

DAYNA LORENTZ

NO EASY



WAY OUT



DIAL BOOKS

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QUARANTINED

*SHOPS AT STONECLIFF MALL
LOCKED DOWN BY NATIONAL GUARD*

Yesterday evening, the National Guard ordered that the Shops at Stonecliff mall be quarantined until further notice. After a week of near radio silence from government officials on the situation within the mall, it was revealed yesterday in the early afternoon that a flu virus had been released into the air vents of the mall and that all people inside have been deemed exposed to the contagion. While the Centers for Disease Control have promised more specific information on the type of virus, they have yet to release any reports. They have also declined to provide information on the situation inside the mall or the conditions of the people quarantined except to say that the situation is secure, that a qualified individual has been appointed to manage the population in the mall, and that the people inside have been provided with all the resources they will require for the duration of the quarantine.

Sentinel sources, however, claim that the situation in the mall is anything but secure. One local resident has been using a high-powered telescopic lens to observe the mall and he reported seeing crowds rushing past the windows of the food court's atrium after the announcement yesterday. He also claimed that the government evacuated the facility in a hurry, suggesting some problem inside the mall, perhaps related to the movement of people.

There have also been reports of arrests of individuals outside the mall. Mary Havershaw of Ossining reported that her neighbors Barbara and John Kravis have been locked inside their home for the past twenty-four hours. “Barbara went to buy some new pillows at that mall last Saturday,” Havershaw stated yesterday morning via telephone. “She got out before the quarantine, but now they want to lock her down too, like those other folks.” *Sentinel* reporters confirmed that a patrol car is outside the home and the home phone number has been disconnected.

After the demonstration of two nights ago, police have cordoned off the streets around the mall, allowing only local traffic into the area. This is in addition to the thirty-foot-high fence erected around the parking lot of the mall, which has been reinforced by cement barriers and is patrolled by the National Guard. News helicopters have been banned from flying over the airspace within the fence’s perimeter, though there were reports of a government helicopter on the roof of the mall earlier today.

If you have any family or friends inside the mall, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has set up a hotline through which you can receive information about your loved ones. The hotline number is 1-800-555-XXXX. The FBI has asked that you not try to approach the mall, as any trespass within the perimeter may result in your being arrested or detained for testing.

DAY **SEVEN**



N O O N

It was like reading the cast list for a twisted new reality show—*Mall Quarantine: Shop 'Til You Drop . . . Dead*.

DANIEL JANCOWISZ, *Age 24, Pace University*

EILEEN MYERS, *Age 36, pregnant, Dental Hygienist*

YOUSSEF HADDAD, *Age 16, asthma, Ossining HS*

Except this wasn't a show, it was reality. Some of these people really were dead.

That kind of thinking was too depressing, so Lexi Ross decided to not even focus on the names anymore. She just input the words. Her mother, Senator Dorothy "Dotty" Ross, the now official head honcho of the mall, had charged her with re-creating the population database her father had made for the government hazmat people. When they bolted from the building, they took all copies with them, which suggested that locking all the civilians in a

mall with a killer flu was not the only secret they were keeping.

The monotony of the task—logging name after name into the program—was soothing, and a welcome break from the screaming chaos of yesterday’s mall riot. So she sat like a good little girl typing away in the dank employee lounge in a corner of the Apple Store’s stockroom.

KATHLEEN MASON, *Age 18, Tarrytown HS*

WILLIAM TSU, *Age 14, Rockland HS*

The only frustrating aspect of the task was that all the relevant information was handwritten on scrap paper. The Senator had given Lexi the lists of names created on the first night of their collective captivity—this was all the government had left behind. Scrawled next to some entries were chronic conditions, and employers or schools. Some names had a cryptic *V* marked beside them in the margin. More relevant information—like whether or not the person was still alive—was not to be found on the page.

As Lexi flipped a rumpled sheet over and began scanning her next entry, she was startled by her mother’s voice over the mall’s loudspeaker.

“Attention, residents of the Shops at Stonecliff. I apologize for the manner in which yesterday’s announcement was made. It was not our intention to cause anyone to panic.”

Understatement of the year. How coy of her mother to label a mall-wide riot a mere instance of “panic.” Lexi had spent the previous evening pinned down by a gurney

and the dying, then dead body that had occupied it, all buried under collapsed curtains and whatever else from the medical center the rioters had stomped down on top of them.

“Anyone who suffered any injuries as a result of last night’s incident should report to the medical center located in the PaperClips on the first floor. Anyone with any medical training should also please report to the PaperClips to assist in helping those injured.”

Lexi wondered if there was anything the medical personnel could do to cure her of the memory of being trapped under a body—alone—for hours, all that time convinced she’d left her father to be trampled to death by the crazed masses. She could still feel the cold, dead, clammy skin against her back.

She glanced over the top of her laptop to check on her father, and saw that he had fallen asleep on the lounge’s crummy, fake leather couch. Turned out, he’d spent the night trapped under rubble, too. Only he had the additional disadvantage of having been shot by a looter with a nail gun and having his arm broken after being pushed down an escalator. Compared to that, trying to sleep without suffocating while being crushed by a corpse didn’t seem so bad.

Lexi decided to let her father rest. Closing her computer, she relocated from the stockroom to the sales area of the Apple Store. At least from there, should the masses decide to riot for a third time, she’d see them coming.

Her mother droned on over the loudspeaker: “. . . if you begin to develop symptoms, including chills, a cough, or a runny nose, please report to the PaperClips for treatment.

“Security guards will be handing out medical masks and hand sanitizer. Please wear your mask and apply the sanitizer before touching any surface and before meals. Avoid touching your face. These small measures will help prevent the spread of the disease.”

Too little too late. If only her mother had announced the flu as soon as she knew about it. If only the stupid government had hinted that they figured everyone inside the mall had a disease. Maybe people would have taken precautions. Maybe that saleslady Lexi had tried to save in the Abercrombie wouldn't have died.

“We have been given additional cots by the government and will set these up in three locations within the mall. Families, please report to the HomeMart for registration and assignment of beds. Women and girls, please report to the JCPenney; men and boys, please report to the Lord and Taylor. These locations will be your Home Stores.”

Organization: This was the Senator's specialty. Lexi's mother had a label maker and by god, the woman knew how to use it. Only Lexi was not sure everyone in the mall would appreciate Dotty's penchant for pushing people around. For example, how would all those kids accustomed to nonstop hooking up in the Abercrombie, no parental units in sight, deal with single-sex dorms?

“If you are in need of a change of clothes, depots will be established on the first floor of each Home Store where you can trade in your clothes for a new set. You will no longer be able to purchase clothing. You will also not have a choice in what clothing you are given. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience this may cause.”

Lexi nearly dropped her laptop from the burst of laughter that shook her. Just wear whatever they hand you? *Like that won't cause a riot?*

“We have been given sufficient quantities of food by the government for the duration of this quarantine, however long it lasts. Meals will be served in the first-floor common areas. If you have a life-threatening food allergy, please notify the security guard when you register at your Home Store. Other than life-threatening conditions, we cannot accommodate any dietary requests.

“If you have any comments or concerns, please bring them to the attention of one of the security guards. We will try to address every situation to the best of our ability. This is an unusual and trying situation, but we are all in this together. By working together and following a few simple rules, we can all make it through this with the least incident and suffering. Thank you for your patience and attention. God bless you all.”

Lexi gave it a day, maybe less. No one would go for this. She flipped open her computer on one of the barren tables—the salespeople had cleared the decks of valuable merchandise to keep the looters at bay. Not like there was much use for laptops and iPhones anyway, what with no cell service or Internet to speak of. The screen blinked on and she got back to work.

BRITTANY FOX, *Age 20, SUNY-New Paltz*

ROBERT GAUDINO, *Age 52, pacemaker*

JOHN FITZGERALD, *Age 45, Lawyer*

ALANNA BROWN, *Age 17, West Nyack HS*

“Thought I’d find you here,” Maddie said, entering the Apple Store.

Lexi glanced up from her laptop screen. She could cry seeing her friend walking around like one of the living; the last time she’d seen Maddie, she was pale as a vampire and lying under a puffer coat on the concrete floor of the Abercrombie stockroom.

“You know me so well,” Lexi said, trying to sound as cool as possible.

“Well, you do have the Apple logo tattooed on your face.” Maddie gave Lexi a one-finger shove on the forehead, then slumped onto a neighboring stool. “*Geraldine Simpson, age sixty-two, Prilosec?* What is this, a list of people we’re *not* inviting to live with us?”

Lexi laughed despite her otherwise black mood. “I’m doing a job for my mother. It’s a new list of everyone in the mall. The government took all the records when they abandoned us.” She pointed to the stack of crinkled paper beside her.

“How do you know she’s not dead?” Maddie said, slicing a finger across her neck.

“I guess we’ll know once people check into their Home Stores,” Lexi said. “Or don’t, in which case I click the box marked ‘deceased.’”

Maddie contemplated this as she flipped through the pages. “Thanks,” she said finally, laying the papers aside. “Without you, I wouldn’t be checking in anywhere today.”

Lexi nodded, though did she really deserve to be thanked for what any decent human being would have done? *Decent human being* here obviously excluding Ginger Franklin, a coward who abandoned her friends to save

her own bony butt. Lexi gritted her teeth and continued to type.

“What happened to you?” Maddie said, spinning on her seat. “I thought you’d come back after dropping your dad off in the med center.”

Lexi wasn’t sure what to say, so she went with the truth. “I got crushed under a gurney during the riot. I spent the night under a dead body.”

“Sucks to be you,” Maddie said.

“I spend the night under a dead body and *that’s* your response?”

“Well, it does.” Maddie shrugged and elbowed Lexi in the side. “At least it wasn’t your first dead body.”

“That makes it better how?”

“I don’t know,” Maddie said. “I’m trying to cheer you up.”

It was more than anyone else had tried to do. “Thanks,” she said, hoping that moved them on to something else topic-wise. She typed another entry into the system.

Maddie spun slowly on her stool. “We’re all going to die, right?” she said after a few minutes.

“You just survived the flu,” Lexi said. “If anyone’s going to live, it’s you.”

“But that’s why the government left,” Maddie continued. “They’re going to blow this place up with everyone in it or something. To keep the virus from getting out.”

This horrible, hopeless option had not occurred to Lexi. She wondered if it had occurred to her mother. It had to have. “There’s no way they’d do that,” she said, more to herself than anyone else.

“Why not?” Maddie said. “There’s like a couple thou-

sand people in here.” She waved a hand at the stack of crumpled papers. “What’s that compared with the millions outside these doors?”

“My mother would never let that happen,” Lexi said. “She’s not the kind to go down with the ship.”

“Why would they tell her about their plans?” Maddie said. “Us disease carriers are obviously far down on the need-to-know list, given how long it took them to share the news about the flu.”

Lexi’s heart rate was climbing. If her mother hadn’t known about all the dead bodies in the Pancake Palace’s freezer, what else didn’t she know? What if Mom was as in the dark as the rest of them? What if she was just as screwed as everyone else? Lexi felt a wave of sympathy for her, and the sensation was strange to say the least.

“My mom is not out of the loop,” Lexi said, as if saying the words made them true. “She knew about the flu days before they announced it. She told me.”

“She told you?” Maddie said, eyes bugging. “And you thought that wasn’t something of interest to the rest of us?”

Crap. “I couldn’t tell,” Lexi said. “My mom made me promise.”

“Dude!” Maddie yelled. “There are some promises you just don’t freaking keep!”

“Look, I’m sorry!” Lexi yelled back. Yelling felt better. “I didn’t think you’d get it!”

“Well, I did!”

“It’s not like if I’d told you, you wouldn’t have gotten sick! We’ve all breathed the stuff in.” *Plus*, Lexi thought, *you were kissing every guy with a pulse.*

Maddie grabbed her stool. “Everything’s woozy,” she said. Her face drained of blood.

Lexi took her arm and helped her to the floor. She propped Maddie against a shelf and brought her some water from the lounge in the back.

“You shouldn’t be walking around if you’re still feeling sick,” Lexi said.

“I had been feeling better,” Maddie mumbled.

“I wish you hadn’t gotten sick. I’m sorry for not telling you.”

“I’m sorry for yelling,” Maddie said, lifting her head. “This whole thing just sucks.”

“Let’s make a pact,” Lexi said. “No more secrets. I tell you everything, you tell me everything.”

Maddie smirked. “Not really a fair deal, since you’re the only one with secrets.”

“You’re the most popular person I know,” Lexi said. “Who knows what you’ll learn from the cool kids in the mall? You give me intel from the masses, I give you intel from my mom. Deal?” She held her hand out.

“Gossip for actual information?” Maddie took her hand. “You’re getting a pretty raw deal.”

Holding hands with Maddie, Lexi felt relief flood her body. She had a friend, someone to share secrets with. She wasn’t alone. “I’m okay with that.”

Maddie let go first. She gulped the water. “I guess we should check into our Home Store,” she groaned.

Lexi stood and examined the stack of names she had yet to enter. It was at least another hour or two of work. *Screw it.* Her dad would put it in when he woke up. Or someone else could do it. It’s not like data entry was brain

surgery. Her mom could do it herself, for that matter.

“Let’s go,” Lexi said, closing her laptop.

“Can we please stop running for like one freaking minute so I can get the fire extinguisher foam off my face?” Ryan Murphy grabbed the nearest shirt and pulled.

Drew halted. “Shrimp,” he said. “Your face is messed up.”

Not like anyone looked good in the fluorescent gloom of the service hallway, but certainly Ryan had a decent excuse for whatever mess his face was. Just that morning he’d pulled a Lazarus and defeated the flu, then he’d free-fallen some thirty feet to rescue the ass who ruined their entire rooftop escape plan, only to be captured by security and then rescued in a cloud of fire-extinguisher foam. He swiped the wicking fabric of his climbing shirt over his skin and felt something smear around.

“That didn’t help,” Drew said.

“Can we stop at a bathroom or something?” Ryan rubbed his hands on his face and came away with crusty white crap.

“No one here cares what you look like,” Marco said.

Ryan remembered Marco from their failed escape attempt through the parking level hatch. Something had changed in the guy over the last four days. He had a nasty edge to his voice. Ryan hated people with attitude. “I’m not worried about turning you on. This crap is burning my skin.”

Mike pulled his T-shirt off, spat onto it, then came at Ryan. “Lemme get that,” he said in a faux mommy voice.

Ryan smacked him away. “I’d rather let my face burn.”

Mike snorted. “Your choice, Jumbo Shrimp.” He threw the shirt at Ryan’s head.

“Dude, this reeks,” Ryan said, trying not to barf. All motion made him sick in the gut—like he needed shirt stink on top of that.

“Real men sweat,” Mike said.

“While I appreciate the clever banter,” Marco interrupted, “it’s not helping us avoid the troop of security guards on our asses.”

Mike stroked the gun in his waistband. “I could come up with a more permanent solution than running.”

“We are not *killing* people,” Ryan stated, like he had any control over Mike’s use of his new toy, lifted from the police officer Ryan had tackled. He’d been as effective as a ninety-pound linebacker in stopping Mike from killing the dude in Shep’s Sporting Goods. Of course, that guy had shot an arrow at them first.

“Unless you have some endless supply of ammo for that thing,” Marco said, “that is not the answer to our problems.”

“So what *is* the answer?” Drew snorted. “And it better involve food, because I’m starving.”

Why were Mike and Drew listening to this guy? A week ago, they’d been trying to, no-joke, kill him. The change was freaky.

Marco closed his eyes like this was all such a waste of time. “Let’s head to the third floor.”

“Lead the way, Kemosabe,” Mike said, sweeping his arm.

The guy had gotten a nickname? He wasn’t even on the football team and he was getting a nickname? Ryan had

only been out of the loop for like twenty minutes, but he was apparently years behind on information.

Despite what he'd just said, Marco Carvajal wasn't actually that concerned about security. They had woven through two stockrooms, shifting between service hallway systems, and moved up a floor already. Between that and the senator's new orders for reorganizing the mall, he doubted many guards were still in pursuit. Nevertheless, he liked to dangle that danger over The Three Douches' heads. Liked to remind them that without his help, they'd all be up a fraking creek.

He would have to have a word with them about "Kemosabe." Kemosabe was worse than "Taco."

They crept down the hallways toward the Grill'n'Shake, Marco's old place of employ. Things he did not miss: wiping tables and scraping food scraps as busboy to the ungrateful mall-walkers. Things he did miss: free fries and unlimited soda.

At the back door, he swiped his actual card key for old times' sake; he didn't want to wear out the mag strip on his shiny, new, stolen all-access pass. For a brief moment, he thought of Shay—how they'd taken the card key together, how their escape plan had fallen apart, but how their relationship had grown stronger—and he wanted to abandon these douches and check to make sure she was still okay in the med center. But he reminded himself that the whole reason he was with Mike, Drew, and Ryan was to ensure the safety of Shay and her sister, Preeti. Not to mention his own.

"Bathroom's in the back, food's this way," Marco said, holding open the service door.

"I think I know my way around the Grease'n'Suck," Ryan said, tromping toward the bathroom. Just as he was about to open the swinging door to the dining room, he froze. "There are people out there," he whispered.

Marco crept to the door and peered through the window. Regular people sat at the tables, some swilling stolen sodas, some with fistfuls of ice pressed to various appendages.

"There's a staff bathroom in the back." Marco said. He led the three into the kitchen.

People had raided what remained of the salad station.

"Where's the grub?" Drew asked, poking at the empty tubs.

"Relax," Marco said, approaching the monolithic metal door of the walk-in refrigerator. Everything worth eating was kept in the fridge, which, lucky for them, was still locked.

Marco pulled out the keys he'd inadvertently stolen from the manager on his last shift—two days ago. It wasn't like the man would miss them, given that he was dead. He wondered where his coworkers were now, Josh especially. Josh was a good guy. Marco hoped Josh was still alive.

It took several tries, but Marco finally identified the key to the fridge. The door swung open slowly, exhaling a cold mist.

"Hit the lights," Drew said, chops already wet with saliva.

Marco flicked the switch. The fluorescent lights

blinked, revealing a wealth of comestibles. Another door inside separated the freezer section, which contained more food, most of it unfortunately frozen solid.

The two douches thrust themselves inside and began pawing the merchandise.

“Dude, crackers,” Mike said, throwing a gigantic bag of saltines at Drew, who grunted happily. The manager must have thrown all the food—from saltines to salt—in the fridge for safekeeping. The two douches didn’t even bother to pull the things from the wrappers; they slit the bags open and poured the broken contents down their gullets.

Marco had certainly surrounded himself with some charming company. But beggars could not be choosers, and these two were the best this mall had to offer in terms of personal security services. He had traded his freedom and chosen to act as mall tour guide in exchange for Mike and Drew’s formidable protection—an excellent deal, even if it meant having to watch Drew spit crumbs like a camel.

He needed to figure out how this whole security thing would work with Shay. Should they all hide out somewhere? Would Shay agree to living like this—stealing food from the Grill’n’Shake’s fridge, sleeping in stockrooms? What if she was sick or really hurt? No, she needed something better than this. So he would have to run a dual operation—one to keep Shay safe, one to keep these idiots safe so they could keep him and Shay safe.

The fridge door swung away from his shoulder, startling Marco.

“Relax,” Ryan said snidely, slipping past Marco into the fridge. He no longer had a fine layer of white all over him, though his face was splotchy—not splotchy like

Marco’s face always was, but the handsome splotchy that guys like Ryan were blessed with. Even on a bad day, the douche was a billion times better looking than Marco.

“What’s for breakfast?” Ryan said.

Mike chucked a bag of frozen chicken fingers at his head. “Gnaw on these.”

Ryan caught it like he had bags of chicken launched at his head on a daily basis—which Marco guessed was essentially the definition of being a football player.

He definitely could not bring Shay here. Not with a handsome, coordinated jerk like Ryan around to mess up everything Marco had going with her.

The voices from the restaurant got louder; Marco thought he heard the kitchen door squeal. Not wanting to get involved in a firefight over frozen chicken, he checked that the inside release button for the handle was still working and closed them into the fridge. As he dug open a giant bag of baby carrots, Marco said a silent prayer that no one would test the lock.

Shaila Dixit was shaken awake by her bed, which was rattling its way out of the PaperClips. Her first instinct was to start patting the sides of the gurney looking for the brakes, but she quickly realized that, since there was no hill in the PaperClips, the gurney could not be rolling of its own volition.

“Just lie back and enjoy the ride,” a voice behind her said.

“Where are you taking me?” The panic began to choke Shay. “Where’s my sister?”

The gurney stopped and a round face with a mask over

its smiling mouth appeared at her side. “Dr. Chen said you had quite a scare,” the face said. “I’m Jazmine, and I’m a nurse. I’m taking you to the new medical center.”

“My sister?”

“Right behind you. You can relax, sweetheart.”

Shay’s head throbbed, so she sank back onto her pillow. If she hadn’t felt like she’d hurl if she stood, she would have run. She did not trust this woman. She did not trust any of them. They had let her grandmother die. They said her sister, Preeti, was okay, but who knew if that was true. This place was horrible. Where was Marco?

Jazmine rolled her out into the hallway and then turned onto the main artery of the mall. Shay noticed half of the windows in the central skylight were covered over.

“What happened to the skylight?” Shay asked. Had the riot reached the ceiling?

“Some crazy people tried to bust out onto the roof,” Jazmine said, her tone implying the inanity of the action.

Shay did not think this was stupid. In fact, she wished she’d thought of it. Ryan had taught her how to climb, after all. She wondered if it was he who’d made the attempt. That would mean he hadn’t escaped through the garage. But had he made it out onto the roof?

“Did they escape?” Shay wanted the answer to be both yes and no.

“You think those government nut jobs in their plastic suits would let anyone out of here?”

That meant Ryan might still be in the mall. Shay closed her eyes and hoped it to be true. Didn’t the universe owe her something good?

The gurney soon rolled to a stop under a fancy chande-

lier and a banner advertising a perfume. The room smelled sickly sweet. “The new med center is a department store?”

Jazmine fiddled with something on the underside of the gurney, then stood and brushed her palms on her jeans. “Harry’s has been converted into this glamorous new hospital. Too many people showed up with riot injuries to try to keep making due in the PaperClips.”

Shay lifted herself to her elbows and looked around. The makeup counters and racks of clothes still stood in their regular places.

“It’s a work in progress,” Jazmine said, following her gaze. “We moved you first, as you’re non-critical.”

“And my sister?” Shay asked.

“Flu cases will be moved last. We’re trying to keep them separate.”

“Can I see her?”

Jazmine, sensing perhaps from Shay’s strident tone that the panic had returned, lifted her face mask and sat on the gurney beside Shay’s hips. “I know you’ve been through a lot, honey,” she said. “But you have got to trust somebody and it might as well be me.”

“Why?” Shay asked, feeling peevish.

“You see anyone else around here?” Jazmine raised an eyebrow.

Shay allowed herself a smile.

“Your grandma was a special lady?” Jazmine cocked her head.

The question drove the smile away. “Don’t you have to move the other people?”

“They won’t miss me for another minute or so.”

She stared at Shay like she was waiting for an answer,

like Shay was really going to talk about Nani to some complete stranger who probably was part of the team that let her die. No, that wasn't fair. That team, the ones in the hazmat suits, had fled, leaving only the contaminated, the damned.

Shay rubbed the edge of her sheet. "She was my best friend."

"That's a good grandma." Jazmine smiled as if waiting for more.

"She let me steal her henna."

"So that's what the mark on your cheek is." Jazmine stroked Shay's skin gently.

Shay flinched, surprised by the touch. The last time someone touched her, it was a zombie hand reaching out from the rubble of the old med center.

Jazmine, unfazed, smiled and held open her arms. "Can I at least give you a hug before I go?"

Tears pricked out along Shay's eyelids at the word. When was the last time someone offered her a simple hug, nothing else implied or wanted? Just a hug, just for her? *So long.*

Shay nodded her head and felt Jazmine's thick arms wrap around her, enveloping her in warmth. The tears dropped down her cheeks, darkening the fabric of Jazmine's shirt.

"No touching," a voice commanded. "And put on your mask."

"Say what?" Jazmine barked. "If I want to hug a person, I'm hugging her."

"New rules." The voice came closer. Shay turned her

head and saw a security guard, stun baton gripped in both hands across his chest like a shield.

Jazmine gave Shay a look like she would kill this man before she'd stop hugging people, but then she let go of Shay, replaced her mask, and shuffled off the gurney. "I'll check on you later," she said, squeezing Shay's shoulder, then walked away.

Shay nearly screamed for Jazmine to come back, but the security guard with his black stick shut her up. He looked both nervous and cocky, and Shay did not like that combination. Would he attack her? No, he was here to protect her. *Right?* Cold sweat broke out over her body. She was alone with this guy who looked ready to beat the crap out of anyone and everyone.

He turned and walked out of the store. Another gurney was rolled in by some woman, not Jazmine.

Shay did not trust these strangers. She did not feel safe. But she couldn't move off this gurney, not yet, so she fell back and stared at the chandelier until her eyes watered and the world became a bright blur.



**T
W
O
P.M.**

The first thing that struck Lexi was the scant number of people who had showed up to sign in at the JCPenney. It was basically her and Maddie and a pair of old ladies.

“Where is everyone?” Lexi asked, weirded out by the emptiness. There still had to be thousands of people in the mall. Where the hell were they?

“Dead?” Maddie offered. “Sick on their way to being dead?”

Lexi gave her a look, but saw that Maddie was not joking.

“Fine, they’re not *all* dead,” Maddie said, shrugging. “Maybe they’re afraid of those thugs with the stun guns.” She pointed to a group of four security guards, all leaning on a giant planter in the middle of the hallway, each displaying a two-foot-long nightstick-slash-electrocution rod.

The dudes looked less than friendly. Apparently, the

riot had made everyone, especially the cops, suspicious of their mall-mates.

This was not a good development. Lexi was not in one hundred percent agreement with her mother on anything, but the Senator’s rules were the only option at the moment, and if the choice was between them and another riot, Lexi knew which side she was on.

“We should help,” Lexi said. Maybe people didn’t trust that the JCPenney Home Store thing was actually happening. The place certainly looked like it was still a JCPenney and not a home of any sort.

“Help what? The cops?” Maddie asked. “The old ladies?”

“My mom.”

“Your mom is like the last person I’m in the mood to help.” Maddie flipped her hair and glared at the cops.

“My mom is the one person trying to pull this place back together,” Lexi said. “Come on.”

Lexi didn’t wait to see if Maddie followed. There used to be nylon barrier things, like the ones used in airports to organize crowds, near the checkout lines in the JCPenney. Lexi figured if she set them up outside, it might show people that her mother was serious about this plan and also control any crowds that hopefully showed up to register.

Just as she was about to cross the threshold, a guard yelled at her. “Hey kid, stop!”

“I’m just going in to get some barrier things,” Lexi yelled back. “You need to do something to make this place look official.”

The guy came strutting toward her. “The Senator said not to allow anyone in until they registered.”

“The Senator’s my *mom* and she told me to help her.” It was sort of true.

The guard took a few moments to process Lexi’s information. “Okay, but what’s your name? I have to write down everyone’s name.”

It was like talking to a 16-bit NPC. “Alexandra Ross. As in the Senator Ross.”

The guy wrote something on his hand. *That’s professional . . .* “What barrier things?” he asked, sounding less like a jerk.

Lexi scanned the sales floor and saw one. “That,” she said, pointing.

The guy nodded. “I like it,” he said. He switched on his walkie-talkie and told whoever was on the other end of it to collect the tension barriers from the checkout lines and set them up for crowd control outside the Home Stores. “This whole thing is kind of a clusterf—I mean, confusing.”

Lexi smirked. “Sounds like my mom’s doing.” She instantly regretted talking badly about her mom to this guy who was supposedly the Senator’s underling.

He didn’t seem to notice. “The chief told us to just write people’s names down until we got some computer system, but so far there’s just been these two old ladies and you. I’m not even sure where to tell people to go. The whole store is still, like, full of stuff.”

The sales floor looked like it always did, though there were toppled racks and tables—evidence of the riot. Most of the store, however, had escaped harm.

“Are there people in here?”

“Security did a sweep,” the guy said. “Most bolted into the service hallways. A team is searching them for stragglers.”

“Are there bodies?” Lexi was not sure if she really wanted to hear the answer.

The guy stiffened. “I’m not allowed to say anything about bodies.”

Okay, that’s not weird or anything. Why the clamming up over bodies?

His walkie-talkie bleeped. *Nice idea with the barriers,* the voice barked. *Get the registrants to begin clearing the sales floors for the cots.*

The security guy pulled the radio from his belt. “Roger,” he said. “Where should we put stuff?”

“Stockrooms for now.”

Lexi told the guard she had a friend outside who could help. As she exited, she saw that the four guards who’d been lounging on the planter were setting up the barriers in front of the store. The place looked a lot more official. People were bound to come out to register now.

Lexi hoped the guard would tell the Senator that this had all been her idea. She may have bailed on the data entry assignment, but security had totally needed her help with the Home Stores. She was being even more useful out here. *Now who’s going to feel bad about throwing a radio at my head?*

Maddie was suspiciously willing to accept Lexi’s invitation to clear the sales floor, and the reason for this became immediately apparent. For every rack she rolled into the stockroom, she removed an item from it and draped it

over her neck. Lexi tried to ignore the shameless shoplifting, but then she caught Maddie actually changing into an entirely new outfit.

“We’re supposed to be storing the stuff from the sales floor, not stealing it.”

Maddie slapped a hand to her chest in mock offense. “Stealing! Why, I’d never.” She pulled a hat onto her head. “I see this as just compensation for my labor.” She glanced at herself in the mirror. “Is the hat too much? Yeah, I agree.” She took it off and Frisbeed it into the depths of the stock area.

Lexi checked to see if anyone else was around. No, they were alone. So what if Maddie *was* taking clothes instead of waiting for the guards to give her a new outfit? That was okay. It was one outfit. No one would even know it was gone.

“You should get something,” Maddie said, her face lighting up. “Something sexy instead of this depressing hoodie situation you seem to always have going on.”

“No,” Lexi said. “I mean, I like this hoodie. Picked it out from the Abercrombie myself.”

“Girl, that thing had a dead body lying on it all night.” Maddie grabbed Lexi’s sleeve and pulled her arm free of it. “This hoodie must be trashed.”

Maddie made a good point. Okay. One outfit for each of them. No one would know. It would be totally fine. And Lexi had just revolutionized the whole Home Store check-in process. She deserved an outfit. The Senator would totally agree.

Maddie pulled an expensive-looking sweater from a

pile and a pair of skinny jeans off a rack. “You’re what, a size ten?”

Lexi had no idea. Sizes were not her thing. She usually bought men’s jeans. They hid her curves better. “Sure?” she said.

Maddie tossed the pants at her. “You’re a ten.” She looked at Lexi like something should be happening. “Well? Go on. Before those old bags roll in another rack.”

Lexi did as she was told. She dropped her jeans and stuffed herself into the pants Maddie had thrown at her. They were pretty much a nightmare, hugging every inch of skin like the things were glued on.

“*Ooh la la*, the girl has legs,” Maddie cooed. The sweater beaned Lexi in the forehead. “Now the *pièce d’rèsistance*.”

Obediently, Lexi dragged off her safe, comfortable T-shirt and tugged on the sweater. It felt like delicate fur. Judging from the wispy hairs, it was made of delicate fur. This too stuck to her skin, but in a nice way, like a hug. The only downside being that the thing revealed that Lexi had boobs like nobody’s business.

Maddie looked pleased with her work. “Now see if the boys don’t start eating each other for a piece of you.”

“You have just described my worst nightmare.”

Maddie raised an eyebrow. “You just haven’t met the right boys.”

“What are you two doing?” a male voice barked.

It was a security guard, another guy with a stun baton. He did not look pleased.

Maddie put on a sad face. “Don’t yell at us, officer! We

were just moving this big heavy rack and it nearly fell on my friend and I was comforting her.”

Lexi froze for a moment, then realized she should be in some sort of pain. “Yes,” she said through gritted teeth. She grabbed her upper arm. “Very painful.”

The guard gave them the once-over. “You change clothes?”

“No way,” said Maddie. “That would be against the rules.”

The guard nodded toward the table behind them. “Then why is your friend wearing *that* sweater?”

“She bought it, back before all hell broke loose.”

“Yeah, right.”

Maddie slapped a hand on her hip. “If she hadn’t been trampled and lost her bag with the receipt in it, she could prove it, but I guess if you hadn’t let this whole mall go to the crazies, she wouldn’t have lost her bag, so it’s just a nasty little cycle we find ourselves in.”

Maddie was so totally out of line, Lexi had no idea what to do except shut up and try not to freak out. The guard shifted his hold on his stun stick. Maddie stared at him like she dared him to use it. Did she actually think the man wouldn’t?

Then, miracle of miracles, the guard turned. “Just get back to clearing racks.” He left them in the stockroom.

Maddie burst out laughing.

“What the hell?” Lexi cried.

“Come on, like that loser was going to really do anything?”

“He had a freaking Taser! You think after everything that’s happened that he’s afraid to use it?”

Maddie pretended to faint. “Oh, big scary man with a big scary Taser!” Then she shoved Lexi. “Grow a pair, dearest. Life’s too short to give a crap about little things like electrocution.”

As Maddie sashayed out of the stockroom, Lexi tried to comprehend the last few minutes. For all her bitching at and about her mom, she had never so much as jay-walked before meeting Maddie. And what had following Maddie gotten her? Mortified in front of a group of guys Lexi didn’t even find remotely attractive, floor-burn from sliding down a bowling lane, and nearly infected with a deadly virus during a game of Dare or Dare. But without Maddie, she was alone.

“Wait up!” she yelled, and raced after Maddie’s shadow.

The mall speaker was barely audible in the kitchen of the Grill’n’Shake. Marco, however, gleaned from what made it to his ears that the senator was serious about people checking in at the Home Stores. He heard “assumed dead” and “calculation of rations.” Now was the time for him to make the call: *Do I stay or do I go?*

“We should try to check in,” Ryan said, swallowing his defrosted chicken.

“Dude, we’re outlaws,” Drew mumbled through a mouthful of reconstituted fries.

“Forget outlaws,” Mike said. “I am not like these other drones. I will not be a part of this goddamn experiment.”

Marco was floored. “*Experiment?* Are you suggesting that our current situation is the result of a government test gone wrong?”

“You really think that some terrorist would bother to attack a freaking mall?” Mike pulled another thawed chicken strip from the bag. “This has government cover-up written all over it.”

Riiiiight . . .

“We’re safer if we just try to fit in,” Ryan chimed in.

If the three of them joined the plebes in the Home Stores, they would have no need for Marco’s card key access services. This idea of Ryan’s had to be shot down.

“No,” stated Marco. “Bad idea. They put you in jail once, they will find another jail for you.”

“We could use fake names,” Ryan offered.

The kid would not give up. “They have a list of everyone in the mall from the first day. You think a couple of strangers appearing on the roster wouldn’t attract attention?” Marco put on his most dismissive glare.

“So, what then?” Ryan winged the remainder of his chicken at the trash and glared back. “We live in the freaking freezer of the Grill’n’Shake?”

“We could find Reynolds, try his escape plan?” Drew said.

“The mall is surrounded,” Marco said. “If they had helicopters scanning the roof, you think they don’t have people watching the grounds?”

Mike stood. “You all are missing the point.” He sat on the stainless-steel countertop. “This mall is a death trap. Our only goal is to survive until whatever the hell is going on ends. If we really are dealing with the flu, then the key is to keep ourselves isolated. We find a hole and stay in it.”

Drew kicked a plastic bucket. “This sucks.”

“It’s better than being dead.”

No one argued with Mike.

“Okay,” Marco said. “So we find a suitable hole and put you in it.”

“What about you?” Ryan asked, eyebrows knit in a scowl. “Aren’t you hiding out with us?”

“I’m your eyes and ears,” Marco said. “Someone’s got to keep his head aboveground to watch for security and stay on top of the situation.” This was working out better than he expected. The three would be entirely dependent on him for everything: food, water, intel. If any problem should arise for him and Shay, he could convince Mike to sneak out of his hidey-hole to resolve it based on whatever lie Marco thought would best motivate him, and the douche would never be the wiser. Better yet, Shay would never know that Ryan was even in the mall.

“I better go check in,” Marco said, pushing himself up from where he’d been scrunched on the floor between two large, empty containers.

“Cut off for check-in’s not for another half hour,” Mike said, glancing over his hunched shoulder.

“I have to check on someone in the med ward.” Marco brushed off his jeans. “I’ll be back in an hour. Then we can move down to the hiding place I have in mind.”

Mike nodded. “We’ll gather supplies from the freezer.”

The coast was clear outside the fridge. Marco crossed the kitchen, pushed through the service door, and started down the dim hallway.

“I thought you were alone in the mall,” Ryan said.

Marco nearly jumped out of his skin. The kid was near silent in his climbing slippers. “I told you to wait here until I come back.”

“I told Mike I’d collect supplies from the med ward in case any of us got sick again.”

“*Again?*” Marco couldn’t help the gooseflesh that prickled out on his arms at the idea that one of the douches was contagious.

“I had the flu,” Ryan said, a touch of pride in his voice.

Marco took larger steps, tried to put a bit more real estate between him and the potentially infectious douche. “It’s not a bad idea,” Marco said.

“So who’s in the med ward?” Ryan sped up to keep pace with Marco.

“My girlfriend,” Marco said, wondering how hard to twist the knife and deciding the harder the better. “I think you know her. Shaila Dixit?” That took the jock down a few pegs. He stopped following for a moment, then jogged a few steps to catch up.

“Is she hurt?” Ryan asked.

Not the response Marco had expected, but he figured why not tell. “She passed out when she learned that her grandmother had died, at least that’s what the doctor told me.”

“I have to see her,” Ryan said.

“You have to stay hidden.” Marco kept walking. “People are looking for The Flying Kid.”

Ryan grabbed Marco’s arm. “I have to see her.”

Marco glowered back at him, not sure if Ryan could see in the dim light the amount of pissed-off-ness he felt. Ryan didn’t back down.

“It’s your funeral,” Marco said, and continued to walk.

Ryan stumbled slightly, trying to keep up—*aftereffects of the flu?* “So Shay’s your girlfriend?” he asked, panting as if walking was too much for him.

Marco tried to sound casual. “It started when she asked me to help her—you were in jail, I believe—but then her sister and grandmother got sick, and now I’m kind of all she’s got.” He watched Ryan’s face change. Watched the realization sink in.

“Does she know I was in jail?”

The douche looked like he was about to cry. Marco threw him a bone. “I didn’t tell her.”

Ryan nodded. “Thanks.”

Like I did it for you . . .

The med ward was now in Harry’s department store, according to the senator’s last announcement. Marco maneuvered through the service halls and between the empty stores with ease. Ryan followed silent as a shadow. They only communicated when Marco stopped in front of a door marked HARRY’S, LEVEL 1, and then Marco merely held his finger to his lips and cracked the door open.

The space before them seemed empty. It looked like some back area—shelves of shoe boxes lined narrow corridors.

“We’re clear,” Marco said. Ryan nodded and they both slipped into the stockroom.

They followed a path between the stacks of shoes to a swinging door, which opened onto the main level. What had been the shoe department was now lined with cots and walled off from the rest of the showroom floor by a

curtain wall. A young guy with his arm in a sling dozed in a corner; otherwise, the room was empty.

“Must have been where they treated the riot victims,” Marco said, weaving toward the only space in the curtain wall.

“Why do you think that?” Ryan followed a step behind.
“No bodies.”

“I had the flu,” Ryan said. “I survived.”

Marco glanced back at him. “You’re lucky.”

Beyond the curtain wall was a makeshift hallway. The entire sales floor had apparently been divided into “rooms” using curtains salvaged from the PaperClips.

“Which way?” Ryan asked.

“Does it matter?” Marco said, feeling defeated. He turned onto the hall leading away from the front of the store, hoping security was stationed there and nowhere else.

They’d checked five rooms when voices reached them from another part of the curtain complex: “An unauthorized entry was logged through a door off the service halls. We’re looking for a fugitive.”

Ryan grabbed Marco and dragged him into the nearest room. Through some wonderful twist of fate, the room contained Shay and her sister, both asleep on hospital beds.

Ryan’s face fell. “Is she sick?” he whispered.

Marco walked to her side. “No,” he said quietly, willing it to be true. “At least, she wasn’t when I left her a few hours ago.”

Ryan stood on the other side of her bed. “She asked

you to help her,” he said, staring down at her face. “Help her do what?”

“Escape.” Marco took her hand. If there was going to be some battle between them for her, he wanted to claim ground early on.

Ryan’s arms dangled at his side. “Did she say anything about me?”

“She never mentioned you.” Marco was being honest. Though of course he knew about them, had seen them all lovey-dovey outside the Grill’n’Shake. And he worried, or at least a very small part of him he was trying desperately to ignore worried, that if she opened her eyes right now and saw them both, she would choose Ryan.

Ryan was caught between kicking Marco’s ass for touching his girlfriend and concern that the dweeb had actually, through some horrible cosmic joke, won her from him. “You obviously didn’t help her escape,” he said. “What did you do?”

Marco raised his head slowly. “I was there for her when she needed someone. While you were off skydiving from the rafters, I saved her from being crushed in the riot.”

Ryan did not consider himself a particularly competitive person off the football field, but seeing Marco’s grip on Shay’s fingers filled him with a primal instinct. He had an inkling of the brain-space Mike lived in every day, a place where everyone was a threat or a target, where every move you made had better put you closer to your goal. Judging by Marco’s hold on Shay’s hand, Ryan sensed that there was little Marco wouldn’t do to keep her. Ryan decided

that he had better play it conservative; after all, his survival and that of Mike and Drew depended on the weasel.

“If she’s not sick, then why is she hooked up to that machine?” Ryan asked, playing the safest card he could.

“I told you, she got crushed in the riot. I *saved* her.”

Footsteps stopped outside the curtain wall; Ryan dropped to the floor and crawled under Shay’s bed, sure they were looking for him. Yet when the guard stepped into the room, he said, “Marco Carvajal?”

Marco shifted his feet—that was all Ryan could see.

“Who’s asking?” Marco said.

Why would security be looking for *him*?

“The senator.” The guard stepped forward, but Marco went toward him without waiting to be dragged away.

Ryan was thankful that Marco did not alert the guard to his presence, and merely walked with the man out of the room.

He crawled back up to standing. Shay groaned softly. Was she having a bad dream? What horrible things had happened to her while he’d been running around like an idiot? He should have stayed with her. She needed him—not anymore, he guessed. Not now that she had Marco.

But Shay liked him. He was sure of it. Marco had to be a stand-in at best. Ryan would win her back. A part of him wanted to shake her awake right then and demand that she dump Marco and run away with him. They would hide out in some corner together. But he didn’t let himself do it. Instead, Ryan leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead like a promise.

“I gave her a sedative, so no matter how long you kiss her, Sleeping Beauty is not waking up.”

A large nurse stood in the “door” in the curtain wall.

“Sorry,” Ryan mumbled, jerking himself to standing. “I’m a friend.”

The woman folded her arms across her chest. “I would hope so.”

“I’ll go.” Ryan was ready to bust through the curtain to get out of there if that’s what it took.

The woman thankfully stepped aside. “Don’t let me catch you in here again.”

Ryan shuffled out, glancing behind him to see the woman disappear into Shay’s room. He debated eavesdropping to make sure Shay was okay, but not wanting to tempt the nurse to violence, decided to exit while he still had the option. He grabbed a bottle of pills from a tray—what kind of pills, he had no idea, but he figured he’d better return to the Grease’n’Suck with something or risk having to explain his failed expedition to Mike. Ryan had a feeling Mike wouldn’t have a lot of sympathy for his nearly getting nabbed while checking up on his would-be girlfriend. Especially when Ryan’s whole goal was to steal her from the only person in this mall Mike seemed to trust.

The security officer led Marco up to the third floor, then toward the skating rink, which was closed, according to a piece of paper taped to the door. *Weird . . .*

This end of the third level was opposite the more exciting part, which offered movie theaters, a bowling alley, restaurants including the Grill ‘n’ Shake, a bookstore, the arcade, etc. The officer stopped in front of a nondescript metal door with a pane of glass in the wall next to it, behind which sat a bored-looking guard. Marco’s guard

nodded to him, the door buzzed, and the guy opened the door for Marco.

“After you,” he said.

Marco walked through, eyes wide and ears open. This was like the most wonderful, unexpected recon opportunity ever. Every question he had about what the hell was going on in the mall, the answers were somewhere in this cluster of offices. He tried to absorb the information through osmosis.

One room held cots, another had piles of what looked like weapons and shields, in the next an older guy was futzing with computer wires between four cubicles, the one after that, three cots. Opposite the computer room was a dark closet with flashing screens showing the feeds from the mall’s closed-circuit camera system. Then, at the end of the hall, the senator. She had a stack of paper on her desk. A heavysset man in a uniform sat on the other side of it.

“We’ve done all we can to convince people,” she said, setting aside a sheet. “It may take a few days, but they’ll see that this plan is going to work and get in line.”

“You’re the boss,” the man said, sounding like he was not sold on the idea.

“I am not establishing a police state,” the senator responded. “At least not as a first option.”

The man got up and left.

The senator waved at Marco. “Come in,” she said, pointing to the chair the heavysset man had abandoned. Marco sat. The senator folded her hands on her desk. “You know what’s stuck in my mind?”

Marco did not like the smug look she was giving him.

He’d stared down enough authority figures at this point to know the palette of looks they displayed and what each one meant. You can only be in so many scuffles before you’re just hauled in every time there’s even a rumor of a fight. Not like Marco really had a choice in whether he got the crap beaten out of him.

Unsure of where the senator was hoping to lead him, he gave her a noncommittal shrug.

“How exactly did you get into the back of the Paper-Clips during the riots?”

This was not the question Marco was expecting. “I saw an open door and went through it.” He tried to be as vague as possible.

The senator’s eyebrows flicked up. “Interesting. Because it occurred to me that maybe you can answer not only this question, but the question of my missing security card key.”

Marco swallowed. This was not the usual interrogation session with a guidance counselor; this was like staring down a shark. He sensed that one false move and she would tear his head from his body.

His brain spun into high gear. He couldn’t afford to give up the card. It was the only bargaining chip he had in this place. Without it, he would lose Mike, lose any freedom he’d gained, forget being able to protect Shay. But they could search him and find the thing without his saying a word and where did that get him?

Better to play some hand than none at all. He slid his fingers into his pocket and felt around for his old card key. He pulled it out, leaving the universal card safely tucked away, and placed it on her desk.

"I only wanted to help Shay," he said, trying on his most pathetic voice.

"And those Spider-Men who tried to get out to the roof."

Motherfrakingcrap.

She pushed the card back toward him. "Don't hyperventilate just yet," she said. "I have a job for you."

Marco did not take the card back. What the hell did she mean by *job*?

The senator leaned back in her desk chair and stretched her hands behind her head. "I have a bit of a problem, Marco. There are around four thousand people in this mall and I only have a small private security force to control them. As we saw yesterday, when the people want to take over, they can.

"I am trying to pull this place together out of that chaos. But I can only do so much. People who don't want to jump on my bandwagon? Well, I don't have much of a way to get them on by force. So here's where you come in.

"I have a hunch, and you don't have to answer, but my hunch is that you know where my Spider-Men are. I don't want to waste my precious police resources hunting and trapping them, so I am offering you the job."

"You want me to hunt and trap the guys who tried to escape through the skylight?" He tried to play it as dumb as possible.

"No," she said, smiling. "I want you to keep tabs on them and keep me informed of any future problems they plan on causing."

"And I get to keep the card key?"

"You can keep the card key."

This deal was like a freaking dream come true. Not only was he not in trouble, he was being ordered to do exactly what he was planning on doing anyway. His arrangement with the douches was now blessed by the cops, and Mike and the others would never be the wiser.

"Okay," he said, taking back the card key.

The senator held out a hand. "Glad to have you on board."

Marco took it. "No problem."

"There better not be." She gripped his palm and stared hard into his eyes. "I am trusting you to be on my side in this. Do not cause me to regret that trust." She released Marco's hand.

"I won't," he said.

"Come back here tomorrow after dinner to check in," she said, then turned to a computer screen.

Marco assumed he was dismissed. The guard who had led him in was waiting outside the door. He shuffled Marco along the hall and let him out the front, depositing Marco back in the mall.

The hallway seemed brighter now. Maybe it was the late-afternoon sun coming through the windows of the food court, maybe it was the relative emptiness of this part of the mall. Marco took a deep breath, like he was sucking in the light, then trotted down the hall toward the escalators, his sneakers bouncing off the tiles like he was made of light himself.



**F
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Having worked in her sexy outfit for half a day, Lexi longed for the comfort of her old tee and hoodie. Her old baggy jeans. Every time she bent over, she felt like some part of her pants was going to split. The pink sweater itched—maybe she was developing a rash. And it seemed to suck in the heat, so she was sweating buckets. Lexi had never felt less sexy.

“Cot number seven million and two, done.” Maddie flopped onto the flat bed, then winced. “I think I’d rather sleep on the floor.”

Lexi found it bizarre how everyone was eager to help; even the whiny girls like Maddie who bitched and moaned still did their assigned job. It was like everyone felt bad about the whole riot thing, and couldn’t we put that behind us and all pretend nothing happened?

After clearing all the clothing from the sales floors into the stockrooms, people asked what they could do

next. The guards found new jobs for everyone, assumedly handed down from the Senator, who’d yet to appear in the flesh. Some were given the sucktastic job of cleaning the bathrooms, others the much less smelly job of col-lating travel-sized toiletries into Ziploc bags, and a few trusted old ladies were given the job of pulling suitable clothes for sleeping from the piles in the stockrooms. Lexi and Maddie were assigned to the largest team, charged with setting up the cots.

Lexi sat beside Maddie. “At least we’re not cleaning the johns,” Lexi said, swabbing her forehead with her sleeve. “I heard that half of them are clogged, with like—”

Maddie put a finger to Lexi’s lips. “Stop. TMI.”

Lexi shrugged. “You said you wanted *all* the gossip.”

“Not the gross stuff,” Maddie said. “Keep the gross stuff to yourself.” She looked at Lexi like Lexi was the only gross thing in the place.

“Okay,” Lexi mumbled. “No gross info. Check.”

Maddie looked around the room at the other women and girls setting up the cots. There were people of every age, but most looked like they were in high school or college. Lexi held still, waited for Maddie to break the silence.

Instead, her mother’s voice boomed through the space: “For those registered at the Home Stores, dinner will be served in the first-floor courtyard outside the Borderland’s Cantina. If you have not been registered, you will not be served. Please take this opportunity to register at a Home Store. Dinner service will end at seven p.m. sharp.”

Maddie hopped off the cot. “I’m so hungry, I don’t even care what they’re serving.”

Lexi hauled her butt up to follow Maddie, but stopped when she saw her dad, Arthur Ross, hobbling toward her.

“Hey girls,” he said, cheery as ever. “Lex, I finished the database, but now I need help inputting the information collected at the Home Stores. Can I borrow you?”

Lexi’s stomach growled. “Can I start after dinner?”

Her father checked to see if anyone was looking (no—everyone was shoving their way downstairs to grab some grub), then pulled a box of frozen burritos from his satchel. “A special treat for working through a meal.”

Maddie perked right up. “Can I help?” she asked, eyelashes batting. She grabbed Lexi’s arm and gave her a pleading look. “Don’t leave me alone to eat the camping food.”

Maddie could seemingly turn her friendship off and on whenever she liked. A minute ago she’d looked at Lexi like she was no better than the crap being sucked out of the toilets; now she clung to her like they were best buds. But Lexi told herself that she was just being sensitive. Maddie was her friend. They’d been having a great time right up until like five minutes ago.

“Of course I won’t leave you,” Lexi said.

Maddie snatched the box of burritos. “Knew I had you whipped,” she said, kissing Lexi’s cheek. “Now, where’s a micro when you need one?”

After nuking the food, Lexi and Maddie wolfed their burritos as they followed Arthur to the first floor. Dad had a laptop set up on the folding table serving as the entrance to the JCPenney. Beside it sat one of the guards responsible for checking people in.

There was a healthy line snaking away from the coun-

ter. It had taken several hours, but people were finally convinced that it was safe to come out into the open. Or maybe they were just that hungry. It didn’t matter. Each gave the guard her name, and in return was handed a special white mask that fit like a dome over the nose and mouth, and small bottle of hand sanitizer.

“Of course they show up after we’ve cleared the whole place and set up their beds,” Maddie snarked, scarfing the last of her burrito.

At least they’ve decided to join the forces of good, Lexi thought. If her mother’s orders had failed to rally people, what then? She refused to think of it. Maddie was wrong. The Senator was in control—look how people followed her commands! There would be no more riots. She would not end up buried under the rubble again. She had Maddie to watch her back. *Right?*

Maddie picked up the first sheet in the pile beside the laptop and Lexi positioned herself in front of the screen. Maddie read the names and Lexi clicked the box in the database to indicate the person had checked into a Home Store, and then the box indicating which of the three stores they were in.

After a half hour of droning on, Maddie interrupted her recitation. “She’s here.”

“Is that a name?” Lexi said, scrolling through the list.

“Ginger,” Maddie snarled. “She’s here.”

Lexi’s jaw tightened at the name. Ginger had abandoned her, leaving Lexi to try to save the kids in the Abercrombie alone. Ginger had made her use the CB radio to call Ginger’s dad, who caused a riot outside the mall and got Lexi in trouble with her parents, and Darren, her

parents—everyone—in trouble with the Feds. Ginger had ruined everything. And now she was back.

Lexi cracked her knuckles. “We shouldn’t be surprised. Where else would she go?”

“Stay in whatever hole she’d crawled into when she left me to die in the Abercrombie? All it took was one mall apocalypse to wreck a lifelong friendship.” Maddie snuggled against Lexi’s shoulder. “At least some people are real friends.”

Lexi felt a warmth spread over her cheeks. *Real friends*. She didn’t want to show Maddie how much those words meant. She straightened her back, jostling Maddie, who sat straight.

“Back to the grind,” she said, sighing, and read the next name.

Someone coughed in the line. The sound echoed like a bomb blast around the emptiness of the hallway. The guard at the table next to them looked up.

“Who coughed?” he shouted. It was the guy who’d seemed so lost this morning. Now he looked like a wolf with a scent.

No one responded. Then a youngish woman waved an arm. “She did!” she yelled, pointing to a mom-aged woman in a flowery dress.

The older woman froze, glanced around her. “I feel fine,” she squeaked. “I just need a sip of water.”

The rest of the people in line backed away from her. Two guards, faces in masks and hands covered in plastic gloves, closed in from the hall.

“Really, I’m fine,” she said, then, as if her body wanted to betray her, she coughed again.

The guards grabbed her arms and led her out of line. The guard next to Lexi pulled antibacterial wipes from a container. He waved them in the air. “Miss,” he yelled.

The girl who’d sold out the woman pointed to herself. “Yeah, you,” the guard said. “Take these and wipe down your hands and face, and give one to everyone around you, then wipe the barrier where the woman was standing.”

The girl’s eyes were wide, her mouth a thin, trembling frown. She obeyed, skipping forward on her tiptoes, and then scuttled back to where she’d been. The others in line took their wipes and began cleansing the space.

The guard turned to Lexi, sliding two masks across the counter. “Put these on.”

Lexi slipped the thing over her face and passed the other to Maddie, who followed suit without making a peep.

Shay was shaken awake by Jazmine. “Dinnertime,” the nurse said, holding out a plate. A pile of what looked like reconstituted barf slid across the surface.

“I’m going to be sick.”

Jazmine smiled and dropped the plate onto the metal table between Shay and her sister. “You had a visitor this afternoon. Some boy.”

Shay’s heart rate increased. “Oh?” But then she reminded herself that it was Marco, had to have been; Ryan, even if he was still in the mall, had no idea that she was in the med center. Only Marco knew that. Her heart rate sank back to normal. “He’s just a friend.”

“Seemed pretty friendly,” Jazmine continued, the smug smile on her face visible beyond the borders of her mask. “He kissed you.”

Gooseflesh prickled across Shay's skin. Marco *kissed* her? No, that was against the rules. If she had kissed him on the cheek, that was only to be friendly. He was taking things out of context. He was reading into her actions. Not that she could really blame him. She had been, in essence, leading him on. But what choice did she have? She had a sister to protect. She needed an ally. And to keep him, she would do whatever she had to.

But she would say something to him the next time she saw him. There would be no kissing, especially while she was passed out. Or if he really needed a kiss, then only on the cheek. God, this Marco nonsense was the last thing she wanted to deal with. Why were boys so freaking needy?

Jazmine laughed. "You look like you're deep in thought, so I'll let you think." She stood.

"No," Shay said, not wanting to be left alone now that she was awake. "I was just thinking about the boy. Do you have a boyfriend?"

Jazmine settled back on the gurney. "I'll tell if you eat something." She nodded at the plate.

Shay lifted the sagging paper dish. "What is it?"

"Chicken something," Jazmine said, eyeing the plate. "I had some. It's edible."

"Are the white lumps chicken?"

"A safe bet," Jazmine said. "I say just close your eyes and shovel it in. You need to eat."

Shay held up her wrist. "I have my trusty IV."

Jazmine frowned. "You planning to spend the rest of your life with that in your arm?"

"Who knows how long that even is?" Shay wasn't

sure why she said that. She didn't want to be negative. But it felt true, once said. She could die tomorrow. And wouldn't that be better than facing another nightmare day in this place?

Jazmine's face softened, but still looked disappointed. "You have to stay strong," she said. "You have a sister to watch out for." She squeezed Shay's hand. "Things are going to get better from now on. This senator lady has got people working together."

For how long? Shay had never been a bitter person, but now it felt like all that was inside her was bitterness. She pushed it down, conjured some happiness.

"That's great."

Jazmine smiled. "That's my girl."

Shay shoveled a spoonful of chicken slop into her mouth and forced herself to swallow it down. "It's actually good," she managed, stifling a retch.

"Now I know you're lying," Jazmine said, chuckling. "Here." She pulled a small leather notebook from the pocket of her cardigan. "I found this in the PaperClips and thought you might like it. You look like a journal girl."

Shay laid the spoon aside and took the notebook. It was a business thing, the kind of little book her dad used to take to conferences before he got an iPad. Opening it, Shay saw that the pen was one of those special ones that had a built-in light in the pen tip and a highlighter on the other end. She ran her fingers over the paper, which was smooth and blank.

"Maybe you can write something about your grandma and show it to me?"

Shay glanced up from the beautiful blankness of the paper, tears turning the world to water. “Yes,” she said, her voice catching on the word.

Jazmine smiled and patted her leg through the thin blanket. “Then you finish your food. I’ll be back in a half hour to check you out.” She took Shay’s wrist and gently removed the IV.

Panic gripped Shay. “Don’t I need that?” Why was Jazmine taking away her medicine?

“It’s just saline,” Jazmine said. “And you’re conscious now, so you can feed and hydrate yourself. We have to conserve what resources we have, now that we’re on our own.”

“But what if I pass out again?”

“Honey, that was the effect of a sedative I gave you. One of the security guards said you looked panicked, so I gave you something to help you relax. But you’re all better.”

Gave me a sedative? Like Shay wasn’t already feeling totally out of it, this woman thought it was a good idea to drug her? And “all better” seemed a long way off if sedatives were on the table as treatment. Unless this was all some ploy . . .

“Are you kicking me out?”

“We need the bed for people who are in recovery.”

“But what about Preeti?”

“She’ll stay for another twenty-four hours for observation, but then she can join you at the JCPenney.”

Shay’s mind raced. She would not be turned out into that madhouse. She would not be left alone to be crushed by the masses. Where was Marco? She began to cry. It was all she had left.

“Don’t make me leave.”

Jazmine squeezed her shoulder. “You’re a strong girl,” she said. “Things are safe out there now. I wouldn’t send you into harm’s way.”

Shay did not trust this woman. Who was she, really, but a stranger who’d pretended to care, just like everyone else? Shay was just another body to be moved around. She had to find Marco. He would help her get Preeti out of here. He would help them find somewhere to hide.

Jazmine continued spouting her plans for Shay’s release. “A guard will take you to the JCPenney if you want.”

“No,” Shay blurted. “I can do it.” She would not get trapped by one of those lunatics with a Taser. She’d seen them blast people if any of their orders were contradicted.

Jazmine brushed off her pants. “If that’s what you want.” She walked to Preeti’s bed and checked her over—pulse, temperature, blood pressure, lung sounds. “Your sister is doing just fine. You can come back and see her in the morning.”

Shay was barely paying attention. She needed a plan. She was still wearing the T-shirt and jeans she’d stolen from H&M. Maybe her bag was under the bed?

Jazmine, as if reading her mind, handed her her bag. “What did I say this morning?”

Shay snatched the strap.

Jazmine grasped her shoulder. “I told you that you have to trust someone.”

Shay nodded because that was what Jazmine wanted, but the woman was wrong. Shay would not trust anyone but herself. Who else could she really count on?

“Can I finish my food?” She needed some more time to come up with a strategy.

Jazmine sighed. “Take your time,” she said. “I’ll be back in an hour to check you out.”

Good. An hour to plan her actions. She scooped the rest of the chicken mush into her mouth. She wasn’t sure what food existed outside the med center; who knew when her next meal would be? She dumped out her bag and sorted the items: wallet, iPod, headphones, dead cell phone, contact solution and case, children’s Tylenol . . .

The bottle stopped her brain cold. She’d last held it to Nani’s lips in an attempt to drive back her fever. How deeply she’d failed Nani. What an idiot she’d been to think she could save her. What good were her plans, really? She’d screwed up everything, killed her grandmother, nearly killed her sister. Better to just lie back and let the mall take her.

Preeti stirred. “Shaila?”

Shay froze, caught between the sadness inside, sucking her against the bed, weighing her body down, and the need to show her sister everything was okay.

“Shay?” Preeti’s voice trembled. “Are you here?”

Jazmine was right about one thing: Shay had to be strong for Preeti. She sealed up the sadness like a sandwich bag. *Poof!* The emptiness felt like joy.

Shay sat up. “I’m here.”

Preeti, who hadn’t even really been awake, rolled over. “Tell Mom I’m not going to school.”

“Okay,” Shay chirped. She stuffed all the crap back into her bag. Her hand stroked the smooth surface of the notebook, nestled amid the sheets. Did she even need it? She felt so clean inside. *Take it,* whispered the sadness. Shay slipped it into her bag.



Ryan tapped the pill bottle against his legs as he padded through the service halls back toward the Grill’n’Shake. At least he thought he was heading back to the Grill’n’Shake. Ryan tried to stick to the path Marco had taken, but all the halls looked alike and, without Marco’s card, most doors were closed to him. He was beginning to consider the possibility that he was lost.

There were store names printed in block letters on some of the doors, but that information was of little use to Ryan. It’s not like knowing he was outside the Candy Hut gave him a clue about where he was relative to the Grease’n’Suck. He wasn’t a big mall person, not like other people. Funny, to go to the mall maybe five times in a year and end up getting quarantined on one of those visits. *Typical Murphy Luck.*

Ryan’s older brother, Thad, had a theory about Murphy Luck. Murphy Luck was always to blame for an interception. Murphy Luck explained why Thad could drink a twelve-pack of light beer and not even get buzzed. Murphy Luck was why Dad was such a dick. The man couldn’t even keep a one-day construction job without pissing someone off. Crap like getting lost in the service halls of a mall qualified as undeniable Murphy Luck.

Voices echoed from around the corner. Not wanting to find out if they belonged to security, Ryan pushed open the nearest exit door. It opened into the second-floor hallway next to the Sports Authority. Feeling like perhaps Murphy Luck had taken a time-out, and that he should not be in the hall, Ryan decided to upgrade from his crusty climbing clothes.

The store was empty—no salespeople, no shoppers, and most importantly, no insane looters with guns. Things seemed normal, like there had never been a riot. Were people really following the mall leader's orders?

Not that it mattered to Ryan. Mike had made the call that they were staying under the radar. Ryan was not going to rock the very small boat of protection he'd found in this hellhole, even if it meant also staying under the thumb of Marco. Mike had watched his back from minute one of this nightmare. Ryan owed it to him to stick with his plans. They were teammates, and a team was a powerful thing. He would find some way around the Marco-Shay situation.

He grabbed a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt, then decided, why stop there? They were obviously taking up residence in the place and might want a change of clothes. He grabbed a duffel and packed it with some T-shirts in his size, then a bunch larger for Mike and Drew, shorts, socks, and boxers. He went into the back to look for some sneakers.

As he rounded the corner of one floor-to-ceiling shelf, he discovered a person who'd not been as lucky with the flu. It was a man. Old. His dad's age. His face was bluish and blood had dried in thin trails from his nostrils. Puddles Ryan did not want to know the origins of pooled around his legs. He smelled terrible.

Ryan scrambled back to the other side of the shelf. His second dead body in as many days. Why was this happening to him? To any of them?

Forget about it. There was nothing he could do to help that guy or Mike or himself, any of them. Best to just for-

get about it. Move on. Find the sneakers and get the hell out of there.

He found a pair of sneakers in his size. The things cost two hundred dollars. In the real world, he couldn't have ever hoped to buy them. *Screw the Shops at Stonecliff.* The place owed him some freaking nice sneakers for all the crap he'd been through.

The coast was clear outside the store. Ryan heard voices down below, but just regular talking. He checked over the railing and saw people sitting on the floor with paper plates. There were dead bodies lying around and these people were at a goddamn block party. It was like bizarre-o-world.

The ground seemed to pull away, and Ryan felt a wave of nausea course through him. He found a bench and parked his ass on it.

He was not fully recovered from the flu. He pretended he was fine, but there was a constant ache in his muscles and his brain went fuzzy if he moved too fast. He should get back to the Grease'n'Suck. He waited for the nausea to subside, then shouldered the bag and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible.

There was no one on the third floor, so Ryan walked faster, nearly running into the Grill'n'Shake. The dining area was empty now. Ryan headed straight into the kitchens.

Mike and Drew were sitting beside a small pile of boxes overflowing with bags of defrosting chicken strips, crackers, and what appeared to be a handle of vodka.

"Looks like you've got all the food groups," he said, dropping the duffel.

Mike looked up. "What the hell took you so long?" He stood and grabbed the back of Ryan's head, pulling him into a hug. "You okay?"

Ryan shrugged him off. "Fine." Mike's caring was a little intense. "I'm not at death's door."

"You were at death's door, idiot." Mike shoved Ryan's head.

"I'm fine, really," he said, trying to ignore the throbbing Mike's jostling had ignited in his skull. "I got us some clothes."

Drew rifled through the duffel. "Packers!" He pulled out a jersey.

"What kind of crap are they selling in this mall?" Mike said, grabbing the bag.

It was the one point of dissent between Mike and Drew. Mike was a Giants guy and Drew had been raised a cheesehead like his dad. The only fight Ryan had seen between the two started when Mike in a drunken haze pissed on Drew's cheese-wedge hat. Drew had tackled him, busting a hole in his basement wall. The fight ended when Mike promised to not only buy a new hat, but to wear a Packers jersey for a week.

"Don't get your jocks in a twist," Ryan said, rubbing his temples. "There's something for everyone."

Mike dug out a Giants jersey and pulled it over his head. "Now we're in business."

"Jumbo Shrimp comes through in the clutch." Drew tugged on some new socks.

Ryan ducked into the bathroom to change and splash water on his face. He slurped some from his cupped hand, then examined himself in the mirror. He didn't look good.

Pale. Bags under the eyes. He'd bench himself. But this was no game. There was no bench to rest on.

When he came back, Marco had rejoined their crew and was skulking in the corner. He was smiling, but still looked pissed off. The guy was weird.

"Now that the whole gang's back together, let's mosey to our new quarters." Marco clapped his hands like this was some class trip.

Ryan was not ready to follow Marco blindly. "What did the senator want to see you about?"

Marco gritted his teeth. He had not wanted to share that particular tidbit with Mike, but it figured the douche wouldn't allow even that small lapse in information. Perhaps he'd twisted the knife too hard on the whole Shay issue.

"She asked me if I had a stolen card key. She'd seen me in a back hall during the riots. I was trying to save my friend's life."—Marco looked purposefully at Ryan, who looked a bit peaked—"The senator was suspicious, so I gave her my old one from the Grill'n'Shake." It was a decent lie. The douche did not question him further and slogged over to a duffel bag.

Mike nodded. "Nice thinking."

"I thought so." Marco was impressed with himself. Everything was coming up Carvajal today. If you discounted the whole trapped-in-a-mall-with-a-deadly-virus thing.

The mall speakers squealed and announced the end of dinner in fifteen. "Please return to your Home Store for distribution of new clothes and toiletries."

Marco checked his watch. It was six forty-five, a little

early for curfew, if you asked him, but nobody was asking, so he'd better get this show on the road. "I have to get back before anyone cares that I'm gone."

"Calm down, Taco," Drew muttered, pushing himself to standing.

"Marco." Marco would not let that nickname back into their vocabulary.

"*Mar-co.*"

The nickname had sounded kinder.

The Three Douches hefted their boxes of nutritionally dubious food and followed Marco into the service halls. Marco decided to risk the elevator—he was now a sanctioned mall employee of sorts; who was going to stop him? He led them down to the parking garage, then wove through the rows of cars to the far wall where he knew of a storage closet for cones and other parking-related crap.

The door to the room wasn't even locked, so Marco swung it open and was greeted with a cloud of stale air. He flipped on the light. The space was the size of a minivan and was empty save for a stack of cones and some sandwich board signs used for indicating that the lot was full.

"There's no window," Ryan said, poking his head through the doorway. "How are we supposed to breathe?"

Mike pushed past him into the space. "It's perfect. No one will bother us here."

"Glad I packed the vodka," Drew said, pulling the bottle from the box.

"I'll come back in the morning to check in," Marco said, dusting off his hands. He didn't want any residue from that hole following him up into the mall.

"What are we supposed to do for a bathroom?" Ry-

an's voice sounded squeaky, like he was about to cry. Marco would have liked to see that. He would have liked to record it for Shay. *Here's your big strong boyfriend . . .*

"The parking garage is your oyster," Marco said, waving a hand.

Mike grabbed Ryan by the shoulders. "We'll manage."

Mike held a hand out for Marco to shake.

Marco took it. "See you in the morning," he said, then shut the door on them for the night.



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Lexi had finished typing in the last entry when a guard approached with a late arrival, fresh from the med center.

“She’s a riot intake, not flu,” the guard said. This diagnosis seemed hasty to Lexi. The girl did not look well.

“Shaila Dixit,” she mumbled, eyes bloodshot and scanning the inside of the JCPenney as if ready to run at the least provocation.

Even through the mist of sick and crazy the girl was giving off, Lexi could tell she was gorgeous. Much prettier than Lexi. But wasn’t everyone?

“I can’t really check people in,” Lexi said. “There’s a guard.”

“I’m not waiting,” the guard said, and left.

The girl kept sweeping the room with her eyes.

“I guess I can just tell him when he gets back,” Lexi offered.

The girl glanced at her. “It looks safe,” she said. “Is it safe?”

Lexi shrugged. “Compared to what? We’re in a mall with a lethal virus.”

The girl was not amused. “What do I do? Just find somewhere to sleep?”

Lexi checked the list. The guard had left his clipboard on the counter when he went to the bathroom. Maddie had said she had to go too, and would he show her where they were? That had been like a half hour ago. It did not take much imagination to picture what had caused the intervening delay. The guard had been on the “youngish and cutish side”—Maddie’s words.

“You’re cot number fifteen-twenty. That means first floor. Look for a cot with a five-twenty on it.” Lexi reached under the counter, where perfumes had once been stored, by the smell of it. “Here’s a nightgown.”

The girl took what looked like a nightie Laura Ingalls Wilder would have donned on the prairie.

“And here’s some soap, hand sanitizer, a mask, and I think a toothbrush?” Lexi passed a plastic bag across the glass.

“Thanks,” the girl mumbled, taking the items and stuffing them into her shoulder bag. She all but tiptoed into the store, head turning this way and that, as if watching for ghosts haunting the empty cosmetics counters. For all Lexi knew, they were—who knew how many had died in this very spot?

The question having been posed, Lexi realized she now possessed the power to answer it. In front of her, on her laptop, was a database of the entire population of

the mall. Her father had set up an intranet linking Lexi's laptop with a server in the mall offices. He had entered all the names from the med center himself instead of letting Lexi do it—some lame attempt at preserving people's privacy or something. All she had to do was run a search for all the entries that had not been checked in to one of the Home Stores or the medical center and she would get—one thousand five hundred and thirty-five.

ONE THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-FIVE?

Her father must not have finished entering his names. No way there were over one thousand dead. First of all, where would the Senator have put them?

Maddie trotted back to the counter. "What'd I miss?" Her shirt was disheveled. Her cheeks were flushed. Her face mask hung like a necklace around her neck.

"You know, my mom made an announcement about minimizing contact to prevent the spread of disease." Lexi canceled her search, erasing the impossible number.

Maddie poked her in the arm. "But I already *had* the disease, so that rule totally does not apply to *moi*." She winked at the guard as he passed to begin shutting the security gates.

Lexi rolled her eyes and closed the laptop. "I'm going to check on our new home."

Maddie brushed her hands over her shirt. "Excellent. I want to use the bathroom." She replaced her mask.

"You just came from the bathroom."

"Oh," she said. "Right." She laughed. No, cackled. Lexi was not sure how to respond, so she kept silent.

Their cots were on the second floor in what had been an evening gown display. Lexi had pulled rank and gotten

them these digs. The area was a small bubble off the main floor, offering them an iota of privacy, something the rest of the floor lacked. There were two other cots in the space, both occupied by older women who were already prone and staring at the ceiling.

Lexi had left her assigned Ziploc bag and pajamas on the cot closest to the wall. Maddie had moved both one cot over, giving herself the cot next to the wall.

"You moved my stuff," Lexi said.

"Is that okay?" Maddie asked. She grabbed her stuff and sashayed out of the bubble.

It was okay, Lexi guessed. But Maddie should have asked. Maybe she'd thought it was someone else's stuff? No, Maddie had seen Lexi's assigned paisley boxer pj's after dinner check-in. *Whatever*. It didn't matter. One cot was as good as the next. And it was better than sleeping with her parents in the mall offices. That was the message the Senator had relayed after dinner via the guard's walkie-talkie. "Please ask my daughter if she would please sleep up here with her parents." Just the words every girl longs to hear. She told the guard to reply in the negative.

Lexi grabbed her stuff and headed for the dressing rooms. There were lines for the bathroom and she wanted out of this hairy nightmare sweater ASAP.

Shay sat on the cot marked 520. There were far too many people in this room. The nearest cot was a mere foot away and the woman on it was already snoring.

The guard had closed the security gate over the exit to the rest of the mall. Was this supposed to make her feel safe? She felt trapped, caged. There was no running back

into the mall through the front entrance. To escape, she was going to have to go out the back.

As if to emphasize the prison aspect, a security guard stalked by her cot, stun baton swinging beside his leg and Taser in its holster. There were only a few guards. After Lights Out, it wouldn't be hard to sneak by them. Shay tried to memorize the path from her cot to the stockroom door. Once she was in the stockroom, she could use her key-light to find the service door. After that, she was home free. She would fetch Preeti from the med center under cover of darkness and then hide out in a nearby stationery store until morning, at which point she would find Marco and they would hole up in some back-room fortress until the government decided to open the doors.

Now the only difficulty was the waiting. She did not know how long she had until Lights Out. How to kill the time? She went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Some other women were washing with wet paper towels, splashing water over their faces and hair. Shay decided to follow suit. She bent over her sink and tried to get her hair under the faucet.

"It's easier if you use your Ziploc bag like a bucket," the woman next to her said. "If you want, you can use mine." She held out her plastic bag.

The woman had a nice face. She looked old, but not Nani old.

"Thanks," Shay managed, and took the bag.

The woman returned to running her fingers through her mane of brown hair. Shay wondered if the bag was okay—was the woman infected? It was too late now. Shay filled the bag, added some soap, and doused herself, then

passed it back to the woman. Only afterward did she realize that she'd failed to remove her T-shirt, the top quarter of which was now soaked. She would have to change into the wretched nightgown she'd been given: red plaid with small blue flowers and a lace-trim collar. It fit her about as well as a garbage bag and was only slightly more comfortable. The fabric was a weird polyester that crinkled with her every motion. She left her jeans and boots on.

Another fifteen minutes were consumed in the finger-combing and braiding of her hair. Shay contemplated hacking the mess off, but the mere idea of losing her hair brought tears to her eyes. She found a stray elastic in her bag and wrapped it around the end of the braid.

The lights still glared down at her. There was more time left to kill.

The notebook found its way into her hands. She flipped it open. She clicked the pen light on and off, on and off. No words came. Normally, she couldn't write fast enough, the words poured so rapidly from her brain. Nothing. She put the pen tip on the page, wondering if mere proximity would inspire, but no. Still nothing. Her words had died.

She closed the journal and dropped onto the cot, which was a mistake, as the thing was barely softer than the cement floor. Her head throbbed. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the pain. At least in it there was something to hold on to.

"Pass the crackers," Ryan said into the black. Mike had ordered the lights be left off to keep their hiding place inconspicuous.

A bag hit him in the side of the head.

“Nice aim,” he grumbled, rubbing his cheek. His head could not withstand much more abuse.

“I am like a freaking laser guided missile, J.S.,” Drew said from somewhere off to Ryan’s right. He sounded drunk. Ryan wondered how many handles of vodka the two had stowed away and whether there was anything of a non-alcoholic variety available. He was not going to risk a flu relapse by getting hammered.

Munching stale saltines, Ryan contemplated his options for reconnecting with Shay. He could sneak out tomorrow during a bathroom break and try to locate her in the med center again. Maybe just seeing him would be enough to bust up whatever she had going with Marco. Taco had said she’d come to him for help. *I can help her now.*

The thought made him laugh. How could he help anyone from a dark closet in the parking garage? And what, was he going to propose that she live with the three of them in this tomb? He wasn’t even sure he’d make it through the night. The floor was cold and kind of wet, and the air smelled of exhaust fumes and was thick with dust.

Plus, would Marco retaliate if Ryan made a move for her? Not like things could get much crappier. He could move them to an even dirtier hole in the parking garage, but Ryan doubted such a place existed. He could rat them out to security, but if he hadn’t done that already, it seemed unlikely. Mike had mentioned something about them watching out for Marco. Maybe the weasel needed them more than he needed to keep Ryan away from Shay.

Ryan’s brain throbbed. He was not known for his strategizing skills off the field. Ryan’s plan was just to be nice

enough to people, to pass his classes, and generally not make any waves outside of the football arena. Mike was the guy who was always running some scheme. Maybe he could help with Shay?

It would have to wait. Ryan’s head was killing him. He pulled the pill bottle from his pocket and decided to take two. Whatever they were, they had to help. His head couldn’t feel any worse.

“I need a drink,” Ryan said, palming the pills.

“I’ve got a bottle of joy juice with your name on it.” Mike’s voice sounded like it was coming from the floor. Was he already flat-on-his-back drunk?

“Anything of the less flammable variety?”

“You can’t light vodka,” Drew mumbled, like Ryan was such an idiot for not knowing this.

“Water,” he said, growing more tired of this stupid plan by the second. “Do we have any water?”

“You need Bacardi 151, something serious,” Drew continued.

“Shut up,” Mike drawled. “Any drink you make, I can light it. You just have to hold the freaking lighter over the glass for more than two seconds.”

“Like you know anything.”

“Like *you* know anything.”

Ryan slapped the pills into his mouth and choked them down with spit alone. He curled up on the gross floor, head on his duffel, and prayed that whatever he’d just taken didn’t kill him. This could not be how he lived for the rest of his potentially shortened life. There had to be a Plan B. Plan A sucked.

The line for the bathroom was no shorter when Lexi emerged from the dressing rooms in her boxers and T-shirt. It snaked around the perimeter of the sales floor. The women in line chatted with those seated on cots. Everyone seemed happy, some even laughed, like it was okay to joke around again. The mall, well, the JCPenney felt safe. Like no one would leave a girl trapped under a corpse beneath a pile of garbage ever again.

Even with all the women using it, the bathroom was relatively clean. One girl tossed her paper towel into the trash only to miss. Instead of walking away, she trotted over and put the crumpled sheet into the bin. It was like people cared again. Had Lexi's mom actually pulled this thing off?

"Hi."

Lexi had just splashed water on her face, so it took a second for her to wipe her skin dry and address the person belonging to the voice. She knew who it was, though. It was undoubtedly Ginger Franklin's tremulous warble.

"I'm so glad you're okay." Ginger twisted a strand of her hair around a finger.

Ginger had a bruise on her cheek. Lexi did not really care how she got it.

"No thanks to you," Lexi said.

Ginger looked like she was tearing up. *Good.*

"I'm really sorry," Ginger said. "I was just so scared. I don't want to die in here."

"Really? Because everyone else is totally lining up for the chance to kick it in the Gap."

"I suck, I know it. What can I do to make it up to you?"

"Go away." Lexi turned back to the mirror and dug the mini toothbrush out of her bag.

Ginger wiped her eyes with her hand. "I never took you for a mean girl," Ginger said.

"No, you only took me for a loser you could use and then abandon."

"I never took you for a loser." Ginger disappeared from Lexi's mirror.

Lexi didn't need Ginger. Ginger had bailed when Lexi needed her most. When her supposed best friend needed her most. Friends like that were no friends at all. Still, Lexi felt like a jerk. She wasn't used to being pissed off at anyone except her mom. Her computer nerd friends, or friend, really—Darren and her, they never fought.

Lexi allowed herself to wish Darren were here. Yes, it was kind of a death sentence, but it would have been great to have had one of her people stuck in here with her. Darren would have been the perfect partner for spying on the Senator. Darren would never have ruined everything by calling his dad and starting a riot outside the mall.

Lexi finished brushing her teeth. The fantasy swirled down the drain with her spit. She was trapped in here with one friend who was kind of a bitch and another who was no friend at all. *Welcome to your life.*

Back at the cots, Maddie was flipping through a magazine.

"They came by with books and stuff," she said. "I got us a *Cosmo* and *Us Weekly*." She waved two magazines. "Can I take *Us Weekly*?" It was the one she had in her hands. Lexi nodded.

Maddie went back to reading. “It’s a week old,” she groaned. “I already knew about this breakup.”

Lexi had never even flipped through a *Cosmo* before. There were lots of skinny white girls in clothes that looked less comfortable than the sweater from hell Lexi had spent the day trapped inside. These were not her people.

“I’m going to walk around.”

“Let me know if you find a copy of *Lucky*.”

What in the name of jeebus was *Lucky*? “Roger that,” Lexi mumbled, and made for the stockroom.



L I G H T S O U T

At ten, the lights went black. All of them. The men around Marco grunted—“Hey!” “What the hell?”—and the shrieks of women could be heard from the JCPenney down the hall. The mall speakers bleeped and the not-quite-reassuring voice of the senator apologized and ordered that some lights be left on for safety’s sake. Within five minutes, a fluorescent light buzzed to life somewhere behind Marco’s head.

Marco had preferred the black. He had covert ops to run. Light just made everything that much more difficult.

After storing The Douche Corps in the parking garage, Marco had signed in to the Lord & Taylor, which was where all the unaccompanied men were supposed to live together peacefully. Whoever devised this plan had clearly never been to an all-boys camp. Some total dick had pissed all over the seat of the john Marco had gotten stuck with, and in the time he’d taken to do the round-trip tour

through the facilities, some asshole had stolen his pillow. At least no one had crapped in his cot.

Marco had gone to camp. Once. His parents had signed him up for a community day camp one week, at the end of which all the campers went on an overnight to Bear Mountain State Park. Marco was supposed to share a tent with one of the other kids, but some false claims were made about Marco's sexual orientation, which prompted the boy to abandon Marco after lights-out to bunk with his friends in another tent. Marco's solo enclosure was excreted upon at random intervals throughout the night. He listened to the sound of piss spattering on his tent and prayed that the walls truly were waterproof. After each golden shower, there was an explosion of laughter from the other tent signaling the piddler's return to his partners in pee.

He'd cried. Not like anyone was there to call him a pussy over it. In the morning he packed the tent in its bag, then washed his hands over and over, never really feeling clean. When the bus dropped him off, he informed his parents that he hated camp and didn't ever want to go again. Money always being an issue anyway, the funds were never again wasted on summer programs.

At least this time, it didn't matter. He would not be at the mercy of these assholes. He had the key to the entire mall. And he was out of here the second that security guard cleared the area.

Shay was beginning to regret her plan. Here she was, in some back hallway behind the JCPenney, and there were no lights except the tiny LED on her key and the glowing red of a distant exit sign. Voices echoed down the hall,

from where, Shay was not sure, but they scared her. She did not like being alone in this hallway, and definitely did not like the idea of *not* being alone in the hallway.

Stumbling forward, Shay kept one hand on the wall, the other waving the small light back and forth across the ground in front of her. Knobs on pipes winked at her. Her hand dropped into a doorway and she staggered, falling against the metal door. She fumbled her key ring, which clattered into the black below.

Shay knelt on trembling legs and patted the cement. The echoes were closer now. Or were they simply coming from the other direction?

Her hand hit something soft, not keys. Shay dared to let her fingers explore the softness. It felt like jeans. Something groaned. Then claws clasped her wrist.

Shay screamed, punched and kicked the softness, which groaned again and let go.

"Help," it may have said.

Once freed, she thrust herself away, hit the opposite wall, then clambered to her feet. Running blind through the dark, Shay took whatever turns the hall presented; she just needed to be away from whatever had groaned. Visions of Nani's blackened, gaunt, dead face, eyes glistening, flashed in the darkness. She ran from the visions, had to escape these ghosts. *Exit*. She needed an exit.

Red signs were her only guide. *EXIT. EXIT.* Her hands slammed into a dead end. From the cold and the corrugation, Shay guessed it was a sealed-over freight delivery door.

Shay banged on the metal. *Let me out!* she screamed in her mind, afraid if she spoke in real life, the echoes would

materialize into people. That the ghosts would be real.

The freight door didn't give when she struck it. All the doors from the mall to the world must have been sealed over with concrete, permanently shut. She would die in this place. All of them were being left to die in this place.

Marco rolled off his cot and crawled down the narrow aisle to the far wall. He traveled light, just his card key, wallet, and iPod—no way he was getting rid of it, even though without Internet or a charger cord, once the battery died, it would be dead weight. He'd never changed into the boxers and shirt he'd been given to sleep in—like he was going to go nighty-night amidst that pack of wolves? *Hells to the no.*

He made it to the nearest stockroom door and slipped through it unnoticed. There were no lights on. The place smelled weird. Then Marco saw a lighter flash in a far corner. *So this is where the party's starting.* Marco had wondered how people would take going from complete freedom to incarceration. Apparently, incarceration had won out for a few hours and now the natives were restless. He was glad to be getting out while the getting was good.

The door to the service hallways was thankfully closer to him than to the lighter flame, so he escaped without incident. Alas, the halls were dark, which made everything suck that much more. Marco groped along the passage, hoping to find an exit before something found him.

No such luck. Footsteps slapped toward him. Then arms slammed into his back.

"Out of the way, loser!" a voice cackled, tearing past Marco.

Okay, maybe this was worse than the Lord & Taylor. At least there were a few security guards in the Lord & Taylor.

As Marco weighed the pros and cons of returning to the at least semi-policed chaos of the men's Home Store, a familiar voice echoed down the passage to his right.

"Help," Shay whispered. "Someone? Help."

Marco ran through the black toward her voice. What the hell was she doing here? Shouldn't she be in the med center? She had a serious head injury!

He turned a corner and heard a door rattle. Marco dashed toward the noise and ran smack into Shay. She screamed and Marco jumped back.

"Shay, it's me! It's Marco!"

She burst into tears and threw her arms around him.

He stroked her hair. "You're okay," he whispered. "I'm here. You're safe." He was not sure why he said this. Like he could protect her from anything.

Her body went limp, as if her bones had evaporated. "I'm so scared," she whispered.

"Let's get you back to the med center."

"Kicked me out," Shay mumbled.

"Then the JCPenney," Marco said, assuming she had been thrown in with the rest of the *chicas*.

Shay nodded against his chest.

Marco used his iPod as a light, flashing it for brief moments to find landmarks—a name on a door, a corner—and managed to wind his way through stockrooms and passages to a door marked JCPENNEY. Shay clung to him like she couldn't take a step without support.

"Why did they kick you out?" he asked, trying to take her mind off whatever had happened to her in the tunnel

before he found her. He prayed it was just the dark. If it was something worse, he would find whoever hurt her and kill the bastard.

“No room,” she said, her voice barely hissing beyond her teeth. “I’m all alone in there.”

Marco slid his card through the reader and opened the door. “It’s safer in here,” he said, leading her into the stockroom. “Just stay the night, and tomorrow, I’ll find us someplace to hide.”

She nuzzled closer to him. Warmth flared over his skin.

“And Preeti?” she managed. “We have to protect her.”

Marco stopped in front of the door leading to the sales floor. “And Preeti. I am going to take care of you both.” He liked saying the words. It was as if by saying them, they could be true. A dream blinked into his brain, him and Shay and Preeti hiding out in a stockroom, all the food they needed, no one bothering them, safe until whenever this nightmare ended. Him and Shay. Together.

Shay leaned her head against the door frame. “‘Til tomorrow, then,” she said.

Marco, unable to control his lips, leaned forward and pressed them to her forehead.

Shay stiffened. “Please,” she said, pushing him away. “I can’t.”

And a part of Marco seethed. *She can’t with me.* But the better part won out.

“Okay,” he said, pulling back. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Shay said, smiling.

“I’ll find you after Lights On.”

Shay nodded and slipped back into the neat, quiet rows of sleepers.

Marco tracked back to the service door only to hear voices on the opposite side. Not wanting to risk another encounter in the black, he padded to the opposite side of the stockroom. There were several different large rooms back here, all of them stuffed with the original contents of the sales floors. Sequins sparkled in his dim light, and his pants caught on errant hangers and poles from the haphazardly disposed-of racks.

Lexi sat on a desk in an office of some sort. She’d wandered after leaving Maddie and found her way into the stockrooms. When Lights Out was announced, she’d stumbled into this office, closed the door, and flipped on the light. Searching the room, she came upon two significant prizes: (1) an old CD player with a cache of not-too-terrible CDs, and (2) a bag of peanut M&M’S. Satisfied this was the best the place had to offer, she’d turned the lights off and enjoyed her feast with a Beatles accompaniment playing softly. She was halfway through *Revolver* and had two M&M’S left when someone slammed into the other side of the wall against which she was leaning.

Unable to leave well enough alone, Lexi slid off the desk and tiptoed to the door. Peeking outside, under the dim light of the one bulb left burning in the stockroom, she saw a boy wrestling with a display rack.

And not just any boy. A lanky, nerdy-looking guy. And judging from the amount of space he’d covered before becoming ensnared in the racks, at home enough in the dark that he probably spent too much time indoors, perhaps playing video games; this was his element. This was also Lexi’s element. This boy was her people.

She suddenly wished she was back in Maddie's outfit. She wanted to look hot for this guy, even if it meant breaking out in a sweater-induced mega-rash.

What would Maddie do? Say something flirty, be confident.

"I think you won," Lexi said.

The guy gave his cargo pants one final jerk and freed himself from the wretched rack. Looking up, he squinted at her, then smiled—he wasn't wearing a mask. *Does that smile mean he likes what he sees?*

"I would hope I'd have the advantage over a clothes hanger," he said.

Lexi liked his face. It wasn't model-nice, but wasn't bad, either. "Don't get cocky," she said. "I had my money on the rack for a few seconds."

"The thing did rip my cargo pants," he said. "I guess we'll call it a draw."

Lexi didn't get a slick vibe from him. He wasn't giving her a line. Sarcasm was his normal mode. It was also Lexi's. She kind of didn't want him to go. "So what brings you to the JCPenney after Lights Out? Did a girlfriend let you in?" She might as well find that out now.

He considered his answer a moment longer than Lexi would have liked.

"A friend who is a girl let me in," he said. "We have been helping each other out and she asked me to check on her. She was scared to be separated."

Lexi did not buy this excuse. How did they know when to meet? It was a long time after Lights Out. And how did he find his way through the service hallways to get from the Lord & Taylor to here? And why lie to her?

"That smells like a load of crap, but whatever. I don't really care. Go on with your operation." She let him hang on that line, turned and went back into her office.

He followed her. "Is this your room?" he asked, flipping on the light.

Lexi couldn't help but smile that he'd followed. "It is now," she said, hopping onto her desk. She held out the last two M&M'S. "Want one?"

"Thanks," he said, and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slowly, luxuriously.

Lexi slid the yellow M&M between her lips. If neither of them could speak, then he couldn't leave. The candy was gone all too quickly. "You going to tell me the truth now?" she said, trying to keep up her confident front. "Like what you're really doing in the back of the JCPenney after eleven on a Saturday. I mean, the place closes at nine according to the sign on the door."

He laughed. "You got me. I'm into women's clothing and needed to stock up on evening wear for the Halloween drag ball."

Lexi had completely forgotten about Halloween. How sad was that? Not that she dressed up. She and Darren hadn't dressed up in years. No, they liked to hide in the bushes outside his house and scare the crap out of the little trick-or-treaters (obviously the Senator allowed no pranks to be played on her government-funded lawn).

"I'm just kidding," he added.

Lexi came back into the present. "Sorry," she said. "Very funny. I just had forgotten about Halloween. Weird how it feels like time should have stopped, like the world should be on pause until we're out of here."

“Yeah,” he said.

Had she said something wrong? He had withdrawn into himself, shrunken like a raisin. “I’m Lexi,” she said, wanting to bring him back.

“Marco,” he said, then seemed to regret it.

There was a knock at the door. They looked at each other. Lexi kicked out the desk chair and Marco dove into the darkness under the desk. Lexi dragged the chair back with her feet as the door opened.

“What are you doing back here?” the guard said. He glanced around, suspicious.

Lexi weighed playing dumb against pulling the mom card. She decided on the mom card. “I’m the Senator’s daughter.”

“Oh,” the guard said. He seemed to weigh options himself. “You can’t be back here after Lights Out.”

Lexi slid off the desk. “Oh, okay,” she said. “My mom had said I could take a break back here if I needed to.”

“I never heard about that.”

“I guess she forgot to tell people,” Lexi said, walking toward the door, opening it for the guard. “I’ll be back here every night after Lights Out.” She hoped Marco got her message—*I’m here if you want to hang out*. However he’d gotten in here, she felt pretty sure he could get in again.

The guard took the door and held it open for her. Lexi walked through, wishing she could have said good-bye. But really, where was Marco going to go? They were trapped in here. She would see him again. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

Maddie was still awake when Lexi returned to the cot.

“Where have you been? I’m wired and there’s nothing to do.”

“I found a boy in the stockroom,” Lexi said, unable to keep it to herself. She’d met a *boy*.

Maddie was all ears at the mention of boys. “Are you telling me there’s a party in the stockroom and you are just letting me in on it now?”

“A boy, singular.” Lexi stretched out on the cot, hands behind her head. “And he wasn’t your type.”

“At this point,” Maddie mumbled, flopping back on her pillow, “any boy is my type.”

“Well, he’s gone now. And we just talked.”

“What a waste.”

It hadn’t been a waste. Lexi would find him again. He was her people. She’d finally found her people.

Marco waited five minutes before crawling out from under the desk. He crept to the door and cracked it open. With only the one lit bulb, it was hard to know if the coast was clear, but he needed to get out of there, so he just ran for it.

“I knew she wasn’t alone in there.” The guard emerged from the shadows.

Before Marco had a chance to utter a syllable, the guy fired the Taser and a jolt like fire in the blood sent Marco into a swirl of darkness.

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