, and I believe I'm one of the few kids at our school that enjoys the class. I'm good at athletics, so that means I'm also good at what most of the subject entails. Even though I'm smaller than most of the other kids in the gym, I only take that as a challenge.

Physical tenacity and a gregarious attitude have helped me form tight relationships with the coaches and P.E. instructors. Most of them are decent people when they aren't creating masochistic activities centered around running. It usually makes for a pleasant start to the school day for me. The early morning exercise helps invigorate me and offsets the several hours of sedentary motionlessness of most classrooms.

Not every kid feels the same way I do about the class, though. Many of my peers are not fond of state-mandated exercise, and they don't get along with the instructors they do battle with on a daily basis.

After the previous several hours, I'm really looking forward to starting my school day with a solid exertion of energy in some good-spirited, ball-centered

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competitions, but I don't even make it past the inner locker room doors.

Leaving my backpack in my school locker, I head down to the Phys Ed locker rooms to change. I had planned to see the nurse during second period when I had my least favorite class, geometry (I'm actually pretty good at it, but our teacher is insane. And it's not a fun, ha-ha, what-crazy-clothes-he's-wearing-today insane. He's the talk-to-himself-during-lessons-and-then-try-to-collect-homework-he-never-assigned insane. It's the perfect class to miss.). The plan would have been fine except for the small problem of the locker room.

The sunglasses-in-the-hallway look attracts some attention, but it's high school and most kids are used to ignoring me so I do my best to keep with that pattern. I decide to try and avoid people I know as much as possible and just keep my head down and get to class. The waves of sound washing over me as I push through the halls of the school disorient me. Because of that I have trouble focusing on walking and tuning out the rush of sounds that slap me every time I turn down a new hallway. Today is proving to be more difficult than I had thought.

To top off my morning, my stomach is starting to cramp up and growl at me. Apparently my marshmallow-packed cereal hadn't been enough to appease the mighty intestinal gods. I was going to have to make a break for the vending machines and their smorgasbord of health foods soon (The state had taken away the school's right to sell anything with sugar or flavor to children years ago, but they allowed us to keep our vending machines. The combination of the two meant we now had machines full of bran muffins, dried

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fruit and warm water bottles. Only the truly desperate or malnourished kids ever used them.).

My sunglasses were helping with the overhead fluorescent lights in the building, but they weren't preventing the pain completely. I still had my eyes nearly slitted to keep the stabbing in my sockets to a minimum.

Reaching the door of the girls' locker room and swinging it open, I manage to get two full strides down the hall before the raw sweaty stank of what I'm walking into reaches up and punches its horrible little fists down my olfactory organs. Dropping to my knees in the hallway, I squench my eyes completely closed and cover my mouth and nose with my free right hand. The mix of unwashed skin, used football pads (seeping through the walls of the boys' adjacent locker room) and old, mildew-infused clothing were just the opening smells I picked out before closing off my brain from interpreting any more.

I can't go in there, I think once my brain crawls out of its hiding place. That's worse than anything I've ever encountered.

Other girls pass me as I crouch on the ground attempting to not breathe the noxious air that surrounds me. I hear laughter. I'm sure I look absurd, but I want to tune everything out. I want my senses to just stop working altogether.

Reluctantly, I realize first period is going to be a bust, and I won't be starting my day with exercise. If I can't change clothes or participate in class, then I might as well make my way down to the nurse and get that task accomplished instead.

The crawl back to the locker room door is short - I

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only made it six feet before dropping - but it's agonizingly slow and painful. Although my movement is hindered in a crouch, it also effectively restricts any access the air might have to my senses (To misquote the kitschy monkey statue: Hear no evil, see no evil, smell no evil.). Standing isn't worth the risk of exposing myself to another assault.

Once in the hall, breathing becomes easier, but I can still taste the fetid blackness oozing from behind the closed door of the locker room. There's no way I'm going anywhere near that again this morning.

A quick scan of the hallway leads me to one of the P.E. teachers on hall duty who hasn't left her post yet. I shuffle towards her as best I can and get her attention (My escape from the hallway has sucked my remaining energy from me. I'm not tired, but I feel exhausted and ravenous.).

"Excuse me, Ms. Davis," I say quietly in a meek attempt to get her to notice me. "I'm not feeling well, and I have a note for the nurse. Can I take it down now?"

"Morning Ms. Perez. You know that's something to take care of once we're in class. Now's not the time for it." She says all of this without glancing away from a clipboard she's writing on.

I don't move. I wait patiently for her to look up, so I can try another tactic. It's going to take more than bureaucratic procedure to get me into that locker room this morning.

"Is there something else?" she finally lifts her eyes from her clipboard to take in the sight of me standing in front of her (Well *below* her, actually. If there is an opposite to "towering over" someone, then that was

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what I was doing.), and then she actually sees me. Her eyes widen slightly and her breath hitches. Her surprise leaps out of her pores, and I immediately taste it in the air. It's an odd sensation. "Are you ok? You don't look well at all. You're," she pauses and her eyes move over my face and neck, "really pale."

My first instinct is to blurt out, 'Duh! No, I'm not ok. I told you I didn't feel well. Way to pay attention.' But I don't foresee that helping me accomplish anything aside from petty revenge. Plus, I really like Ms. Davis. She's older and widowed (It was a tractor accident on their farm, I believe.). She's also in phenomenal shape and never backs down from a challenge. She'll out-intimidate the most obstinate kid in class or accept an impromptu three-point shooting contest. It doesn't matter; she'll do it all. I respect her.

Instead I go for the simple repetition of my previous question, "Can I take my note down to the nurse? I don't feel well."

"Of course. Of course. Let's do that." Almost like magic, a yellow hall pass appears in her hand, and she scribbles out some information on it before handing it over (Most likely it had been under a paper on the clipboard, but she's still impressively quick.).

"We'll see you tomorrow, Catarina. I doubt you're coming back to class today looking the way you do. Feel better, kiddo."

"Thanks Ms. Davis. I will." And I give her the best smile I can muster under the circumstances (Great teachers just make life more bearable.).

With the pass in hand, I head down to the nurse and what will be one of my last hours ever in a public school building.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The nurse and I have only met twice in the time I've been at this school. The first time was after some bad seafood had its way with me (Turns out leftover shrimp in a brown paper bag for lunch the day after a birthday dinner at the local lobster shack is not the strongest idea.), and the most recent time was for a jammed index finger suffered during a particularly rousing science lesson about biomes (It's a long story, and it involves a squirrel, a two by four and a broken slinky. I'll save it for later.). A five foot tall, one hundred pound Hispanic girl is easily forgettable in a school this large, so I was guessing she probably wouldn't remember me when I came in.

Nurse Pritchett is with some skinny freshman kid when I come into her cramped office (Kids *always* refer to her as "Nurse Pritchett" and not "Mrs. Pritchett". I'm not sure why.). The room has a distinct chemical smell that's refreshing after my previous olfactory excursion. It's almost relaxing. I can smell sickness in the air under

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the chemicals, but it is subtle and easy to ignore. She absently waves me to an empty plastic chair next to the door, and I happily sit down. It's a relief to not have to worry about adding moving to the list of things I'm trying to accomplish all at once.

The room isn't large - it's about the size of two bedrooms smashed together - and it's nicely soundproofed (Probably to keep any kids' annoying cries of pain from bothering the office ladies next door.). The combination of the two features work together to give me a pleasant reprieve from the awfulness of the locker room and the school hallways.

Closing my eyes, I pass the time connecting smells and sounds to what I guess they originated from.

Insect buzz? Her computer on the desk in the corner.

Repetitive *chick-chick* sound? Wall clock.

Biting alcohol scent? Disinfectant for cleaning.

And something delicious. Almost like meat? That would be -

"Young lady, how can I help you?" Her friendly voice interrupts my thoughts and then morphs into a more suspicious tone. "Why are you wearing sunglasses in my office? Are you high? Or do you have a black eye?"

I squint at the woman standing in front of me. Nurse Pritchett can't be any older than her mid-twenties, but she has called me "young lady" every time she's seen me (Ok, all three, but still. That's enough for a pattern.). That combined with her severely pulled back hair fastened into a classic librarian's bun makes me wonder if she's trying to project an image of being older. It must be tough to play nurse maid to a bunch of hooligan

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teens all day.

"Neither, ma'am." I pull out my dad's crumpled letter I'd kept in my pocket all morning. "I have a note for you."

"Very well, then. Thanks." She unfolds the paper I had pressed into her palm and quickly reads my dad's scrawl about my eyes hurting and my not feeling well. She "hmmph's" once she finishes and sets it on her desk.

"I'm going to need to see your eyes for myself before I approve of anything, you understand."

I nod. "Ok."

"And judging from the pallor of your skin I'm guessing there might be something else wrong with you. You look pale. Are you feeling alright aside from your eyes hurting?"

"Uhm, well." I consider how much to say. This is probably as close to a doctor as I'm going to get. I might as well open up a bit and see what she can tell me. Can't hurt, right? (This is where we insert the quote, "Famous Last Words".) "Actually all my senses have been acting weird. They're sensitive. Super sensitive. Painfully sensitive."

"What do you mean by 'sensitive'?" She asks me with the first real hint of concern in her voice. "How sensitive are we talking here?"

"For starters, if I take off my glasses I can't see because of how blinding the light is. I currently have my eyes squinted behind these glasses, and it's still a bit painful. Actually," I pause and reach behind me for the light switch and snap both tabs down, "that will make things a bit easier on me. Thanks."

I can see her frown at me, but the darkening of the room is a sensory relief. It only cuts down on the lights;

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it doesn't completely extinguish them. All the rooms at my school have emergency lights that are permanently lit. It's like creepy educational mood lighting.

"Plus my ears are picking up a lot more sound than I'm used to. As an example," I stop talking for a moment so I can pick out some minute detail of sound to prove my point. But like I mentioned before, the sound proofing on the room is impressive, and there's little for me to listen to in the room. I can hear the computer and clock, but neither of those is very impressive.

"Hang on. There's not much in here to listen to. It's actually rather nice." Then I pick up a faint whooshing noise that had been so light it had been imperceptible until now. After listening to it for a few beats, I discover what it is. The discovery both thrills me and disturbs me a bit.

"Ok. This might sound weird, but I can hear...your... uhm...heartbeat."

Her previous frown tightens even more, and I don't need to smell her skepticism to know it's there.

"My heartbeat? Ok."

I take off my sunglasses so she can see my eyes. The emergency light makes me blink. It's still brighter than I want. "I'm going to close my eyes. Use your fingers to feel your own pulse, and I'll let you know when I hear it."

She doesn't move at first; she just continues to stare at me. After a few seconds of this, she straightens up and puts her right index finger to her carotid artery in her throat.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the *woosh-bump* sound I heard earlier. Now that I know it's there, it's easy to

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pick out. I just listen to the soothing rhythm for a moment before breaking the silence.

woosh-bump. "Beat," I say softly.

woosh-bump. "Beat," I say again.

woosh-bump. "Beat," I say and continue through several more before stopping.

"Those were dead on every time. Those *are* sensitive ears. Now you were -"

"You had peanut butter and jelly this morning," I interrupt her, anticipating her next question. "Raspberry jelly. I can smell it on you." I breathe deeply through my nose a few times and try to nail down the next scent. I then realize it's not one, but two similar and competing scents. "You have two cats. One is a male. The other I can't smell as well. It's either a female or you haven't been around it recently." I open my eyes and squint at her. Her increased heart rate and breathing and open eyes tell me I don't need to ask my next question, but I do anyway.

"Am I right?"

"Yes," she stammers. "Roscoe and Bill. Bill didn't come home last night so I haven't seen him since yesterday morning. How'd you know that?"

"I don't know. Actually, I was kind of hoping you could tell me. Is this common? Will it go away? It's rather annoying. Is there a medicine I can take? I just want it to stop." The words come pouring out of me faster than I had planned, and I'm sure they sound a bit on the crazy side. But I don't care right now. I hold out hope she might be able to help.

"I've never heard of it before. How long has it been happening?"

"Since last night. I, uh..." I start and then let it

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trail off. No point recounting last night's adventures even if they are relevant. That is a can of worms that shall stay firmly closed. Luckily she doesn't notice.

"Anything else aside from those changes?"

"Well, I'm a bit stronger (But saying that feels like bragging, so I quickly move on.), and, oh, my appetite is awful. I can't get enough to eat. And food has no taste. None whatsoever. Everything is unflavored oatmeal."

She continues to just stand in one spot and stare at me long enough that I begin to get uncomfortable. I wiggle a bit in my seat under her gaze.

"I'm going to take a closer look at your eyes," she finally says and turns and steps over to her wall of cabinets and begins opening drawers until she finds a long, black and silver cylinder and brings it over to me.

"This flashlight will let me see how dilated your pupils are. I have a feeling that's where your light sensitivity is coming from. I won't shine it in your eyes, though. Just above them so I can see them better."

I nod and say, "Ok."

She points the flashlight away from me and towards the opposite wall before clicking it on. The sudden donut of whiteness makes me jump, but as long as it isn't in my eyes it's tolerable. She moves the white circle along the wall to my right and then the wall behind me until it is just above my head. It hurts, but as long as I focus on another part of the room instead of the beam then it's bearable.

"Wow!" She says softly and steps even closer to me and bends down so that she is about a foot from my face. It's hard to focus on another part of the room when she is filling my entire field of vision. "Your entire eye is pupil. Your iris and sclera are gone. Hmmm.

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Look down please."

I do and try to focus on the chair between my knees.

"There it is. I can see the white of your eye now, but just barely. No wonder the light hurts so much. Your pupils are so dilated they are letting in all the light around you without filtering any out. I bet you can see really well in the dark right now, can't you?"

I hear her words, but I'm no longer listening. I finally pinpointed that delicious meat smell I had picked up earlier. Its intoxicating aroma is making my stomach lurch hard enough to make me nauseous. Almost as nauseous as the realization of where it's coming from. That delicious meat smell is coming from Nurse Pritchett.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Did you hear what I said? I think I have some eye drops that might help."

She's moved back to her cabinets and the distance helps, but it doesn't stop it completely. My left hand is damp, and lifting it I realize I've been salivating. Drool is dribbling from the corners of my mouth and has splashed onto the back of my hand (Thank the holy heavens it's dark in here and she can't fully see me.). It's disgusting.

"Are you ok back there?" Her back is still to me as she moves small boxes and bottles in the cabinet. "Cat? Is something wrong?"

I guess that answers my question about whether she remembered me from my previous visits.

My brain wants to answer her, but my mouth is having trouble forming the words now that my appetite has found a focus. My jaw moves, but no sound issues forth. I slow my breathing for a moment and try again.

"I don't know. But please don't come back over here. Stay there." I can tell she isn't listening to me by

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her body language. "Please," I manage to get out before she turns and steps towards me.

I hear her heart pushing the blood through her body, *whoosh-bump whoosh-bump whoosh-bump*, and each pulse intensifies the desire to taste it. Something deep in my gut tells me that the flow of it will make me better. Healthier. Stronger. I need it more than I've ever needed anything before. My brain focuses on her neck as she approaches me. With fascination, I see that I can pick out the slightest rise in her throat as her carotid artery swells and releases with blood. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I'm attracted to it like a pre-teen girl to a British boy band.

Standing up, I close the distance to Nurse Pritchett in a single step. I can't deny myself the pull I'm feeling. It's all I can think about. It's everything right now. I move to within inches of her before she can react.

"What are you -" she begins.

"**stop**," I say quietly cutting her off, and my voice is deeper and thicker than I've ever heard it before. I *need* her to stop, and I can feel my need for that to happen in my own voice. I don't want her to move, and I force that desire into every word. "**just stay there**," I say, and she does. This twenty-something year old nurse just stands in front of me motionless staring into my eyes.

Either I don't know what to do next or I do know but my brain refuses to accept it, so I just stand in front of her breathing. My brain is nothing but fog and clouds. I'm moving on instinct. I'm a starving person who has left the desert only to stumble onto the Pilgrim's first feast. It's too much. It's overwhelming.

As she stands in front of me not moving, it dawns on me what I'm wanting. What is driving me towards

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her. What is making me salivate enough to dampen the front of my sweatshirt. I can smell it, and I'm scared.

It's her blood. The drug that is compelling me forward is the blood of our school nurse.

And the worst part? I don't think I care.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Or is the worst part the fact that I don't know how to get at it? I can see the throb of the artery in the curve of her neck, but I don't know how to get to it. I hunger for it, but I don't know how to break the fragile container that is her skin.

My tongue instinctively runs along my teeth checking them for sharpness, but nothing useful registers. My thumbs gently run across my fingertips searching for the point of a nail, but they are all smooth. A growl of anger wells up from inside of me. I won't be denied.

The image of tearing into her like a horror-movie zombie flashes into my mind, but the brutality of such an attack is sobering. Something tells me that's not how it's done. That it's wrong.

Then another idea sparks in my brain: a knife. But I don't have one on me (School regulations and all. Who would have thought they would apply in a case like this?). Maybe she does?

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"*knife? get me one.*" My voice has gotten even deeper and thicker than before, and I know my need for the pointy object was draped across every word I uttered.

She blinks at me for a moment, before responding quietly, "In the kitchen."

"*get it,*" and I force every bit of my desire for the knife into those words.

The thought that I will soon be satiated washes over me in a wonderful wave of warmth and calmness. Getting to drink is all I can think about, and I watch her step over to the door of her office and grab the door handle.

The kitchen? In the cafeteria? But the connection hits me a moment too late. She opens the door to leave and the blast of fluorescent light from the school hallway strikes my unshielded eyes like the Nazi's looking upon the Ark at the end of Raiders.

The pain shatters my hypnotized stare and becomes the only thing I can think about. The pain consumes my entire being. I howl as my nerve endings rage against the whiteness. Must. Make. It. Stop.

I leap for the door and slam it shut with every bit of my strength, but in my attempt to solve the problem I overdo it. The wooden door slams into the frame hard enough to splinter it, and a hinge pops next to the wall. It may have been overkill, but at least it's dark for the moment.

It's enough to allow me to relax and quit screaming. Then I realize I can still hear screaming. From the hallway. It's Nurse Pritchett, and she sounds hysterical. I shake my head, and the memories of the last few moments come back to me. What was I about to do?

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I'm horrified as I realize I was a single sharp pointy object away from eating the nurse. I wanted to cannibalize another human being!

This can't be happening. This isn't right. I have to get out of here.

Grabbing my sunglasses off the chair and putting them back on, I pull my sweatshirt's hood over my head and cinch the strings as tight as they will go. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I know I have to get away from here. Right now.

Looking at the busted oaken door sitting in the blue metal frame, I make a decision. Settling my weight into my legs, I leap straight at the door hitting it with my shoulder. It cracks down the middle, and I erupt through it and land in the hallway. Kids, teachers and administrators are everywhere and they are all staring at me as I stand in the dead quiet of the hallway (Then again who wouldn't stare at the pixie of a teen that just burst through a wooden door. Probably not part of any school's daily curriculum.). They just stare. A scream pierces the air behind me, and I jump. It's a scream that will haunt me for as long as I live. The scream of a person I just tried to eat!

Turning toward the emptiest hallway I can see, I take off sprinting, moving faster than any kid has ever moved in that building. Moving faster than probably any kid has ever moved in the history of schools. Running without paying attention to where I am in the building, I make three quick turns down different hallways. I'm moving with so much speed that I'm past kids before they even get a chance to process what's moving towards them.

The brightness of sunlight finally glints off metal

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and glass at the end of one hall, and I aim directly for it. Twelve paces away from it, I realize it's not a door but a window. The fuzzy horizon I can barely make out behind it tells me this isn't even a first story window. I must have climbed stairs at some point and not even realized it.

It's either turn and retreat or jump. That's not even a choice I care to consider. Three paces from the window I put all my weight into my left foot and push as hard as I can into the air and propel myself towards the glass like a Hispanic cannon ball, making sure to duck my head and pull my knees up to my chest. The window exploding around me as I hit it barely registers as the harsh yellow of the sun bathes over me grabbing my attention.

Instinctively, I rotate my body in the air so that I hit the ground sneaker-first and immediately roll for several feet before coming up into a run. I have a brief moment of realizing how cool that was and how much of an action movie I just lived through before the fact that I just jumped out of a two story window, unharmed, hits me. Following shortly behind that thought is the memory of trying to eat another human.

I run, and I don't look back. The life I had before today is gone, and something new is about to begin.

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PART TWO
-ACCEPTANCE-

You will have to purchase the book to read the rest of
the story.