

My Soul to Lose

Soul Screemers series

by Rachel Vincent, 1978–

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„Thanks for the ride, Traci!“ Emma slammed the back door, then opened it again to free the end of her filmy red skirt as her sister leaned out the open driver’s side window.

„Be ready to go at eight, or I’m leaving you here.“

Em gave a mock salute, then turned toward the mall entrance without waiting for the car to pull away from the curb. We would be nowhere near the parking lot at eight o’clock. Finding a ride home would be no problem—Emma could cock one hip and smile, and guys all over Texas would throw their car keys at her feet, if that’s what she wanted.

But sometimes a ride was more fun, because she could flirt with the driver. See how much he could take before his concentration wavered and he had to force his attention back onto the road. She’d never actually caused a wreck, but

Em went a little further every time, ever eager to push the limits of... Well, of anything.

I went along for the ride because it was a delicious rush of power and freedom—living vicariously through Emma was usually more exciting than living my own life for real.

„Okay, Kaylee, here’s the plan.“ Em stepped up to the glass doors, and they whooshed open. The artificial cool inside was a mercy on my damp skin and overheated cheeks; Traci’s car wasn’t air-conditioned, and September in the Dallas metroplex was still hot enough to make the devil sweat.

„So long as it leads to Toby’s public humiliation, I’m in.“

„It will.“ She stopped in front of a mirror built into the wall of the main walkway and her reflection grinned at me, brown eyes sparkling. „And that’s the least he deserves. You really should have let me key his car.“

And I’d been totally tempted to. But I was less than a year from getting my license and couldn’t shake the certainty that if we keyed someone’s fresh paint job— even if that someone was my rat of an ex-boyfriend—new-driver karma would come back to bite me on the bumper.

„So, what are you going to do? Push him into the snack table? Trip him on the way into the gym? Unbutton his pants while you’re dancing, then scream for help?“ I wasn’t too worried about homecoming-dance karma. But Toby should have been...

Emma turned from the mirror, her pale brows high in surprise. „I was just gonna stand him up, then make out with his best friend on the dance floor, but that last one has real potential. Maybe we’ll do both.“ She grinned again, then tugged me around the first corner to the huge main corridor of the mall, where the center of the floor opened to reveal the first level below. „But first we’re gonna make sure you look so good that he spends every minute of this stupid dance wishing he was there with you.“

Normally I’m not much of a shopper. Thin and small chested looks just as good in jeans and skinny tees as it does in anything more complicated, and I must have been dressing to my advantage subconsciously, because finding a new date had only taken two days.

But that didn’t make Toby any less of a human cockroach—less than an hour after he’d dumped me, he’d asked Emma to homecoming. She’d accepted with a plan for revenge already half-plotted.

So I’d come to the mall the weekend before the dance armed with my aunt’s credit card and Emma’s good taste, prepared to dump a metaphorical shaker of salt over my slime-filled leech of an ex-boyfriend.

„We should start with...“ Emma stopped and gripped the brass rail, looking down at the food court on the lower level. „Yum. Wanna split a soft pretzel first?“

I knew from her tone that food wasn’t what had caught her eye.

A level below us, two guys in green Eastlake High baseball caps were shoving two tables next to a third, where four girls from our school sat in front of an untouched pile of junk food. The guy on the left was a junior named Nash Hudson, whose pick of the week—Amber something-or-other—was already seated. Showing up at homecoming with Nash would have been all the revenge I could ask for against Toby. But that wasn’t gonna happen. I wasn’t even a blip on Nash Hudson’s social radar.

Next to Amber sat my cousin, Sophie; I would have recognized the back of her head anywhere. After all, that was the part of her I saw most.

„How did Sophie get here?“ Emma asked.

„One of the other dancing monkeys picked her up this morning.“ She'd been ignoring me consistently—mercifully—since dance-team try-outs a month earlier, when she'd become the only freshman member of the varsity dance team. „Aunt Val's picking her up in about an hour.“

„I think that's Doug Fuller across from her. Come on!“ Emma's eyes glittered beneath the huge skylight overhead. „I wanna drive his new car.“

„Em...“ But I could only run after her, dodging shoppers hauling bags and small children. I caught up with Emma on the escalator and rode down one step above her. „Hey look.“ I nodded toward the group at the food court, where one of the dancers had just switched sides of the table to whisper something into Doug's ear. „Meredith's gonna be pissed when she sees you.“

Emma shrugged and stepped off the escalator. „She'll get over it. Or not.“

But the moment my foot hit the ground, a cold, dark sense of dread gripped me, and I knew I couldn't go any closer to the food court.

Not unless I wanted to cause a scene.

I was seconds from losing control over the scream building deep inside me, and once it broke free, I wouldn't be able to make it stop unless I could get away.

Better to leave before that happened.

„Em...“ I croaked. One hand went to my throat; it felt like I was being strangled from the inside.

Emma didn't hear me; she was already strutting toward the cluster of tables.

„Em...“ I said again, forcing that single syllable out firmly, ahead of the pressure building in my throat, and that time she heard me.

Emma turned and took one look at my face, and her forehead wrinkled in familiar concern. She glanced longingly toward the food court, then rushed to my side. „Panic attack?“ she whispered.

I could only nod, fighting the urge to close my eyes. Sometimes it was worse then, when I saw only darkness. It felt like the world was closing in on me. Like things I couldn't see were creeping toward me.

Or maybe I watch too many scary movies...

„Okay, let's go.“ Em linked her arm through mine, half holding me up, half dragging me away from the food court, the escalator and whatever had triggered this particular... episode.

„A bad one?“ she asked, once we'd put a good two hundred feet behind us.

„It's getting better.“ I sat on the edge of the huge fountain in the center of the mall. The jets of water shot all the way up to the second floor at certain points during its routine, and little droplets pelted us, but there was nowhere else to sit. The benches were all full.

„Maybe you should talk to somebody about these panic attacks.“ Emma plopped down beside me with one leg tucked beneath her, trailing her fingers through the rippling water. „It's weird how they seem to be locked on specific places. My aunt used to get panic attacks, but walking away didn't help her. The panic went with her.“ Emma shrugged and grinned. „And she got really sweaty. You don't look sweaty.“

„Well, at least there's a bright side.“ I forced a laugh in spite of the dark, almost claustrophobic fear still lurking on the edges of my mind, ready to take

over at the first opportunity. It had happened before, but never anywhere so heavily populated as the mall. I shuddered, thinking how close I'd come to humiliating both me and Emma in front of hundreds of people. Including half a dozen classmates. If I freaked out in front of them, the news would be all over school by the tardy bell on Monday morning.

„Still feel like cooking up a little revenge?“ Emma grinned.

„Yeah. I just need one more minute.“

Em nodded and dug through her purse for a penny. She couldn't resist feeding the fountain, despite my certainty that no wish you had to pay for could possibly come true. While she stared at the coin on her palm, eyes squinted in concentration, I steeled myself and turned to face the food court, my jaws clenched tight. Just in case.

The panic was still there—indistinct but threatening, like the remains of a nightmare. But I couldn't pinpoint the source.

Usually I could put a face on the dark dread looming inside me, but this time the crowd made that impossible. A group wearing our rival school's colors had taken the table next to Sophie and her friends, and both sides were deeply engaged in a French-fry war. Several families stood in line, some parents pushing strollers, one pushing a small wheelchair. Some kind of moms-'n'-tots group had descended upon the frozen-yogurt place, and couples of all ages shuffled their way through the cattle shoots in front of each restaurant's counter.

It could have been anybody. All I really knew was that I couldn't go back there until the source of my panic had gone. The safest thing to do was to get as far away as possible.

Em's penny plunked into the water behind me, and I stood. „Okay, let's try Sears first.“

„Sears?“ Emma's frown puckered both her forehead and her glossed lips. „My grandmother shops there.“

As did my style-conscious aunt, but Sears was as far from the source of my panic as we could get and still be in the mall. „Let's just look, okay?“ I glanced at the food court again, then back at Emma, and her frown faded as understanding sank in. She wouldn't make me say it. She was too good a friend to make me voice my worst fears, or my certainty that, at that moment, they could all be found at the food court. „They might have something..“ I finished weakly.

And with any luck, by the time we'd scoured the juniors' department, whoever had triggered my panic attack would be gone.

Maybe I should have tossed a penny in the fountain too.

„Yeah. They might have something.“ Emma smiled, and we made our way quickly down the central corridor. The tension in my neck eased with each step, and I only realized I'd been grinding my teeth when my jaw suddenly relaxed. By the time we stepped into the cloud of perfumed air near at the Sears makeup counter, the panic had completely receded into memory.

It was over. I'd narrowly escaped complete terror and utter humiliation.

A little giddy from relief, Emma and I glanced through the dresses, then spent the next hour trying on goofy, pastel-colored pants and flamboyant hats to pass the time, while I kept my mental fingers crossed that, when we left, the coast would be clear. Metaphorically speaking.

„How you feelin’?“ Emma tilted the brim of a neon green hat and smoothed the long blond hair trailing beneath it. She grinned and made a face at herself in the mirror, but her eyes were serious. If I wasn’t ready to go, she would hide out in the Sears granny section with me for as long as it took.

Em didn’t truly understand about my panic attacks—no one did. But she’d never pushed me to explain, never tried to ditch me when things got weird, and never once looked at me like I was a freak.

„I think I’m good,“ I said, when I realized that no traces remained of the shadowed horror I’d glimpsed earlier. „Let’s go.“

The boutique Em wanted to hit first was upstairs, so we left our hats and sherbet-colored pants in the dressing room and laughed our way through Sears until we found the in-store escalator.

„I’m gonna wait until everyone’s there—till the dance floor’s totally packed—then I’ll press up really close to him.“ Clutching the rubber handrail, Emma twisted to face me from the tread above, a mischievous grin lighting up her eyes. „Then when he’s really happy to see me, I’ll yank his zipper, shove him back, and start screaming. They’ll probably throw him out of the dance. Hell, maybe they’ll expel him from school.“

„Or call the cops.“ I frowned as we stepped off the scrolling stairs and into the bed-and-bath department. „They wouldn’t do that, would they?“

She shrugged. „Depends on who’s chaperoning. If it’s Coach Tucker, Toby’s screwed. She’ll stomp his balls into the ground before he even has a chance to zip up.“

My frown deepened as I ran my hand across the end of a display bed piled high with fancy pillows. I was all for humiliating Toby, and I was certainly up for wounding his pride. But as satisfying as the whole thing sounded, getting him arrested hardly seemed like a fitting consequence for dumping me the week before homecoming. „Maybe we should rethink that last part...“

„It was your idea.“ Emma pouted.

„I know, but...“ I froze, and my hand flew to my neck as a familiar ache began at the base of my throat.

No. Nooooo!

I stumbled back against the bed, suddenly swallowed whole by a morbid certainty so vicious I could hardly draw my next breath. Terror washed over me, a bitter wave of anguish. Of grief I couldn’t understand, or even place.

„Kaylee? Are you okay?“ Emma stepped in front of me, half blocking me from the other shoppers’ sight, and lowered her voice dramatically. „It’s happening again?“

I could only nod. My throat felt tight. Hot. Something heavy coiled in my stomach and slithered toward my throat. My skin crawled with the movement. Any moment, that swelling screech would demand freedom and I would fight to contain it.

One of us was going to lose.

Emma’s grip tightened on her purse and I recognized the helpless fear in her eyes. They probably reflected my own. „Should we go?“

I shook my head and forced out two last whispered words. „Too late...“

My throat burned. My eyes watered. My head swam with pain, with echoes of the shriek now trying to claw its way out of me. If I didn’t let it, it would tear me apart.

Nononono...! It can’t be. I don’t see it!

But there it was—across the aisle, surrounded by rainbow-hued mountains of bath towels. A deep shadow, like a cocoon of gloom. Who is it? But there were too many people. I couldn't see who swam in that darkness, who wore shadows like a second skin.

I didn't want to see.

I closed my eyes, and shapeless, boundless terror closed in on me from all sides. Suffocating me. That bitter grief was too hard to fight in the dark, so I forced my eyes open again, but that did little good. The panic was too strong this time. Darkness was too close. A few steps to the left, and I could touch it. Could slide my hand into that nest of shadows.

„Kaylee?“

I shook my head because if I opened my mouth—or even unclenched my jaws—the scream would rip its way free. I couldn't force myself to meet Emma's eyes. I couldn't tear my gaze from the shadows coalescing around... someone.

Then the crowd shifted. Parted. And I saw.

No.

At first, my mind refused to translate the images sent from my eyes. Refused to let me understand. But that blissful ignorance was much too brief.

It was a kid. The one in the wheelchair, from the food court. His thin arms lay in his lap, his feet all but swallowed by a pair of bright blue sneakers. Dull brown eyes peered from a pale, swollen face. His head was bare. Bald. Shiny.

It was too much.

The shriek exploded from my gut and ripped my mouth open on its way out. It felt like someone was pulling barbed wire from my throat, then shoving it through my ears, straight into my head.

Everyone around me froze. Then hands flew to cover unprotected ears. Bodies whirled to face me. Emma stumbled back, shocked. Scared. She'd never heard it—I'd always avoided catastrophe with her help.

„Kaylee?“ Her lips moved, but I couldn't hear her. I couldn't hear anything over my own screaming.

I shook my head. I wanted to tell her to go—that she couldn't help me. But I couldn't even think anymore. I could only shriek, tears pouring down my face, my jaws open so wide they hurt. But I couldn't close them. Couldn't make it stop. Couldn't even dial back the volume.

People moved all around me now. Mothers let go of their ears to herd their kids away, foreheads furrowed with the headache we all shared. Like a spear through the brain.

Go... I thought, silently begging the bald child's mother to push him away. But she stood frozen, both horrified and somehow transfixed by my audio onslaught.

Motion to my right drew my attention. Two men in khaki uniforms ran toward me, one yelling into a two-way radio, his free hand over his other ear. I only knew he was yelling because his face was flushed with the effort.

The men pulled Emma out of the way, and she let them. They tried to talk to me, but I couldn't hear them. Couldn't make out more than a few words from their silent lips.

„...stop...“

„...hurt?“

„... help...“

Terror and grief swirled inside me like a black storm, drowning out everything else. Every thought. Every possibility. Every hope.

And still I screamed.

One of the mall cops reached for me, and I stumbled backward. I tripped on the base of the display bed and went down on my butt. My jaw snapped shut—a brief mercy. But my head still rang with the echo of my shriek, and I couldn't hear him. And an instant later, the scream burst free again.

Surprised, the cop stepped back, speaking into his walkie again. He was desperate. Terrified.

So was I.

Emma knelt next to me, hands over her ears. Her purse lay forgotten on the ground. „Kaylee!“ she shouted, but made no sound I could hear. She reached for her phone.

And as she dialed, color suddenly drained from the world, like *The Wizard of Oz* in reverse. Emma went gray. The cops went gray. The shoppers went gray. And suddenly everyone stood in a swirling, twisting colorless fog.

I sat in the fog.

Still screaming, I waved my hands near the ground, trying to feel. Real fog was cold and damp, but this was... insubstantial. I couldn't feel it at all. Couldn't stir it. But I could see it. I could see things in it.

On my left, something twisted. Writhed. Something too thick and vertical to be serpentine. It twisted somehow through a shelf of towels, without ever touching the shoppers pressed against them, as far from me as they could get without leaving the department.

Apparently I was enough of a freak show to justify the pain of listening to me.

On my right, something scuttled through the mist on the ground, where it was thickest. It scurried toward me, and I leaped to my feet and dragged Emma away. The cops jumped back, startled all over again.

Emma pulled free of my grip, her eyes wide in terror. And that's when I shut down. I couldn't take anymore, but I couldn't make it stop. I couldn't stop the shrieking, or the pain, or the stares, or the fog, or the eerie movement. And worst of all, I couldn't stop the certainty that that child—that poor little boy in the wheelchair—was going to die.

Soon.

Dimly I realized I'd closed my eyes. Tried to block it all out.

I reached out blindly, desperate to get out of the fog I couldn't feel. Could no longer see. My hands brushed something soft and high. Something I no longer had the word for. I scrambled up on it, crawling over mounds of material.

I curled into a ball, clutching something plush to my chest with one hand. Running my fingers over it again and again. Clinging to the only physical reality that still existed for me.

Hurt. I hurt. My neck hurt.

My fingers were wet. Sticky.

Something grabbed my arm. Held me down.

I thrashed. I screamed. I hurt.

Sharp pain bit into my leg, then fire exploded beneath my skin. I blinked, and a familiar face came into focus over me, gray in the fog. Aunt Val. Emma stood behind my aunt, face streaked with mascara-stained tears. Aunt Val said something I couldn't hear. And suddenly my eyes were heavy.

New panic flooded me. I couldn't move. Couldn't make my eyes open. And still my vocal chords strained. The world was closing in on me, dark and narrow, with no sound but the harsh wail that still poured from my abused throat.

A new darkness. Pure. No more gray.
And still I screamed...



My dreams were a jumble of violent chaos. Thrashing limbs. Bruising grips. Churning shadows. And through it all was that never-ending screech, now a hoarse echo of its former strength, but no less painful.

Light shone through my closed eyelids; my world was a red blur. The air felt wrong. Too cold. It smelled wrong. Too clean.

My eyes flew open, but I had to blink several times to make them focus. My tongue was so dry it felt like sandpaper against my lips. My mouth tasted funny, and every muscle in my body ached.

I tried to push myself up, but my arms wouldn't work. Couldn't work. They were tied to something. My pulse raced. I kicked, but my legs were bound too.

No! Heart pounding, I pulled on my arms and legs, then jerked them left to right, but couldn't move more than a few inches in any direction. I was strapped to the bed by my wrists and ankles, and I couldn't sit up. Couldn't turn over. Couldn't prop myself up on my elbows. Couldn't even scratch my own nose.

„Help!“ I cried, but my voice was only a hoarse croak. No vowels or consonants involved. Blinking again, I rolled my head to first one side, then the other, trying to get my bearings.

The room was claustrophobically small. Empty, other than me, the camera mounted in one corner, and the high, hard mattress beneath me. The walls were sterile, white cinder block. There were no windows in my line of sight, and I couldn't see the floor. But the decor and the antiseptic smell were dead giveaways.

A hospital. I was strapped to a hospital bed. All alone.

It was like one of Emma's video games, where the character wakes up in a strange room with no memory of how he got there. Except, in real life, there was no chest in the corner holding the key to my chains and survival advice written on parchment.

Hopefully there were also no video-game monsters waiting to eat me the moment I got loose, because even if someone had left me a gun, I wouldn't have known how to use it.

But my objective was clear: Get out. Go home.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done without the use of my hands.

My pulse swooshed in my ears, a hollow echo of real fear. That overpowering need to scream was gone, but a different kind of panic had settled into its place. What if there was a fire? Or a tornado? Or more screaming? Would anyone come get me, or would they leave me here to die? I would be easy prey for those shadow things, or a natural disaster, or any random psycho who wandered past.

I had to get off the bed. Out of these stupid... bed cuffs.

„Please...“ I begged the camera, frustrated by my own weak whisper. I swallowed thickly, then tried again. „Please let me out.“ My words were clearer that time, if no louder. „Please...“

No response. My pulse spiked, pumping adrenaline through me. What if they were all dead, and the last person on earth was strapped to a bed? Was this how civilization would end? With leather straps and padded handcuffs?

Get a grip, Kaylee.

The reality was probably much less far-fetched, but just as scary: I was trapped. Helpless, and exposed, and vulnerable. And suddenly I couldn't breathe. Couldn't make my heart stop racing. If I didn't get out soon, I was going to start screaming again—from normal terror this time, but the result would be the same. They'd shoot me up again, and the cycle would repeat ad nauseam. I'd be in this bed for the rest of my life, cowering from shadows.

So what if there were no windows and the overhead bulbs bathed the room in light? Eventually there would be shadows, and they would come for me. I was sure of that.

„Please!“ I shouted, almost giddy to hear my voice coming back. „Let me—“

The door opened seconds before I would have started fighting my bindings in earnest. „Hi, Kaylee, how are you feeling?“

I strained to lift my head and put a face to the smooth, masculine voice. He was tall and thin, but looked strong. Bad skin, good hair. „Like a frog about to be dissected,“ I said, as he unbuckled my left arm.

I liked him already.

„Fortunately for you, I was never very good with a scalpel.“ His smile was nice, and his brown eyes were kind. His name tag read: *Paul Connors, Mental Health Technician*.

Mental health? My stomach tried to twist itself in knots. „Where am I?“

Paul carefully unbuckled my other wrist. „You're at Lakeside Mental Health Center, attached to Arlington Memorial.“

Lakeside. The psych ward. Shit.

„Um, no. I can't be here. Somebody made a mistake.“ Panic poured into my bloodstream fast enough to make my skin tingle. „I need to talk to my aunt. Or my uncle. He'll fix this.“ Uncle Brendon had a way of straightening things out without pissing people off—a skill I'd always envied.

Paul smiled again and helped me sit up. „After you get settled in, you're welcome to call them.“

But I didn't want to settle in.

My own sock feet caught my attention from the end of the bed. „Where are my shoes?“

„They're in your room. We had to take them off to unlace them. For everyone's safety, we don't allow shoestrings, belts, drawstrings, or robe ties.“

My shoestrings were dangerous? Fighting back tears, I leaned forward to free my right leg.

„Careful. You might be a little stiff and shaky at first,“ he said, already working on my left ankle. „You were out for quite a while.“

My heart thumped painfully. „How long?“

„Oh, just over fifteen hours.“

What? I sat up and felt my eyes glaze over in horror. „You left me strapped to a bed for fifteen hours? Isn't there some kind of law about that?“

„Lots of them. And we follow every single one. Need help getting down?“

„I got it,“ I snapped. I knew my anger was misdirected, but I couldn't help it. I'd lost fifteen hours of my life to a needle and four-point restraints. I wasn't capable of friendly at the moment. „Why was I buckled in?“

I slid carefully off the bed, then leaned against it while my head spun. The dingy vinyl tile was cold through my socks.

„You arrived on a stretcher, screaming and thrashing though under heavy sedation. Even after you lost your voice, you kept flailing around, like you were fighting something in your dreams.“

The blood drained from my head so fast I got dizzy again. „I was?“ No wonder I hurt all over; I'd been fighting my restraints for hours. In my sleep. If chemical comas even qualified as sleep.

Paul nodded solemnly and stepped back to give me space when I stood. „Yeah, and that started again a couple of hours ago, so they had to buckle you back up to keep you on the bed.“

„I was screaming again?“ My stomach had become a bottomless pit of horror, swirling slowly, threatening to swallow me like a black hole. What the hell was wrong with me?

„No, thrashing. You went still about half an hour ago. I was on my way to unbuckle you when you woke up.“

„What did they give me?“ I reached for the wall when a fresh wave of dizziness rolled over me.

„The usual mix. Ativan, Haldol, and Benadryl to counter the side effects of the Haldol.“

No wonder I'd slept so long. I had no idea what the first two drugs were, but Benadryl alone was enough to knock me out for most of the night during allergy season. It was a miracle I'd woken up at all. „What if I'd been allergic to any of that?“ I demanded, crossing my arms over the T-shirt I'd worn to the mall. So far, waking up in my own clothes was the closest thing I'd found to a bright side.

„Then we'd be having this conversation in the E.R., instead of the restraint room.“

The restraint room? I was vaguely disturbed by the fact that they had a name for it.

Paul pulled open the door. „After you.“

I steeled my spine and stepped into the bright hallway, unsure what to expect. People walking around in straitjackets, mumbling to themselves? Nurses in white uniforms with starched hats? But the hall was empty and quiet.

Paul stepped past me, and I followed him to the last door on the left, which he pushed open for me.

I shoved my hands into my pockets to hide how badly they were shaking, then made myself cross the threshold.

Another white room, not much bigger than the first one. The bed was a mattress set in a heavy wooden frame, too narrow and too low. Draped with a plain white blanket. Empty, open shelves were bolted to the wall in place of a dresser, and there was one long, high window. No closet.

My stringless shoes lay at the end of the bed. They were the only things I recognized in the entire room. Everything else was foreign. Cold. Scary.

„So... I've been committed?“ My voice shook. I couldn't help it.

„You've been hospitalized,“ Paul said from the doorway.

„What’s the difference?“ I stood at the end of the bed, unwilling to sit. To get comfortable.

„This is temporary.“

„How temporary?“

„That’s up to you and your doctor.“ He gave me a sympathetic smile, then backed into the hall. „One of the nurses will be by in a minute to get you settled in. Hang in there, Kaylee.“

I could only nod. A second later, Paul was gone. I was alone. Again.

From outside the room came the steady rattle-clank of a cart being pushed down the hall. Shoes squeaked on the floor. And somewhere nearby, someone cried in great, dramatic sobs. I stared at my feet, unwilling to touch anything for fear that it would make the whole thing sink in. Make it real.

Am I crazy?

I was still standing there like an idiot when the door opened, and a woman in pale pink scrubs came in carrying a clipboard and pen. Her name tag read: *Nancy Briggs, R.N.*

„Hi, Kaylee, how are you feeling?“ Her smile was wide and friendly, but felt somehow... measured. As if she knew just how much to give. How to appear friendly without welcoming actual conversation.

I missed Paul already.

„Confused and homesick.“ I gripped the edge of the shelf with one hand, willing it to dissolve beneath my touch. To fade into the bad dream I’d surely wake up from any minute.

„Well, let’s see if we can’t fix at least the first part of that.“ The nurse’s smile grew bigger, but no warmer. „There’s a phone in the hall. Someone’s on it right now, but when it’s free, you’re welcome to use it. Local numbers, legal guardians only. Tell someone at the front desk who you want to call, and we’ll connect you.“

Numb, I could only blink. This wasn’t a hospital, it was a prison.

I patted my pocket, feeling for my phone. It was gone. Fresh panic exploded in my chest and I shoved my hand into my other pocket. Aunt Val’s credit card was gone. She’d kill me if I lost it! „Where’s my stuff?“ I demanded, trying to stop the tears that blurred my vision. „I had a phone, and some lip gloss, and a twenty-dollar bill. And my aunt’s credit card.“

Nurse Nancy’s smile thawed a bit then, either because of my tears or the fear they no doubt magnified. „We keep all personal items locked up until you’re discharged. Everything’s there except the credit card. Your aunt took it when she left last night.“

„Aunt Val was here?“ I used my bare hands to wipe my eyes, but they filled again instantly. If she was here, why didn’t she take me home?

„She rode in the ambulance with you.“

Ambulance. Discharged. Locked up. Those words played over and over in my head, a litany of fear and confusion. „What time is it?“

„Eleven-thirty. They’ll bring lunch in about half an hour. You can eat in the common area, down the hall and to the left. Breakfast is at seven. Dinner’s at six.“ She reached to her left with the hand holding her pen and pushed open a door I hadn’t noticed, revealing a tall, white industrial toilet and a shower stall. „You can shower whenever you like. Just come to the nurse’s station first for your hygiene kit.“

„Hygiene kit?“ My eyes went wide as my insides went numb. This isn't real. It can't be.

„We hand out soap and shampoo as needed. If you want to shave, you'll have to be monitored by a staff member.“ I blinked, uncomprehending, but she continued. „There's a group session about anger management at nine, one about coping with depression at eleven, and one at two this afternoon about symptoms of mental illness. That's a good one to start with.“

She smiled patiently, like she expected to be thanked for passing out information, but I just stared at the empty shelf. Her entire briefing was irrelevant to me. I'd be out very soon, surely, and the only group I was interested in was the group of my own family members who could make that happen.

„The boys' rooms are in the opposite wing, on the other side of the common area. Girls are not allowed on that wing, and vice versa. Visitation is every night from seven to nine. Lights out at ten-thirty. Someone will check on you every fifteen minutes when you're out of sight of the nurses' station.“ She paused again, and I made myself look up to meet her detached gaze. „Do you have any more questions?“

My eyes watered again, and I didn't bother to wipe them. „Why am I here?“

„That's a question for your doctor.“ She glanced briefly at her clipboard. „Dr. Nelson. He makes rounds after lunch, Monday through Friday. So you'll see him tomorrow.“ She hesitated, and this time set the clipboard on the shelf bolted to the cinder-block wall. „How's your neck? You didn't need stitches, but they did clean out the wounds...“

Wounds? My right hand flew to my neck, and I flinched at how tender the skin there was. And how... rough. My heart thumping, I rushed into the bathroom. The small, reflective aluminum mirror over the sink showed that what little mascara I'd worn the day before was now smeared beneath both of my eyes. My skin was pale, my long hair hopelessly knotted.

I tilted my chin up and angled my body toward the overhead light. My gasp echoed in the small room. My neck was a tangle of blood-crusting scratches.

And suddenly I remembered pain at my neck. Wet, sticky fingers.

My right hand shook as I held it up to the light. Dark crust still clung to my cuticles. Blood. I'd done this to myself, trying to make the screaming stop.

No wonder they thought I was crazy.

Maybe they were right.

The nurse had said I wasn't allowed to close my door, but I closed it while I showered, and again when I got out of the bathroom, because she'd left it open after one of the fifteen-minute checkups.

Were they afraid I was going to kill myself? If so, it'd have to be a pretty creative suicide. The only things not nailed to the floor or the wall were the towel on a shelf over the toilet and the tiny bar of hand soap on the sink. In the end, my pride won out over vanity and I washed both my body and hair with hand soap, rather than go begging for basic hygiene supplies from people I'd never met.

After my shower, I found a clean set of purple scrubs folded on the bed, but I'd have to go without underwear until someone brought me some clean clothes. Nurse Nancy had said Aunt Val was supposed to bring them, but when and if my aunt showed up, she was not leaving without me.

Clean and dressed—if not exactly to my satisfaction—I stared at the door for a solid three minutes before working up the nerve to open it. I'd missed both dinner and breakfast, so I was starving, but less than eager to mingle. Finally, after two false starts, I shoved still-wet hair back from my face and pulled the door open.

My laceless sneakers squeaked in the empty hallway, and I walked slowly toward the clinking of silverware, acutely aware that while I did hear a couple of soft voices, there was no actual conversation. Most of the doors I passed were open, revealing room after identical room. The only differences between those and the room I'd been assigned to were the personal possessions. Clothes stacked on open shelves and pictures taped to walls.

Halfway down the hall, a girl a couple of years younger than me sat alone on a bed in a room almost as bare as mine, talking to herself. Not whispering under her breath, or reminding herself not to forget something important. Actually talking to herself, at full volume.

When I turned the corner, I found the source of the other voice, as well as what passed for the cafeteria. Five round tables were set up in a large room occupied with normal-looking people in jeans and T-shirts. Mounted on the far wall above their heads was a small television tuned to SpongeBob.

„The trays are on the cart.“

I jumped, then whirled around to see another woman—this one in cranberry-colored scrubs—sitting in a hospital waiting-room-type chair near the doorway. Her name tag read: *Judy Sullivan, Mental Health Technician*. „Find the one with your name on it and take a seat.“

I took a covered tray labeled Kaylee Cavanaugh from the second shelf of the cart, then glanced around for somewhere to sit. There were no empty tables—most had two or three occupants—yet everyone ate in silence, but for the sounds of chewing and silverware scraping plastic trays.

The edges of the room were lined in more stiff-looking waiting-room chairs and small couches with pale green vinyl cushions, and one girl sat alone on one of these with her tray on her lap. She picked at the edge of a slice of meat loaf with her fork, but seemed more interested in whatever patterns she was creating than in actually eating.

I found a table and ate in silence, suffering through half of the dry meat loaf and a stale roll before I looked up from my tray—and directly into the eyes of the girl sitting alone on the edge of the room. She watched me with a creepy sort of detached curiosity, as if I were a bug crawling across the sidewalk in front of her. I wondered briefly if she was the ant-stomper type. Then I wondered why she was at Lakeside.

But I purged that thought quickly—I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know why any of them were there. As far as I was concerned, they were all locked up for the same reason: they were crazy.

Oh, and you're the shining exception, right? some traitorous voice asked from deep inside my head. The girl who sees things that aren't there and can't stop screaming. Who tries to rip her own throat out in the middle of the mall. Yeah, you're sane.

And suddenly my appetite was gone. But Meat Loaf Girl—Lydia Trainer, according to her tray cover—was still staring at me, limp black hair falling over half of her face, revealing only one pale green eye. My return stare didn't faze

her, nor did it force her to acknowledge me. She just watched me, as if the moment she looked away I might jump up and dance the cha-cha.

But then someone else walked between us and caught her attention like a ball of yarn rolled in front of a cat. Lydia's gaze followed a tall, heavysset girl as she carried an empty tray toward the cart.

„Mandy, where's your fork?“ Judy the mental health tech asked, standing so she could see the girl's tray. The tense way she held herself made me nervous. Like she expected Mandy to lean forward and take a bite out of her.

Mandy dropped her tray on the cart with a clatter of silverware, then stuck one hand into the waistband of her jeans and pulled out a fork. If I'd had any appetite left, that would have killed it. Mandy tossed the fork onto her tray, spared a contemptuous glance at the aide, then shuffled in sock feet into another large common area across the hall.

Lydia still watched Mandy, but now her features were scrunched into a tense grimace and one hand clutched her stomach.

I glanced at her tray to count her utensils. Had she swallowed her knife, or something stupid like that, while Judy's attention was occupied with Miss Fork-in-Drawers? No, all of the silverware was there, and I could see no obvious reason for Lydia's pained look.

Creeped out now, I stood and turned in my tray—all utensils accounted for—then rushed back to my room without looking up until I'd closed the door behind me.

„Hello?“

„Aunt Val?“ I wound the old-fashioned, curly phone cord around my index finger and twisted on the hard plastic chair to face the wall. That was all the privacy I'd get in the middle of the hallway.

My kingdom for a cell phone.

„Kaylee!“ My aunt sounded bright and cheery, and I knew even without seeing her that her hair would be perfectly arranged and her makeup expertly applied, even though she didn't have to be anywhere on the weekend.

Unless she was coming to get me. Please let her be coming to get me...

„How are you feeling, sweetheart?“ Aunt Val continued, a sliver of concern denting her otherwise impenetrable armor of good cheer.

„Fine. I feel good. Come get me. I'm ready to come home.“

How could you let them bring me here? How could you leave me? She would never have left her own daughter in a place like this. No matter what Sophie had done, Aunt Val would have taken her home, made a pot of hot tea, and dealt with the issue privately.

But I couldn't say that. My mother was dead, and I'd had no one but Aunt Val and Uncle Brendon since my father moved to Ireland when I was three, so I couldn't vocalize the soul-bruising betrayal twisting through me like a vine choking me from the inside. At least, not without crying, and crying might make me look unstable, which would give them a reason to keep me there. And give Aunt Val a reason to drop off my clothes and run.

„Um... I was actually just about to head your way. Have you seen the doctor yet? Do you think I'll be able to talk to him?“

„Yeah, sure. I mean, that's what he's here for, right?“

According to Nurse Nancy, the doctor didn't do his rounds on weekends, but if I told Aunt Val that, she might wait for official visiting hours. Doctor or not, I was sure she would take me home once she saw me. Once she'd had a look at

this place, and at me in it. We might not share the same blood, but she'd raised me. Surely she couldn't walk away twice, right?

From somewhere near the common area, a booming male voice announced that the anger management group was about to start, then specifically suggested that someone named Brent should attend.

I leaned my forehead against the cold cinder blocks and tried to block it all out, but every time I opened my eyes—every time I even took a cold, sterile-scented breath—I remembered exactly where I was. And that I couldn't leave.

„Okay. I'm bringing some things for you,“ my aunt said softly into my ear.

What? I wanted to cry. „No. Aunt Val, I don't need things. I need out.“

She sighed, sounding almost as frustrated as I was. „I know, but that's up to your doctor, and if he gets delayed... or something, wouldn't you feel better with a fresh change of clothes?“

„I guess.“ But the truth was that I wasn't going to feel any better until Lakeside was a distant, unpleasant memory, instead of my current waking nightmare.

„They won't let you have anything but clothes and books. Do you want something to read?“

All I wanted to read was the exit sign on the other side of the locked door by the nurse's station. The one you had to be buzzed through.

„Um... I have a paper due next week. Could you grab *Brave New World* from my nightstand?“ See? I'm not crazy. I'm responsible and focused on schoolwork. Don't you want to take me home so I can live up to my true potential?

Aunt Val was silent for a moment, and that uncomfortable feeling in the bottom of my stomach swelled. „Kaylee, I don't think you should worry about homework right now. We can tell the school you have the flu.“

Footsteps shuffled past me, headed toward the group session. I stuck a finger in my ear, trying to block it all out. „The flu? Doesn't it take, like, a week to get over the flu?“ I wouldn't miss that much school. I wouldn't miss any, if she'd take me home today!

My aunt sighed, and my gut twisted around the lump of dread anchoring me to the chair. „I'm just trying to buy you some time to rest. And it's not really a lie. You can't tell me you're feeling one hundred percent right now...“

„Because they shot me full of enough crap to put an elephant to sleep!“ And I had the cotton mouth to prove it.

„And for all we know, you might actually be coming down with a bit of the flu. I heard you sneeze the other day,“ she finished, and I rolled my eyes.

„They don't lock up people with the flu, Aunt Val.“ Not unless it's the bird flu or Stephen King's end-of-the-world flu.

„I know. Listen, I'll be there in a bit, and we can talk about this then.“

„What about Uncle Brendon?“

Another pause. Sometimes there was less meaning in what Aunt Val said than in what she didn't say. „He took Sophie out to lunch to explain all this to her. This has been really hard on them both, Kaylee.“

Like it's easy on me?

„But we're both coming to see you tonight.“

Except I would be out by then, even if I had to get down on my knees and beg her to take me home. If I had to wake up here again, I'd lose my mind. Assuming I hadn't already.

„Promise?“ I hadn't asked her to promise me anything since I was nine.

„Of course. We just want to help you, Kaylee.“
Yet somehow, I didn't feel very comforted.

I waited in the common area, stubbornly resisting the jigsaw puzzles and crossword books stacked on a shelf in the corner. I wouldn't be here long enough to finish one anyway. Instead, I stared at the TV, wishing they'd at least show some good cartoons. But if there was a remote available, I had no idea where to find it.

A commercial came on and my attention wandered, in spite of my best efforts to ignore my fellow patients. Lydia sat across the room from me, not even pretending to watch the television. She was watching me.

I stared back at her. She didn't smile. She didn't speak. She just watched, and not with an unfocused stare, which was obviously all some of the residents were capable of. Lydia actually seemed to be observing me, like she was looking for something in particular. What, I had no idea.

„Weird, isn't it?“ Mandy dropped into the chair on my left, and air whooshed from the cushion. „The way she stares.“

I glanced up to find her looking across the room at Lydia. „No weirder than anything else here.“ And frankly, I wasn't looking to make conversation—or friends—with someone who stuffed forks down her pants.

„She's a ward of the court.“ Mandy bit into a half-eaten chocolate bar, then continued with her mouth full. „Never talks. You ask me, she's the strangest one here.“

I had serious doubts about that.

„What're you here for?“ Her gaze traveled south of my face, then back up. „Let me guess. You're either manic depressive, or anorexic.“

Inside, my temper boiled, but I was proud by how calm my reply sounded. „I don't talk either.“

She stared at me for a second, then burst into a harsh, barking laugh.

„Mandy, why don't you find something constructive to do?“ A familiar voice said, and I glanced up to find Paul standing in the wide doorway, holding...

My suitcase!

I sprang from the couch, and he held the rolling bag out to me. „I thought that might make you smile.“

In fact, I was oddly excited and relieved. If I had to be locked up, at least I could be miserable in my own clothes. But then my enthusiasm flashed out like a burned-up bulb when I realized what that suitcase meant. Aunt Val had dropped off my clothes without coming in to see me.

She'd left me again.

I took the bag and headed back to my room, where I dropped the suitcase on the floor beside the bed, unopened. Paul followed me, but stopped in the doorway. I sank onto the bed, battling tears, my suitcase forgotten in spite of the rough scrub bottoms chaffing me in all the wrong places.

„She couldn't stay,“ Paul said. Apparently my emotions were as transparent as the tempered glass windows. Wouldn't my therapist be pleased? „Visiting hours don't start until seven.“

„Whatever.“ If she'd wanted to see me, she would have, even if it was just for a few minutes. My aunt's tenacity was a thing of legends.

„Hey, don't let this place get to you, okay? I've seen a lot of kids lose their souls in here, and I'd hate to see that happen to you.“ He ducked his head,

trying to draw eye contact, but I only nodded, staring at the floor. „Your aunt and uncle will be back tonight.“

Yeah, but that didn't mean they'd take me home. It didn't mean anything at all.

When Paul left, I heaved my suitcase onto the bed and unzipped it, eager to wear, see, and smell something familiar. After just a few hours at Lakeside, I was already terrified of losing myself. Of fading into the glazed eyes, slow steps, and empty stares all around me. I needed something from real life—from my world outside this room—that would help me hold on to me. So I was completely unprepared for the contents of my bag.

Nothing in it was mine. The clothes still had price tags dangling from waistbands and collars.

Fighting back fresh tears, I lifted the first piece from the suitcase: a pair of soft pink jogging pants with a wide, gathered waistband and a complicated arrangement of flowers embroidered over one hip. At the front were two holes where the drawstring should have been. It'd been snipped and removed so I couldn't hang myself with it. The suitcase held a matching top, along with an entire collection of clothes I'd never even seen. They were all expensive, and comfortable, and perfectly coordinated.

What is this, psycho chic? What was wrong with my own jeans and tees?

The truth was that, in her own twisted way, Aunt Val was probably trying to cheer me up with new clothes. That might have worked for Sophie, but how could she not understand that it wouldn't work for me?

Suddenly pissed beyond words, I stripped and tossed the borrowed scrubs into a pile in the corner of the room, then ripped open a five-pack of underwear and stepped into the first pair. Then I dug through my bag for anything that didn't look like something Martha Stewart would wear on house arrest. The best I found was a plainish purple jogging suit at the bottom of the pile. Only once I had it on did I realize the fabric glittered beneath the light over my bed.

Great. I'm psychotic and sparkly. And there was nothing else in the bag. No books, and no puzzles. Not even any of Sophie's useless fashion magazines. With an angry sigh, I stomped down the hall in search of reading material and a quiet corner, silently daring Paul or any of the aides to comment on my epic wardrobe disaster.

After supper, Aunt Val and Uncle Brendon walked through the door next to the nurses' station, both empty-handed; they'd had to empty their pockets and turn over Aunt Val's purse to the security guard. That way, I wouldn't be tempted to try to kill anyone with her lip gloss and travel-size pack of tissues.

Seeing them standing there was like seeing my dad every time he came home for Christmas. Part of me was so mad at them both for leaving me there that I wanted to shout until I went hoarse, or ignore them completely. Whichever would come closest to hurting them like they'd hurt me. I wanted them to feel scared, and alone, and without even basic comforts like their own clothing.

But the other part of me wanted a hug so bad I could practically feel arms around me already. I wanted to smell the outside world on them both. Soap that didn't come in tiny, unscented, paper-wrapped packets. Food that didn't come on labeled, hard plastic trays. Shampoo that didn't have to be checked out from the nurses' station, then turned in along with my dignity.

In the end, I could only stand there staring, waiting for them to make the first move.

Uncle Brendon came first. Maybe he couldn't resist our actual blood bond; my bond to Aunt Val was by virtue of her wedding vows. Either way, Uncle Brendon hugged me like he might never see me again, and my heart raced a bit in panic at that thought. Then...

I pushed it aside and buried my face in his shirt, smelling his aftershave, and Aunt Val's favorite spring-scented dryer sheets.

„How you holding up, hon?“ he asked, when I finally pulled back far enough to see his face, rough with evening stubble.

„If I'm not crazy yet, I will be after one more day in this place. You have to take me home. Please.“

My aunt and uncle exchanged a dark glance, and my stomach seemed to settle somewhere around my knees. „What?“

„Let's sit.“ Aunt Val's heels clacked all the way into the common area, where she glanced around and looked like she wanted to take her suggestion back. Several other patients sat staring up at the TV, most with glazed looks of half-comprehension. Two more worked on puzzles, and one thin boy I'd hardly seen was arguing with his parents in the far corner.

„Come on.“ I turned toward the girls' hall, leaving them to follow. „I don't have a roommate.“ In my room, I sank onto my bed with my feet tucked beneath me, and Uncle Brendon sat next to me. Aunt Val perched stiffly on the edge of the only chair. „What's wrong?“ I demanded, when all eyes turned toward me. „Other than the obvious.“

Uncle Brendon spoke first. „Kaylee, you haven't been released. We can't take you home before the doctor has even seen you.“

„Why not?“ My jaws were clenched so hard they ached. My hands curled around fistfuls of the blanket.

I felt freedom slipping away like water through my fingers.

„Because you tried to rip your own throat out in the middle of Sears.“ Aunt Val frowned, like it should have been obvious.

„That's not...“ I stopped, swallowing back tears. „I didn't know what I was doing. I was just trying to make the screaming stop.“

„I know, honey.“ She leaned forward, frowning in serious concern. „That's the problem. You could have seriously hurt yourself without meaning to. Without any idea what you were doing.“

„No, I...“ But I couldn't really argue with that. If I could have stopped it, I would have. But a stint in Lakeside wasn't going to make that any better.

My uncle sighed. „I know this is... unpleasant, but you need help.“

„Unpleasant?“ That sounded like a direct quote from Aunt Val. I gripped the footboard of the bed so hard my fingers ached. „I'm not crazy. I'm not.“ And maybe if I kept saying it, one of us would actually believe it.

„I know,“ my uncle said softly, and I glanced at him in surprise. His eyes were closed and he took several deep breaths, like he was preparing himself for something he didn't want to do. He looked ready to cry. Or to beat the crap out of something. I was voting for the latter.

Aunt Val stiffened in her chair, watching her husband carefully, as if silently willing him to do something. Or maybe not to do it.

When Uncle Brendon finally opened his eyes, his gaze was steady. Intense. „Kaylee, I know you didn't mean to hurt yourself, and I know you're not crazy.“

He seemed so sure of it, I almost believed him. Relief washed over me, like that first air-conditioned breeze on a hot summer day. But it was quickly swallowed by doubt. Would he be so sure if he knew what I'd seen?

„We need you to give this a shot, okay?“ His eyes pleaded with me. Desperately. „They can teach you how to deal with it here. How to calm yourself down and... hold it back. Val and I... We don't know how to help with that.“

No! I blinked away unshed tears, refusing to let them fall. They were going to leave me locked up in here!

Uncle Brendon took my hand and squeezed it. „And if you have another panic attack, I want you to go to your room and concentrate on not screaming. Do whatever you have to do to resist it, okay?“

Stunned, I could only stare for a long moment. It took all of my remaining focus to breathe. They really weren't going to take me home!

„Kaylee?“ my uncle asked, and I hated how concerned he looked. How fragile he obviously considered me now.

„I'll try.“

My aunt and uncle knew that my panic attacks always seemed to be triggered by someone else. So far, always someone I'd never met. But they didn't know about the morbid certainty that came with the panic. Or the weird hallucinations I'd had at the mall. I was afraid that if I told them those parts, they'd agree with Dr. Nelson, and the three of them might put me back in that restraint bed and weld the buckles shut.

„Try hard.“ Uncle Brendon eyed me intently, his green eyes somehow shining, even in the dim overhead light. „Because if you start screaming again, they'll pump you so full of antidepressants and antipsychotics you won't even remember your own name.“

Antipsychotics? They really thought I was psychotic?

„And Kaylee...“

I looked up at Aunt Val and was surprised to see visible dents in her armor of relentless optimism. She looked pale, and stressed, and the frown lines in her forehead were more pronounced than I'd ever seen them. If someone had shown her a mirror at that moment, she might easily have wound up my roommate in the loony bin.

„If you even look like you're going to hurt yourself again—“ her gaze strayed to the scabbed-over scratches on my neck, and my hand immediately flew to cover them „—you'll wind up strapped to that table again.“ Her voice broke, and she pulled a tissue from her purse to blot tears before they smudged her mascara. „And I don't think either one of us can handle seeing you like that again.“

I woke up at four in the morning and couldn't go back to sleep. After an hour and a half of staring up at the ceiling, ignoring the aide who came to check on me every fifteen minutes, I got dressed and headed down the hall in search of a magazine I'd started the day before. To my surprise, Lydia sat on a couch in the living-room half of the common area.

„You're up early.“ I sat next to her, uninvited. The television played in the corner, tuned to the local news, but no one watched it. As far as I knew, the other patients weren't up yet. Neither was the sun.

Lydia watched me just like she had the day before, in mild interest, no surprise and almost total detachment. Our gazes met for a long minute, neither

of us blinking. It was an odd sort of a challenge, as I silently dared her to speak. She had something to say. I was sure of it.

But she stayed silent.

„You don't sleep much, do you?“ Normally I wouldn't have pried—after all, I didn't want anyone else poking into my alleged mental instability—but she'd stared at me for hours the day before. Like she wanted to tell me something.

Lydia shook her head, and a strand of lank black hair fell in front of her face. She pushed it back, her lips firmly sealed.

„Why not?“

She only blinked at me, staring into my eyes as if they fascinated her. As if she saw something there no one else could see.

I started to ask what she was looking at, but stopped when a purple blur caught my attention on the other side of the room. A tall aide in eggplant-colored scrubs checking in on us, clipboard in hand. Had it been fifteen minutes already? But before she could continue with the rest of her list, Paul appeared in the doorway.

„Hey, they're sending one over from the E.R.“

„Now?“ The female aide glanced at her watch.

„Yeah. She's stable, and they need the space.“ Both staff members disappeared down the hall, and I turned to see that Lydia's face had gone even paler than normal.

Several minutes later, the main entrance buzzed, then the door swung open. The female aide hurried from the nurses' station as a man in plain green scrubs stepped into the unit, pushing a thin, tired-looking girl in a wheelchair. She wore jeans and a purple scrubs top, and her long pale hair hung over most of her face. Her arms lay limp in her lap, both bandaged from her wrists to halfway up her forearms.

„Here's her shirt.“ The man in green handed the aide a thick plastic bag with the Arlington Memorial logo on it. „If I were you, I'd throw it out. I don't think all the bleach in the world could get rid of that much blood.“

On my right, Lydia flinched, and I looked up to see her eyes closed, her forehead furrowed in obvious pain. As the aide wheeled the new girl past the common area, Lydia went stiff beside me and clenched the arms of her chair so tightly the tendons in her hands stood out.

„You okay?“ I whispered, as the wheelchair squeaked toward the girls' hall.

Lydia shook her head, but her eyes didn't open.

„What hurts?“

She shook her head again, and I realized she was younger than I'd first guessed. Fourteen, at the most. Too young to be stuck at Lakeside, no matter what was wrong with her.

„You want me to get someone?“ I started to stand, but she grabbed my arm so suddenly I actually jerked in surprise. She was a lot stronger than she looked. And faster.

Lydia shook her head, meeting my gaze with green eyes brightly glazed with pain. Then she stood and walked stiffly down the hall, one hand pressed to her stomach. A minute later, her door closed softly.

The rest of the day was a blur of half-eaten meals, unfocused stares, and too many jigsaw puzzle pieces to count. After breakfast, Nurse Nancy was back on duty, standing in my doorway to ask a series of pointless, invasive questions.

But by then I was annoyed with the fifteen-minute checkups, and beyond frustrated by the lack of privacy.

Nurse Nancy: „Have you had a bowel movement today?“

Me: „No comment.“

Nurse Nancy: „Do you still feel like hurting yourself?“

Me: „I never did. I’m really more of a self-pamperer.“

Next, a therapist named Charity Stevens escorted me into a room with a long window overlooking the nurses’ station to ask me why I’d tried to claw open my own throat, and why I screamed loud enough to wake the dead.

I was virtually certain my screaming would not, in fact, wake the dead, but she seemed unamused when I said so. And unconvinced when I insisted that I hadn’t been trying to hurt myself.

Stevens settled her thin frame into a chair across from me. „Kaylee, do you know why you’re here?“

„Yeah. Because the doors are locked.“

No smile. „Why were you screaming?“

I folded my feet beneath me in the chair, exercising my right to remain silent. There was no way to answer that question without sounding crazy.

„Kaylee...?“ Stevens sat with her hands folded in her lap, waiting. I had her undivided attention, whether I wanted it or not.

„I... I thought I saw something. But it was nothing. Just normal shadows.“

„You saw shadows.“ But her statement sounded more like a question.

„Yeah. You know, places where light doesn’t shine?“ Much like a psychiatric hospital itself...

„What was it about the shadows that made you scream?“ Stevens stared into my eyes, and I stared at her crooked part line.

They shouldn’t have been there. They were wrapped around a kid in a wheelchair, but didn’t touch anyone else. They were moving. Take your pick... But too much of the truth would only earn me more time behind locked doors.

I was supposed to be learning how to handle my panic attacks, not spilling my guts about what caused them.

„They were... scary.“ There. Vague, but true.

„Hmmm.“ She crossed her legs beneath a navy pencil skirt and nodded like I’d said something right. „I see...“

But she didn’t see at all. And I couldn’t explain myself to save my life. Or my sanity, apparently.

After lunch, the doctor came to poke and prod me with an entire checklist of questions about my medical history. According to my aunt and uncle, he was the one who could really help me. But after my session with the therapist, I was skeptical, and the doc’s opening lines did little to help that.

Dr. Nelson: „Are you currently taking any medications?“

Me: „Just whatever you guys shot me full of yesterday.“

Dr. Nelson: „Do you have a family history of diabetes, cancer, or cataracts?“

Me: „I have no idea. My dad isn’t available for questioning. But I can ask my uncle when he gets here tonight.“

Dr. Nelson: „Do you have a medical history of obesity, asthma, seizures, cirrhosis, hepatitis, HIV, migraines, chronic pain, arthritis, or spinal problems?“

Me: „Are you serious?“

Dr. Nelson: „Do you have any family history of mental instability?“

Me: „Yes. My cousin thinks she’s twenty-one. My aunt thinks she’s eighteen. I’d call them both mentally unstable.“

Dr. Nelson: „Do you now, or have you ever, used or abused caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, amphetamines, or opiates?“

Me: „Oh, yeah. All of it. What else am I supposed to do in study hall? In fact, I better get my stash back from your rent-a-cop when I check out of here.“

Finally, he looked up from the file in his lap and met my gaze. „You know, you’re not helping yourself. The fastest way for you to get out of here is to cooperate. To help me help you.“

I sighed, staring at the reflection shining on his sizable bald spot. „I know. But you’re supposed to help me stop having panic attacks, right? But none of that stuff—“ I glanced at the file I was secretly desperate to read „—has anything to do with why I’m here.“

The doctor frowned, pressing thin lips even thinner. „Unfortunately, there are always preliminaries. Sometimes recreational drug use can cause symptoms like yours, and I need to rule that out before we continue. So could you please answer the question?“

„Fine.“ If he could really help me, I was ready to get cured, then get out. Short and sweet. „I drink Coke, just like every other teenager on the planet.“ I hesitated, wondering how much of this he’d tell my aunt and uncle. „And I had half a beer once. Over the summer.“ We’d only had one, so Em and I had split it.

„That’s it?“

„Yeah.“ I wasn’t sure whether he was happy with my answer, or secretly making fun of my seriously deficient social life.

„Okay...“ Dr. Nelson scribbled in the file again, then flipped up the top page, too fast for me to read. „These next questions are more specifically geared toward your problems. If you don’t answer honestly, you’ll be crippling us both. Got it?“

„Sure.“ Whatever.

„Have you ever believed you had special powers? Like the ability to control the weather?“

I laughed out loud. I couldn’t help it. If that was a symptom of crazy, maybe I was sane, after all. „No, I don’t think I can control the weather. Or fly, or adjust the earth’s orbit around the sun. No superpowers here.“

Dr. Nelson just nodded, then glanced at the file again. „Was there ever a time when people were out to get you?“

Growing more relieved by the second, I shifted onto one hip, leaning with my elbow on the arm of the chair. „Um... I’m pretty sure my chemistry teacher hates me, but she hates everyone, so I don’t think it’s personal.“

More scribbling. „Have you ever heard voices that others could not hear?“

„Nope.“ That was an easy one.

Dr. Nelson scratched his bald spot with short, neat fingernails. „Have your family or friends ever suggested that your statements were unusual?“

„You mean, do I say things that don’t make sense?“ I asked, and he nodded, nowhere near as amused as I was by his questions. „Only in French class.“

„Have you ever seen things other people couldn’t see?“

My heart dropped into my stomach, and my smile melted like a Popsicle in August.

„Kaylee?“

I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to ignore the dread swirling through me, like the memory of that dark fog. „Okay, look, if I answer this honestly, I’m going to sound crazy. But the very fact that I know that means I’m not really crazy, right?“

Dr. Nelson’s wiry gray eyebrows both rose. „Crazy isn’t a diagnosis, nor is it a term we use around here.“

„But you know what I mean, right?“

Instead of answering, he crossed his legs at the knee and leaned back in his chair. „Let’s talk about your panic attacks. What triggered the one you had in the mall?“

I closed my eyes. He can’t help you if you lie. But there was no guarantee he could help me if I told the truth, either.

Here goes nothin’...

„I saw a kid in a wheelchair, and I got this horrible feeling that... that he was going to die.“

Dr. Nelson frowned, his pencil poised over my file. „Why did you think he was going to die?“

I shrugged and stared miserably at my hands in my lap. „I don’t know. It’s just this really strong feeling. Like sometimes you can tell when someone’s looking at you? Or standing over your shoulder?“

He was quiet for several seconds, but for the scratching of pen against paper. Then he looked up. „So what did you see that no one else saw?“

Ah, yes. The original question. „Shadows.“

„You saw shadows? How do you know no one else could see them?“

„Because if anyone else had seen what I saw, I wouldn’t have been the center of attention.“ Even with my brain-scrambling screech. „I saw shadows wrapping around the kid in the wheelchair, but not touching anyone else.“ I started to tell him the rest of it. About the fog, and the things twisting and writhing inside it.

But then Dr. Nelson’s frown dissolved into a look of patient patronization—an indulgent expression I’d seen plenty of in my two days at Lakeside. He thought I was crazy.

„Kaylee, you’re describing delusions and hallucinations. Now, if you’re really not on any drugs—and your blood work will confirm that—there are several other possible causes for the symptoms you’re experiencing—“

„Like what?“ I demanded. My pulse pounded thickly in my throat, and my teeth ground together so hard my jaws ached.

„Well, it’s premature to start guessing, but after—“

„Tell me. Please. If you’re going to tell me I’m crazy, at least tell me what kind of crazy I am.“

Dr. Nelson sighed and flipped my file closed. „Your symptoms could be secondary to depression, or even severe anxiety...“

But there was something he wasn’t saying. I could see it in his eyes, and my stomach started pitching. „What else?“

„It could be some form of schizophrenia, but that’s really jumping the gun. We need to run more tests and—“

But I didn’t hear anything after that. He’d brought my life to a grinding halt with that one word, and hurtled my entire future into a bleak storm of uncertainty. Of impossibility. If I was crazy, how could I possibly be anything else? Ever.

„When can I go home?“ That dark, sick feeling in my stomach was churning out of control, and all I wanted in that moment was to curl up in my own bed and go to sleep. For a very long time.

„Once we get a definite diagnosis and get your meds balanced...“

„How long?“

„Two weeks, at least.“

I stood and was almost bowled over by the hopelessness crashing over me. Would I have any friends left, if this got out? Would I be that crazy girl at school now? The one everyone whispered about? Would I even go back to school?

If I was really crazy, did it even matter?

My next four days at Lakeside made the phrase bored to death seem like a distinct possibility. If not for the note from Emma that Uncle Brendon brought, I might have given up entirely. But hearing from her, knowing that she hadn't forgotten about me—or told anyone else where I was—brought relevance back to my life outside Lakeside. Made things matter again.

Em was still planning to humiliate Toby that weekend, and crossing her fingers that I'd be back at school in time to see it happen. And in case I wasn't, she'd made plans to broadcast his downfall on YouTube, just for me.

That became my new goal. Doing and saying whatever it took to get out. To get back to school, and back to my life.

Nurse Nancy started each morning with the same two questions and faithfully recorded my responses on a clipboard. I saw Dr. Nelson for a few minutes every day, but he seemed more concerned with the side effects of the medication he'd prescribed than with whether or not it was actually working. In my opinion, the fact that I hadn't had any more screaming fits was total coincidence, and not the result of any of the pills they made me take.

And the pills...

I decided early on not to ask what they were. I didn't want to know. But I couldn't ignore the side effects. I was groggy all the time, and spent half of the first two days sleeping.

The next time my aunt and uncle came, they brought two pairs of my own jeans and *Brave New World*, and I spent the next day reading it between naps. That night, Paul gave me a ballpoint pen and a legal pad, and I started writing my paper longhand, desperately missing the laptop my father had sent for my last birthday.

On my fifth night in La La Land, my aunt, uncle, and I sat on a couch in the common area. Aunt Val prattled endlessly about Sophie's dance-team routine, and the many rounds of debate with the team's faculty sponsor over the new uniforms: unitards or separate tops with hot pants.

I personally didn't care if Sophie danced in the nude. In fact, the life experience might open up some interesting career opportunities for her some day. But I listened because as dull as Aunt Val's story was, it had happened out in the real world, and I missed the real world more than I'd ever missed anything in my life.

Then, in the middle of a detailed description of the unitard in question, several simultaneous bursts of static caught my attention from the nurses' station. I couldn't make out the actual words coming over the two-way radios, but something unusual was obviously going down.

Moments later, shouting shattered the overmedicated hush from somewhere beyond the nurses' station, and the main entrance buzzed. Then the door to the

unit flew open, and two large men in scrubs came in carrying a guy about my age, with a firm grip on each of his arms. He refused to walk, so his bare feet trailed on the floor behind him.

The new boy was thin and lanky, and yelling his head off, though I couldn't understand a word he said.

He was also completely nude, and trying to toss off the blanket someone had draped over his shoulders.

Aunt Val leaped to her high-heeled feet, predictably shocked. Her mouth hung open, her arms limp at her sides. Uncle Brendon's scowl could have paralyzed anyone who saw it. And all over the unit, patients poured from their rooms to investigate the commotion.

I stayed on the couch, paralyzed with horror not only for what I saw, but for what I remembered. Had I looked like that when the aides had buckled me to the restraint bed? Had my eyes been so bright and distant-looking? My limbs so out of control?

I'd been dressed, of course, but I wouldn't be if my next panic attack struck while I was in the shower. Would they haul me out naked and dripping to strap me to another bed?

While I watched, spellbound and horrified as the aides half pulled the newcomer through the unit, Uncle Brendon tugged Aunt Val to one corner of the now nearly empty common room. He glanced at me once, but I pretended not to notice, knowing he wouldn't want me to hear whatever he was about to say.

„We're handling this all wrong, Val. She shouldn't be here,“ he whispered fiercely, and inside I cheered. Schizophrenic or not—and no diagnosis had been confirmed yet—I didn't belong at Lakeside. I had no doubt of that.

On the edge of my vision, my aunt crossed her arms over her narrow chest. „Dr. Nelson won't let her out until...“

„I can change his mind.“

If anyone could, it would be Uncle Brendon. He could sell water to a fish.

One of the aides let go of his charge's arm to reposition the blanket, and the new guy shoved him backward, then tried to pull free of the other aide, now shouting a random stream of curses.

„He's not on call tonight,“ Aunt Val whispered, still staring nervously at the scuffle. „You won't be able to reach him until tomorrow.“

My uncle's scowl deepened. „I'll call first thing in the morning. This will be her last night here, if I have to break her out myself.“

If I weren't afraid of drawing attention to my eavesdropping, I would have jumped up and cheered.

„Assuming she doesn't have another... episode between now and then,“ Aunt Val said, effectively raining all over my parade.

And that's when I noticed Lydia curled up in a chair at the back of the room, face scrunched up in pain, watching all three of us rather than the scuffle up front. She made no effort to hide her eavesdropping, and even gave me a thin, sad little smile when she saw that I'd noticed her.

When the staff had the new guy under control and safely sedated in the closed restraint room, my aunt and uncle said a quick goodbye. And this time, when the unit door closed behind them, my usual bitter wash of loneliness and despair was flavored with a thin, sweet ribbon of hope.

Freedom was eight hours and a phone call away. I would celebrate with a designer jogging suit bonfire.

The next morning marked my seventh day at Lakeside, and my first waking thought was that I'd officially missed the homecoming dance. But it was hard to be too upset about that, because my second thought was that I would sleep in my own bed that night. Just knowing I was getting out made everything else look a little brighter.

Maybe I wasn't crazy, after all. Maybe I was just prone to anxiety attacks, and the pills the doc prescribed could keep that under control. Maybe I could have a normal life—once I'd put Lakeside behind me.

I woke up before dawn and had half finished a five-hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle by the time Nurse Nancy came into the common room to ask about my gastrointestinal health and my suicidal impulses. I even smiled while I bit back a suggestion about where she could shove her clipboard.

The rest of the staff seemed to find my sudden good cheer alarming, and I swear they checked on me more often than usual. Which was pointless, because all I did was work on puzzles and stare out the window, aching for fresh air. And a doughnut. I had the worst craving for doughnuts, just because I couldn't get one.

After breakfast, I packed all my stuff. Every stupid sparkly jogging suit and every fluffy pair of socks. My copy of *Brave New World*, and my handwritten, fifteen-hundred-and-twenty-two-word essay, each word counted, just to make sure. Three times.

I was ready to go.

Nurse Nancy noted my packed bag and my neatly made bed with a single raised eyebrow, but said nothing as she checked me off on her clipboard.

By lunchtime, I was fidgeting uncontrollably. I tapped my fork on the table and stared out the window, watching the visible portion of the parking lot for my uncle's car. Or my aunt's. Every time I glanced up, I found Lydia watching me, a silent frown painted on her face, along with a now constant grimace of pain. Whatever was wrong with her was getting worse; she had my sympathy. And I couldn't help wondering why they didn't give her stronger pain pills. Or if they were giving her any at all.

I'd been working on the puzzle for nearly an hour after lunch when a loud crash echoed from the boys' hall, and startled aides took off in that direction. As they ran, that familiar grim panic grabbed me like a fist around my chest, squeezing so hard I couldn't breathe.

Despair settled through me, bitter and sobering. No! Not again! I'm getting out today...

But not if I started screaming again. Not if they had to strap me to another bed. Not if they had to shoot me so full of drugs I slept through the next fifteen hours.

My heart pumped blood through me so fast my head spun. I stayed in my seat while the other patients stood, edging eagerly to the broad doorway. The screaming hadn't started yet. Maybe if I stayed completely still, it wouldn't. Maybe I could control it this time. Maybe the pills would work.

Down the hall, something heavy thudded against the walls, and dark panic bloomed inside me, leaving my heart swollen and heavy with a grief I didn't understand.

Lydia rose from her chair with her back to the boys' hall. Her eyes closed, and she flinched. As I watched, frozen, she fell forward, bent at the waist. Her knees slammed into the vinyl tile. She held herself off the floor with one hand—the other pressed to her gut in obvious pain—and cried out softly. But no one heard her over the splinter of wood from down the hall. No one but me.

I wanted to help her but I was afraid to move. The shriek was building inside me now, fighting its way up. My throat tightened. I gripped the arms of my chair, my knuckles white with tension. The pills weren't working. Did that mean my panic attacks were neither schizophrenia nor anxiety?

Wide-eyed, I watched as Lydia hauled herself up, using an end table for balance. One arm wrapped around her stomach, she held her free hand out to me, tears standing in her eyes. „Come on,“ she whispered, then swallowed thickly. „If you want out, come with me now.“

If I weren't busy holding back my scream, I might have choked on surprise. She could talk?

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, then let go of the chair and slid my hand into hers. Lydia pulled me up with surprising strength, and I followed her across the room, through a gap in the cluster of patients, and down the girls' hall, while everyone else stared in the opposite direction. She stopped once, halfway down, bent over in pain again as a horrifying screech ripped through the air from the other side of the unit.

„It's Tyler,“ she gasped as I pulled her up and pressed my free fist against my sealed lips, physically holding back my screams. „The new guy. He hurts so bad, but I can only take so much...“

I had no idea what she was talking about, and I couldn't ask. I could only pull her forward, moving as much for her benefit now as for mine. Whatever was wrong with her was somehow connected to Tyler, so surely distance from the commotion would be as good for her as it was for me.

At the end of the hall, we stumbled into my room as the shouting grew louder. Lydia kicked the door shut. My eyes watered. A deep keening had started at the back of my throat, and I couldn't make it stop. All I could do was hold my mouth closed and hope for the best.

Lydia dropped onto my bed and held her hands out to me, her face pale now, and damp with sweat in spite of the over-air-conditioned room. „Hurry,“ she said, but as I stepped forward, that terrible grayness swept into the room from nowhere. From everywhere. It was just suddenly there, leaching color from everything, thickening with each second that high-pitched squeal leaked from my throat.

I scrambled onto the bed with her and used my shirt to wipe tears from my face. It was real! The fog was real! But that realization brought with it a bolt of true terror. If I wasn't hallucinating, what the hell was going on?

„Give me your hands.“ Lydia gasped and doubled over in pain. When she looked up again, I took her hand in my empty one, but kept my mouth covered with the other. „Normally I try to block it,“ she whispered, pushing limp brown hair from her face. „But I don't have the strength for that right now. This place is so full of pain...“

Block what? What the hell was going on? Uncertainty pitched in my stomach, almost strong enough to rival the dark fear fueling my uncontrollable keening. What was she talking about? No wonder she'd quit speaking.

Lydia closed her eyes, riding a wave of pain, then she opened them and her voice was so soft I had to strain to hear it. „I can let the pain flow naturally—that’s easiest on both of us. Or I can take it from you. That way’s faster, but sometimes I take too much. More than just pain.“ She flinched again, and her gaze shifted to something over my shoulder, as if she could see through all the walls separating us from Tyler. „And I can’t give it back. But either way, it’s easier if I touch you.“

She waited expectantly, but I could only shrug and shake my head to demonstrate confusion, my lips still sealed firmly against the scream battering me from the inside.

„Close your eyes and let the pain flow,“ she said, and I obeyed, because I didn’t know what else to do.

Suddenly my hand felt both hot and cold, like I had a fever and chills at the same time. Lydia’s fingers shook in mine, and I opened my eyes to find her shuddering all over. I tried to pull my hand away, but she slapped her other palm over it, holding me tight even as her teeth began to chatter. „K-keep your eyes cl-closed,“ she stuttered. „No m-matter what.“

Terrified now, I closed my eyes and concentrated on holding my jaw shut. On not seeing the fog things in the back of my mind. On not feeling the thick current of agony and despair stirring through me.

And slowly, very slowly, the panic began to ebb. It was gradual at first, but then the discordant ribbon of sound leaking from me thinned into a strand as fragile as a human hair. Though the panic still built inside me, it was weaker now, and blessedly manageable thanks to whatever she was doing.

I dared a peek at Lydia to find her eyes closed, her face scrunched in pain, her forehead again shiny with sweat. Her free hand clutched a handful of her baggy T-shirt, pressing it into her stomach like she was hurt. But there was no blood, or any other sign of a wound; I looked closely to make sure.

She was funneling the panic from me somehow, and it was making her sick. And as badly as I wanted out of Lakeside, I would not take my freedom at her expense.

I still couldn’t talk, so I tried to pull my hand away, but Lydia’s eyes popped open at the first tug. „No!“ She clung to my fingers, tears standing in her eyes. „I can’t stop it, and fighting only makes it hurt worse.“

The pain wouldn’t kill me, but from the looks of it, whatever she was doing might kill her. I tugged again and she swallowed thickly, then shook her head sharply.

„It hurts me, Kaylee. If you let go, I hurt worse.“

She was lying. I could see it in her eyes. She’d heard my aunt and uncle and knew that if I had another screaming fit, Uncle Brendon wouldn’t be able to get me out. Lydia was lying so I wouldn’t pull away, even though she was hurting herself worse—maybe killing herself—with every bit of panic she took from me.

At first I let her, because she seemed determined to do it. She obviously had her reasons, even if I didn’t understand them. But when the guilt became too much and I tried to pull away again, she squeezed my hand so hard it hurt.

„He’s cresting...“ she whispered, and I searched her eyes in vain for a translation. I still had no idea what she was talking about. „It’s going to shift. Tyler’s pain will end, and yours will begin.“

Begin? Because it’s all been fun and games so far...

But before I could finish that thought, Lydia's hands went limp around mine, and she relaxed so suddenly and thoroughly she almost seemed to deflate. For a precious half second, she smiled, obviously painfree, and I started to think it was over.

„He's gone,“ Lydia said softly.

Then the panic truly hit me.

What I'd felt before had only been a preview. This was the main event. The real deal. Like at the mall.

Anguish exploded inside me, a shock to my entire system. My lungs ached. My throat burned. Tears poured from my eyes. The scream bounced around in my head so fast and hard I couldn't think.

I couldn't hold it in. The keening started up again, more urgent than ever, and my jaws—already sore from being clenched—were no match for the renewed pressure.

„Give it to me...“ Lydia said, and I opened my eyes to see her staring at me earnestly. She looked a little better. A little stronger. Not quite so pale. But if she took any more of my pain, she'd backslide. Fast and hard.

Unfortunately, I was beyond the ability to focus by then. I didn't know whether or not to give her what she wanted, much less how to do it. I could only ride the scream jolting through me like a bolt of electricity and hope it stayed contained.

But it wouldn't. The keening grew stronger. It thickened, until I thought I'd choke on it. My teeth vibrated beneath the relentless power of it, and I chattered like I was cold. I couldn't hold it back.

Yet I couldn't afford to let it go.

„There's too much. It's too slow,“ Lydia moaned. She was tense, like every little movement hurt. Her hands shook again, and her face had become one continuous grimace. „I'm sorry. I have to take it.“

What? What does that mean? Her pain was obvious, and she wanted more? I pulled my hand away, but she snatched it back just as my mouth flew open. I couldn't fight it anymore.

The scream exploded from my throat with an agonizing burst of pain, like I was vomiting nails. Yet there was no sound.

An instant after the scream began—before the sound had a chance to be heard—it was sucked back inside me by a vicious pull from deep in my gut. My mouth snapped shut. Those nails shredded my throat again on the way down. It whipped around inside me, my unheard screech, being steadily pulled out of me and into...

Lydia.

She began to convulse, but I couldn't pry her fingers from my hand. Her eyes rolled up so high only the lower arc of her green irises showed, yet still she clung to me, pulling the last of the scream from me and into her. Pulling my pain with it.

Gone was the agony of my bruised lungs, my raw throat and my pounding head. Gone was that awful grief, that despair so encompassing I couldn't think about anything else. Gone was the gray fog; it faded all around us while I tried to free my hand.

Then, suddenly, it was over. Her fingers fell away from mine. Her eyes closed. She fell over backward— still convulsing—before I could catch her. She hit her

head on the footboard, and when I fumbled for a pillow to put under her, I realized her nose was bleeding. Dripping steadily on the blanket.

„Help!“ I shouted, the first sound I'd made since the whole thing started, several endless minutes earlier. „Somebody help me!“ My voice sounded funny. Slurred. Why was it so hard to talk? Why did I feel so weird? Like everything was moving in slow motion? Like my brain was packed with cotton.

Footsteps pounded down the hall toward me, then the door flew open. „What happened?“ Nurse Nancy demanded, two taller female aides peering over her shoulder.

„She...“ I blinked, trying to focus in a thick cloud of confusion. „She took too much...“ Too much of what? The answer was right there, but it was so blurry... I could see it, but couldn't quite bring it into focus.

„What?“ Nurse Nancy knelt over the girl on my bed—Lisa? Leah?—and pulled back her eyelids. „Get her out of here!“ She yelled at one of the aids, gesturing toward me with one hand. „And bring a stretcher. She's seizing.“

A woman in bright blue scrubs led me into the hall by one arm. „Go sit in the common room,“ she said, then jogged past me.

I wandered down the hall slowly, one hand on the cold, rough wall for balance. Trying to stay above water as wave after wave of confusion crashed over me. I sank into the first empty chair I found and buried my face in my hands. I couldn't think. Couldn't quite remember...

People were talking all around me, whispering phrases I couldn't make sense of. Names I didn't quite recognize. So I latched on to the first familiar thing I saw: a jigsaw puzzle spread out on a table by the window. That was my puzzle. I'd been working it before something bad happened. Before...

Cold hands. Dark fog. Screaming. Bleeding.

I'd placed three puzzle pieces when two aides rolled a stretcher past the nurses' station and out the main door of the unit. „Another one?“ the security guard asked, as he held the door open.

„This one's still breathing,“ the aide in purple said.

This one? But the harder I tried to remember, the blurrier the images got.

I'd only placed two more pieces when someone called my name. I looked up from my puzzle to see another aide—her name was Judy; I remembered that—standing next to my uncle. Who stood next to my suitcase.

„Kaylee?“ Uncle Brendon frowned at me in concern. „Ready to go home?“

Yes. That much was clear. But my relief came with a bitter aftertaste of guilt and sadness. Something bad had happened. Something to do with the girl on my bed. But I couldn't remember what.

I followed Uncle Brendon through the main door—the one you had to be buzzed through—then stopped. Two men leaned over a stretcher in front of the elevator, where a girl with dark hair lay motionless. One man was steadily squeezing a bag attached to a mask over her face. A smear of blood stained her cheek. Her eyes were closed, but in my fractured memory, they were bright green.

„Do you know her?“ Uncle Brendon asked. „What happened to her?“

I shuddered as the answer surfaced from the haze in my head. Maybe someday I would know what it meant, but in that moment, I only knew that it was true.

„She took too much.“

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