

Girl, Unplugged

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Book Cover by Nicole Rivera using CanvaPro

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Dedicated to all my Warriors —
those I taught,
those I taught alongside,
those lifelines in room 315,
and, above all,
the one I married.

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Chapter One

Detention

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 5 @ 3:12PM

I was minding my own business, peeps. Sure, I had my phone out. And, sure, we all know that's not the way of their world here in the hallowed halls of academia, but what's a girl to do with a phone threatening to transform into a metal and plastic brick within moments?

Action had to be taken!

A charge was needed!

This girl required connection!

I even did my best to perpetuate the fraud —THE LORD OF THE FLIES was open (and to the appropriate page!) on the top of my desk. All was well with the world. I was sure of it.

I was wrong.

The curmudgeon — let's call him "Mr. G" — says, "You know the rules," while pulling my phone by its charge cord (what disrespect!) off of my lap. Then he tells me, "You can get this back at detention this afternoon."

What?!

Wait. That's not even the best part. This guy does all of this while brandishing his own phone on some dorky-ass belt clip in my face.

Is he for real?

You guys all know a guy like this, right? Tell me I'm not alone.

Well, actually I am. I'm in detention all alone. Surrounded by computers all tuned to some science news about the sun.

Send help, my peeps. Entertain me. I am in your hands for the next hour, let's connect.

~Talia

#unplugged #helpmeindetention #sendhelp #entertainme #theMANisgettingmedown

Approximately 23 seconds after publishing the post, it was a lie. I was no longer alone. I grabbed my phone, thankfully revived by the outlet it had been plugged into at the computer station so I could listen to the *Screaming Jellyfish* album my best friend Amy gifted me the night before, and texted her immediately,

MAY DAY! MAY DAY! In detention. CD is here!

For the uninitiated, CD is short for Captain Distraction. Captain Distraction is code for Matthew Murphy, the boy I had been crushing on for almost two years. He was a beautiful mystery. His brown skin betrayed the ethnic representation his name announced and the gene pool his father contributed. His mother's bloodline won the genetic battle in the same way my mom's had with my little brother, Roger. He looked at me with his dark brown eyes, gave a nearly imperceptible nod of detention solidarity, and walked to the back of the room. I watched him go, focused on regulating my breathing, and forgot about all of

my virtual plans for the hour. Quick question: At what point does keeping a crush secret become pathetic?

My phone buzzed, whipping me out of my stupor.

Don't disappoint me, Nat. Be Talia!

Amy was convinced that I had two personalities — the one I presented to “the real world” — Natalie Turner — and the one I presented to the virtual world — Talia Turner. “Talia’s Tales” was the name of my Tumblr page where, aside from participating in countless fandoms, I shared my own writing. I had a tendency to be super social, open, and witty with my online connections, pretty much everything that I am not in school and my day to day living. Amy is the only person on the planet who has truly seen both sides of me. It is for this reason she can make outrageous demands like “Be Talia!” She knew there was a difference, and she knew I couldn’t deny it.

However, simply saying “Be Talia!” was not enough of a direction for me. What did she want from me? Would she be pleased if I stood up and recited some of my poems about Matthew Murphy? Or perhaps write something new — on the spot — about all the feelings I was experiencing at the moment, and then shoot it over to him in the form of a paper airplane? No and no. Not happening. Sorry Amy, Talia’s sleeping, my phone is barely charged. I sent her an eye rolling emoticon with the text,

I’ll try.

“Some really fascinating news today, guys!” Mrs. Krimble, queen and gatekeeper of Staten Island Prep’s detention, sang to us. She was an unfortunate victim of the subject she chose to teach. She was trying to entice us with science-y news, and I don’t think she even meant it as part of the punishment. I’m not joking. I handed her my detention

slip, gave her a polite smile, and plugged my ear buds in. I wasn't trying to be rude. I knew I didn't need to know what the "fascinating news" was because I knew it wasn't going to be fascinating to me.

I did a quick glance at the rest of the room to see exactly where Murph ended up sitting. I have a problem; this, I know. He was sitting in the back of the room. He had pushed the keyboard aside and pulled out his sketchbook. Murph is an incredibly talented artist. I don't have any talents like that, so I find it amazing.

"Matthew, would you come back up here, please?" Mrs. Krimble was so loud standing right in front of me that I heard her over *Mermaids in the Moonlight* (supposedly Amy's second favorite song on the *Screaming Jellyfish* album). "Bring that with you." Mrs. Krimble gestured toward Murph's sketchbook. I muted my music like a good little crushing stalker does, so I could hear everything he said when he got back to the front of the room.

Murphy carefully closed his book and walked up to Mrs. Krimble's desk. He stood right in front of my computer. I should have been worlds away listening my way to *Matchless Burn* (Amy's favorite song on the album), or scrolling through all I missed in my virtual life during these past couple of hours. I should have been typing feverishly on my blog, responding to comments, and adding gifs. I wasn't. I was listening for Murph. I was watching Murph. I call him Captain Distraction for a reason.

Mrs. Krimble asked to see his work. He opened up the book and flipped past sketches of various imagined creatures, superheroes, and landscapes before stopping on a blank page. A purple brochure fell out of his book. I leaned over to pick it up. It was from New York University.

I tapped him with it, motioning that it fell out of his stuff. “Wha-- Oh,” he said, “Mr. Chaucey thinks I should submit a portfolio to their art school.”

“A what?” I said, pulling out one of my ear buds, but Mrs. Krimble had already grabbed the brochure, and Murph’s attention, before he could respond.

“Are you kidding me, Matthew?” She flipped through the brochure and smiled in excitement. “What are you going to include?”

“A bunch of my sketches,” he flipped through his book, “You know... to see if they’ll give me money or something.” I thought of how awesome that would be, though my heart was sinking thinking about the future where I couldn’t ~~stalk~~ see him every day in school.

“Have you sketched any live models?” Mrs. Krimble asked.

“Not really...” he said, flipping through the sketchbook as if something would pop out to answer the question.

“Well, then, you should sketch Natalie,” Mrs. Krimble said, “for practice.” The blood ran out of my face and into my stomach when she turned and winked at me.

Murph turned and looked at me, “Her?”

Ohgodohgodohgod he doesn't know who I am! I was mortified.

Then he stammered on, “I mean... you mean now?” He shuffled his feet and looked like he might be blushing. I hated that Mrs. Krimble was embarrassing him like this. Why was she forcing him to even take notice of me? And what did that wink mean? I looked at him and shrugged, hoping to convey, “I don’t know what she’s talking about,” with my silence.

Mrs. Krimble was already around her desk and down the row with the rest of Murph’s belongings in her hands. “Yes! I am in charge here and I say your detention assignment for the next hour is to get practice in by sketching a live subject. In this case, one Natalie Turner.” With

the utterance of my name she flopped Murph's bag on the seat next to me. "Young man, you get over here and get to work. Miss Turner will not mind being your model for one hour because – oh yes, that's right – I said she would not and – to recap – I am the one in charge here!"

I was beginning to think that someone spiked the coffee in the teacher's lounge. Mrs. Krimble was in her typical carefree jubilant mood, but, for once, it had nothing to do with science. It was clear she was having a blast. Still, I wasn't sure how Murph felt about it. His face was unreadable as he walked around and took the seat next to me. My phone, concealed under my desk, was clutched tight in my hands. I was ready to text Amy about this real-life conversation I was sort-of having with Matthew Murphy, but then I was stunned into inactivity. I couldn't tell her. Not now. Now he was here.

He exhaled, opened his sketchbook back to the first empty page and finally – with a crooked smile — said, "Thanks, Natalie." All types of butterflies flew through my insides hearing him say my name. Then he looked over to my Tumblr page on my screen and said, "So...You think I could sketch you? You know... for practice."

At that point I knew I was blushing. I felt the heat flow through my cheeks and rise all the way up to my ears. I clicked the power button on my phone and set it on the desktop, took my ear buds off and placed them on top. "If you want to..." I said in a voice so quiet I wondered if I only thought it.

"Matthew and Natalie, let's not waste the whole hour, okay?" Mrs. Krimble interrupted the closest thing I had to a romantic moment in years, "Plus — remember," she added in a whisper, "no talking."

I nodded to her over the computer screen, feeling my temperature regulate back to normal. Then I turned back to Murph. He tapped his pencil to his sketchbook and then pointed it to me, miming this question again. I wished there was a way to make a gif of this moment

to share with Amy via text, and the world on my Tumblr page with the tag line *This is how he looked at ME today*.

I nodded to him, he winked, and my heart sighed. He tilted my chin slightly. I was facing his computer screen, still on the *Scientific American* home page. I read it just to keep my heart inside my chest.

Here's what I learned: space nerds that spend their life staring at the sun (I thought that was really bad for you to do) say that the bright spots they saw yesterday were brighter than any other bright spots they ever saw before. There was some sort of solar storm (Shouldn't it always be sunny there?) causing bright spots that may be sending stuff to the Earth (Uh... light?).

I didn't want to ask Murph to scroll down because:

1. I was starting to feel normal and didn't want to get re-flustered.
2. I didn't think the article was going to get any more fascinating than it had already proved to.

Instead, I stared at the picture of the sun and wondered if today was a good day to get a tan. And then, in some quiet space in my brain a soft voice asked, *What would Talia do?*

Going home I replayed the end of detention over and over again in my head. It went like this: Murph asked to take my picture so he could finish the sketch at home. Then he asked for my phone number. (Here's where it turns crazy-amazing) I, being quite audacious in my response, said (I still can't believe it), "Sure — a pic for a pic and a

number for a number.” I have no idea where the courage came from. There was only one logical explanation: Talia showed up!

As I waited to cross Richmond Terrace, I texted Amy,

You’re going to be so proud of me

Then waited a couple of seconds before following that up with the selfie I took with Murph and his sketch-in-progress — she wasn’t going to believe it.

Amy didn’t text back. She called. I didn’t answer. I mean, I was out in public, on the street, walking home — who the heck wants to hear all of my nonsense out there? I hit the autoresponder message using a custom message I had created for these occasions saying, “In public.”

She texted back with,

Ur killing me

What.

Ever

It is what it is. I am who I am. Amy knew better than anyone, that wasn’t her precious Talia walking down the street!

Amy and I met in preschool. We were inseparable until Hurricane Imelda tore our lives apart. Growing up my parents would always tell my brother and I about Hurricane Sandy, how they struggled, how homes were lost, neighborhoods destroyed. We were both too young to remember. My parents never thought anything like that would ever happen again on Staten Island. They weren’t alone. Everyone thought that. Everyone was wrong. After Hurricane Imelda my parents never had to tell us about Sandy again. We had our own destruction to remember. However, we were not physically affected by the storm.

Our house was fine. We lost power for a couple of hours. In all the time the storm passed through, my life was barely inconvenienced. Amy, on the other hand, had to be evacuated from her home. Thanks to Hurricane Imelda, the ocean decided it was taking over her block. Eventually her family gave up on the rebuild and moved to south Jersey. Amy lost everything and I lost her. I missed her so much. Thank God for technology.

I spent the rest of the walk home texting back and forth with Amy, explaining the entire event. I could tell you there were complete sentences. I could say I did not employ the use of gifs. I could even say that I did not have to stop walking a couple of times just to regain composure from laughter. I would be lying. Amy was extremely proud of me. Shocked, but proud. She concluded with,

My little girl is all grewed up without me

I loved this girl so much.

Later, while I was tweeting my way through an episode of *Wolf Nights* with the cast and crew, I received a text from a number that was readily identified as “Murph” in my caller ID. I gulped and prayed I was equipped to handle what came next. It said,

What do you think?

It was attached to a picture of the completed sketch. It was amazing. Let’s count off why:

1. Matthew Murphy spent his entire evening looking at, and thinking about, a picture of me.
2. It really looked like me. Really.
3. The background details — my iPhone, my ear buds and one of the computer screens including a detailed sketch of the

sun and its solar flares — were flawless.

It was easy to see why Mr. Chaucey thought Murph could get a scholarship for his skills.

Wow!

I added a wow-face emoticon for emphasis, and, seconds after it was sent — before I could even text Amy for any kind of consult — my phone rang. It was him.

Oh no! I tapped through the autoresponder messages. There was the custom “In public” message I typically used for Amy. Well, that made no sense to anyone else, and would probably make me sound like a freak. The next on the list, “Can I call you later?” *Oh hell no.* That wasn’t happening. Next, “I’m on my way.” *What?!* I felt beads of sweat forming around my brow. My intestines flipped. The last message — *Why is it last?!* — said, “Sorry, I can’t talk right — “ *Too late.* He hung up before I could even read the thing.

I felt sick. I stared at the phone as the “Murph missed call” message appeared on my screen. I waited for the inevitable follow up buzz and message indicating my doom: a voicemail. What would he say? He has to know the phone was in my hand — I just texted the word “Wow!” to him. I added an emoticon! He knew, and now he had to be judging me. *Ohgodohgodohgod* —

Verrrrt. It buzzed. The vibration in my hand nearly caused me to rocket the phone across the room I jumped so high. The flinch caused me to grip the phone tighter, so I looked down and, between my fingertips, I did not find a voicemail notification. I found a text.

Inhale. I breathed in audibly. And exhale, I let out a long, deep breath with the same breathy noisiness of a snoring beast.



Hey. Sry Mrs. K forced you into this. Thx for letting me sketch you.

I read it. I re-read it. Okay. I typed,

You're welcome.

I thanked the techie gods that blushing was not translated through text.

Murph responded immediately. He was not rereading texts.

Guess there wasn't really anything else to do,

Then he sent another,

But I'm sure you would have found something online.

I scrambled for what to write back. He was right, of course, I could always find something to do online. In fact, I had virtual plans when he walked into detention! But would admitting to that make it seem like that's what I wanted to do? Would it make me seem cool? What would Amy say? Based on earlier in the day I figured she'd tell me to be Talia, so I thought about that. Talia loves the online world, but given this opportunity, would she admit defeat?

Murph interrupted my search for a response with,

Mrs. K had other plans.

I guess he felt the need to fill in the silence my circular thinking dragged us into. Maybe the still text made him nervous. God, I was so bad at this stuff. He continued, changing topics completely,

You think I should color it?

At first I was confused. I scrolled back, *what were we talking about again? Did I mention something that needed to be colored?* Then it hit me. I was stunned. *He wants to spend more time on my picture?* I didn't know what to say.

He kept texting,

I don't want to ruin it

I read it, he buzzed in again,

I really like it.

There was a longer pause after that text, but I didn't bother trying to clog his brain with any of my entangled thoughts.

I'm coloring it!!!!

So many exclamation points!

I'll scan this first...

I waited for more.

and I'll need to take more pics of you...

What?!?!?

Okay?

What would Talia do? What would Talia do? WWTD?

Sure.

I threw my phone across the room the second I hit send and threw my face in my pillow. No turning back now. It's out there. Murph and me, together, for some picture taking. Whatever the heck that means.

Verrrrrt. He was responding. *Where's my phone?*

Verrrrrt. Verrrrrt. He was writing a bunch. *Ohgodohgod it was all a joke. Where's my phone?!* Beneath the curtain to my window, I saw the light of my phone screen illuminated. I jumped down to the floor to accept my doom.

Cool.

See you tomorrow.

You rock, Turner.

I stared at my phone. *What just happened?*

And one more buzz in my hand,

See you on the ferry.

The ferry? The only reason either of us would be on the ferry is if we were going to the city. *Why would be going to the — OMG!* It hit me all at once. The trip the museum! No wonder Mrs. Krimble was extra giddy during detention — it was the eve of our annual trip to her Mecca, The New York City New School Museum.

I got on Skype to chat with Amy. I needed as much advice as possible. It needed to be face-to-face talk. I was about to spend the entire next day with Matthew Murphy.

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @2:46AM

Have you ever seen a picture and thought to yourself, "Damn. That's beautiful?" I'm an ordinary girl (secret's out!), but an artist's rendition of my features, brought to life by his hand — a hand so full of talent and vision that it must be a work of art itself — gave life to a blank page in a way I never thought possible. It gave life to my blank eyes, my plain skin, and my tortured hair. I

*saw Talia today, my peeps, and I hope I am someday brave enough
to show you what she looks like.*

~Talia

#beautyredefined #meetTalia

Chapter Two

Noise

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @7:22AM

In all honesty, I should be out the door already, but I need a moment.

My world is noisy. This screen, so quiet. Good morning, peeps. Thank you for your gentle nudge into the day. I did it again — unplugged phone posed as a pillow last night and did a terrible job. The sleep lines on my face this morning carved deep untold stories of the worries I shared with my bestie into the wee hours of the morn via text. It's going to be a big day here in the big city. Send good vibes.

~Talia

#allthegood #allthestrength #betalia

It was 6:37AM, my head felt like it was full of some thick, oozy syrup, and my pillow felt like heaven on Earth. Lights on, radios blasting, television competing for attention, family bustling in and out of the kitchen for things to nosh on and, in the second room on the

right, up on the second floor, I was hitting my snooze button as if that was going to be enough to grant me a couple more precious moments of shut eye. I am not a morning person. I was born into the wrong family.

I knew I didn't have the time to stay in bed any longer, but the only thing that truly lit a fire under my ass was the fact that, as I reached my arm under my pillow to give it another loving, groggy grab, I felt my iPhone lying beneath it — again. "Craaap," I moaned. *I have to stop doing this!* I dug through my covers and scooped it out in a panic, checked the battery and audibly gasped at the pathetic 4% battery left. *Not cool*, were the only words that entered my mind. It was imperative that my phone was fully charged for the day ahead of me.

I put the phone on the charger and started tapping on the screen while it sucked what little energy it could in the time it took me to get ready. I found a gif I had saved for just these occasions — it was an animated version of Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*, with a speech bubble proclaiming "My phone is dying!" — and posted it on my Tumblr page. Then I reblogged a bunch of gifs of Danny Tartum from last night's episode of *Barista Boys*. He was seriously adorable in the scene where Lanie caught him looking at her over his car door. There were at least 15 different creations from that look alone. I shared one with Amy via text. She'd thank me later.

"What the heck are you doing?" It was Roger, my little brother, at my bedroom door. He had the same brown hair as me, but while mine was long and thick enough to stay pretty tame after a night of sleep, his looked like he had been electrocuted in the night. It always made me laugh, but this morning, Rog was the one who looked amused. It hadn't occurred to me how weird I must have looked lying across my bed and nightstand trying to type on my phone.

“Oh Rog! Lemme borrow your iPod for the shower, please?” I needed music to get ready.

He barged into my room, “What’s wrong with your phone?” and reached over to my iHome.

“Don’t touch it!” I yelled. I didn’t mean to, it just came out.

“Wow.”

He was hurt, I could tell.

“Sorry, Rog.” I really was, “it’s just that it’s almost dead. I need to charge it, ya know?”

“Yeah... whatever,” he handed me his iPod while unplugging his headphones.

“Thanks,” I said as I got up and kissed his head.

He called to me as I made my way out of the room, “You’re an addict, you know that, right?”

He may have had a point, because all I could think of was how I needed to get myself connected to the world in some other way. I headed into the den which separates my brother’s room and my own to get onto the family computer for a virtual wake up to the world that was more my speed. I needed the Internet. Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr were how I greeted my days. None of the morning news programs my mother subscribes to, loud ass rock music my brother has on some maddening loop, or stagnant text that my father pours over in *The New York Times* can get me to shake off the sandman’s damages. Give me backlit screens with gifs, videos and random thoughts from my online peeps, and I’ll show you a girl who can conquer anything.

However, the second I stepped out of my room, I was spotted. “The princess has risen!” my mother sang from the kitchen, exuding the same brightness in her voice that every corner of our house (except for my wonderfully draped bedroom) exemplified.

In the morning my house was as loud as the Mall's food court on a Friday afternoon. My mother blasted the Today Show from the second it started so she could hear it over her blow dryer. My brother, who didn't believe in shutting off his speakers even when he was wearing headphones, saw every waking hour as another opportunity to gain experience in who knows how many different MMORPGs that he was involved in. My dad's morning was a symphony of beeps from his e-mail, early morning texts, and phone calls. He added to that with the coffee machine and his incurable addiction to microwave usage. When I finally got up, I contributed to the cacophony with my music in the bathroom, but that wasn't until the rest of these nut cases had been up for at least two hours.

One benefit of my house's morning ritual was the extreme lighting. One drawback was the inability to have any quiet time. I'll admit, most of the time I don't require quiet time that my own headphones can't give to me, but on the morning after Murph's call I was nervous as hell about the day ahead. I felt like a minute of quiet would have been all I needed to get my head straight. A moment to remember that Murph was a normal human being who just wanted to have a nice piece for his college portfolio and I was helping him out.

"The clock is ticking sweetheart, the day waits for no one!" My mother was dancing while she said this last bit. I kid you not. She was right. I headed to the shower to avoid Rog using up all the hot water before me.

The trip to school was even noisier than my house. On the bus everyone is staring at their hands — whether they're grasping iPods, smart

phones, DSEs, or, believe it or not, books — but, at the same time, they are all still talking. If there was a mute button for life, this scene would look like it should be silent, but it isn't. It's loud. Just like home. Everything is loud. Everything except detention and the night.

Amy and I discovered the silence of the night during the hurricane. We were out in my backyard when the entire neighborhood lost power. The whole city was out for at least an hour. The sky came alive and my neighbors came out to see, but no one spoke. It was amazing. Ever since then, whenever the weather is right, I sneak out into my backyard to capture whatever quiet I can. The night before the trip to the museum was one of those nights. At around two in the morning, after hours of texting with Amy (Skype was a no-go — Amy claimed she did not have Skype-appropriate hair — what.ever.), I snuck outside. I wanted to shut the street light off so I could really see the stars and recapture that stillness so I could think.

Heading to school, my mind spun with possibilities. Amy was going full-blown virtual cheerleader on me. She started by resending an edited form of the gif I sent her that morning. I don't know how she did it so quickly, but she cut out Murph's face from the photo I sent her the day before and superimposed it on the Danny Tartum gif I sent her and wrote,

You could be his Lanie.

I deleted that so fast. Can you imagine if someone was looking over my shoulder? The sentiment was great, but that just wouldn't do. I texted back

IN PUBLIC!!!!!!!!!!!!

I added the angry devil emoticon to drive my seriousness home. I think she got the point. While she didn't stop texting me for the rest

of my trip to school, the rest of her well-wishes were generic enough that in the event I were horribly maimed in an accident and someone found my phone, they'd just think my bestie really wanted me to have a good day. Still, for me, it was all too much. My brain was as noisy as my daytime surroundings. I tried to spill out the distractions into my palm — typing, typing, typing — wondering if everyone could see how excited I was about a tiny conversation I had with a boy yesterday.

Mrs. Krimble waited in the front of the auditorium for all juniors going on the trip to the New School Museum. I wasn't happy to have to see her so soon after my detention, but if I wanted to go on the trip, I had to check in before homeroom.

“Hey Miss Turner, let's hope those solar flares don't interrupt our trip this afternoon, huh?” she gave me a joking jab in my side. She was all smiles.

Oh my God, I thought, *she thinks we have an inside joke because of my damn detention!* The punishment was finally being dealt. I can only imagine the horror on my face. I stammered a response while darting my eyes to see who was around for this teacher-student chummy behavior. I was grateful that I had at least some clue what she was talking about, though. If not for Muph sketching me, I would've been sure she was talking about some impending exam I was doomed to fail.

Murph. All roads lead back to him. Even when I had no reason to think of him, that's what I was doing.

“Do you have a MetroCard?” Mrs. Krimble interrupted my daydreaming. It was probably for the best.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you use a student MetroCard to get to school, or do you need one for the trip?” she elucidated as I noticed Murph walking into the auditorium.

All SI Prep trips used the mass transit system in NYC. If we couldn't get there with a MetroCard, then the school wouldn't schedule a trip there. Since I took the city bus to school every morning and home every afternoon, I had a MetroCard, so I didn't need a temporary one for the trip. It was a simple question for me to answer. It's a shame I didn't see it that way at the moment. “Uh — no. I mean. No, I take the bus. I have one. I'm good,” said the babbling idiot (in other words, me).

“Okay, then I'll see you back here after homeroom!” Mrs. Krimble waved me off with a smile, calling out as I started to walk away, “Just as long as the sun doesn't stop us!”

I turned back to see her cracking herself up when I walked right into the chest of the one and only Matthew Murphy. He smelled like soap, and it was wonderful.

“Ohmygosh,” I breathed, mortified that I walked right into someone because I was joking around with a teacher. I am still waiting for my acceptance letter to the Dork Hall of Fame, it should be here any day now.

“Whoa, girl!” Murph said putting his hands on my shoulders. They were warmer than I expected. Actually, scratch that. I never really expected anything. I never thought about his hands touching me before that moment and then, suddenly I could think of nothing else. How my shoulders fit perfectly in his palms, how he used those hands to create such perfect drawings, what it might feel like to hold hands with him... I was lost in a flurry of thought in a moment. Time travel has to be possible, or else how could I be able to think so much in the time that elapses within a single breath?

“Oh—“ I looked at him. “I’m sorry...” and then I was stunned silent.

“No big,” he said letting go of me with a smile, “you okay?”

“Yep,” I responded, suddenly at a loss for syllables.

“See ya later?” he asked leaning over to look in my eyes.

“Yep,” I said again. I couldn’t believe it, so I added, “Yeah, I better go. I don’t want to be late for homeroom.” At which point I bolted for the auditorium door. I was mortified and terrified of the the ferry trip in less than an hour.

I missed the silence of detention.

Posted to TALIA’S TALES

Oct 6 @8:39AM

Here’s something I’m fiddling with. Let me know what you think.

BE TALIA

Do you know this girl Talia?

Sometimes I pretend to be her.

Talia knows how to talk

Talia knows how to walk

She’s cool as a cube in a crowd

Get her going and she’s super loud

Talia tells jokes to friends

Talia never pretends

Her words are her power

She can spill them for hours

And hours

And hours...

#amwriting #poetry #betalia

Chapter Three

Worlds Collide

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 8:53AM

With all the craziness in my life this week, I almost forgot that it was FANFIC FRIDAY! So sorry my peeps. There will be no new WOLF NIGHTS or BARISTA BOYS content from me today, but I thought I'd ask you for some TALIA'S TALES fanfic instead.

THE SETTING: a boat ride followed by a trip to a museum with lunch in the park.

THE PLAYERS: an artist and this blogger (that's right — ME!)

THE PLOT: TBD

NOTES: the blogger has a huge crush on the artist.

THE QUESTION: What will she do about it?

You write your fanfic, and we'll find out how close you come to the reality.

Stay tuned... we're about to find out quite a bit about our Talia today!

~Talia

#Fanficfriday #inspireme #cheatingonlife #tellewhattodo

The Staten Island Ferry terminal is a large waiting space designed with tourists in mind. The bright blue floors are colored that way so the tourists don't feel cheated by the murky waters they are about to sail over. To add to the deception, there are two giant aquariums filled with gorgeous fish that could never survive in any waters surrounding our island. The aquariums are where our classes typically gather at the beginning of our trips, so I was surprised (and super nervous) when Murph chose a seat for us on the benches furthest from them.

Mrs. Krimble was responsible for all eleven students on the trip to the New School Museum, but only two of them spent the previous afternoon with her in detention. She found us as if she had placed homing beacons on us. "So, did either of you read the coverage of that solar storm yesterday?" Her extreme sincerity and curiosity broke my heart.

"Nah, miss." I think Murph called all of his female teachers "miss" whether or not they were married. "If you will recall, I had an assignment to do. I was sketching," he said tapping the messenger bag I never saw him without.

"Of course." She sounded disappointed. Then she laughed, adding, "Guess I should have seen that one coming."

She turned and looked at me, "What about you, Natalie? Did you see the article?"

"A little bit of it," I confessed, hoping Murph wouldn't think any less of me. He raised his eyebrows.

"And?" Mrs. Krimble asked.

I said, "I didn't get the big deal." The minute the words left my mouth I regretted it. Murph's eyes grew wide as he bit his bottom

lip, and Mrs. Krimble's entire posture changed. I had done it. She was about to lunge on a teachable moment. I had ruined everything. *Nice job, idiot!* my inner voice roared as Murph and I both turned our full attention to Mrs. Krimble's lesson on the sun. "First you have to understand how powerful the sun is." As she turned to point out through the window to the powerful beast in the sky, I stole a glance at Murph, who was looking back at me.

I hadn't ruined everything. He smiled, took a quick picture with his phone and then, very naturally, placed his hand on top of mine. So, to be honest with you, even after fifteen minutes of Mrs. K's explaining what the big deal was with the damn article, I still couldn't tell you the significance of that solar storm. I was too busy regulating my own breathing and ensuring that the voice in my head screaming, *That's his hand holding my hand! Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh!* stayed in my head screaming and didn't express itself out loud.

On the ferry, Mrs. Krimble instructed our class that we were to sit together on the outer benches of the "tourist side" of the boat -- it had a nicer view, and, on a weekday morning during the school year, wasn't so mobbed that you couldn't appreciate it. A large portion of our class was distracted by the morning aroma of the baked goods and coffee coming from the ferry's concession stand, so Mrs. K was forced to round up the stragglers. Murph pulled out his sketchbook and began sketching everything he saw. I sat next to him and shared a quick picture of the view from the boat to my Tumblr page. I texted Amy too, but she was in class by that time. I knew not to expect an immediate response. She just had her own phone-related detention

last week thanks to my need for constant connection with her. We agreed to free period communications only for at least a month after that.

The class settled into the seats next to us. That's when it became obvious that Mrs. K had been telling some of the other kids about the solar storm as she escorted them to their seats. A couple of them were legitimately interested. I couldn't believe it. Stella Malroney asked a lot of questions, but she is so polite that might have just been for Mrs. K's sake rather than her own curiosity. Terrell Falcon, on the other hand, seemed genuinely interested. He asked how anyone could actually look at the sun -- which I was sort of happy he asked -- and what a storm was like on the sun. Mrs. Krimble went on and on about the various instruments used so no one actually looked directly at the sun. And then she began to explain what a solar storm was, interjecting many times that she wished we were in the classroom where she had pictures and videos of such events.

"What about the museum, Mrs. Krimble? Won't they have videos?" Stella asked in her perfect, aren't I so clever? voice. I don't mean to hate on Stella. She is, hands-down, the sweetest person I have ever met. Let me explain it to you this way: Have you ever had sweet potato marshmallow casserole? Just in case you haven't, let me highlight the major ingredients: sweet potatoes, marshmallows, sugar, brown sugar, vanilla, butter and -- oh yeah -- cinnamon sugar. This is a polarizing dish in my family. Some people love it, others can't tolerate the sweetness. Stella Malroney is Staten Island Prep's very own sweet potato marshmallow casserole. I don't believe she has ever had any malicious intentions and I don't even think she was attempting to kiss up to Mrs. Krimble, she's just sweet, sweet Stella.

“Oh yes, Stella, I’m looking forward to what they have to say about yesterday’s event and how it will affect us.” Mrs. Krimble was beaming, as if a solar storm had burst within her.

“Whoa, Miss K.” Rainbow Diaz, who I didn’t even think was listening, came into the discussion from somewhere out of left field, “affect us how? Am I going to get burnt out here?”

Colin Savoy and Russ Sandberg guffawed in unison, as if they knew any better. I rolled my eyes at them and gave Rainbow a small smile. She returned the gesture with a shrug, whispering, “What do I know?”

I laughed. I always liked Rainbow. She was the type of person I didn’t feel uncomfortable around. I never felt like she was judging me. She asked questions bravely and never apologized for who she was. In that way, she reminded me a lot of Amy. I guess it was just a matter of circumstance that we hadn’t become closer in the past few years.

Who am I kidding? It was no coincidence. I made no effort to talk to her.

Mrs. Krimble laughed, “No, Rainbow, you’ll be fine. I meant how the storm will affect our planet.”

With this extremely vague response and the appearance of Lady Liberty, Mrs. Krimble lost her audience. It doesn’t matter that we all live right across the water from the Statue of Liberty — we all become just as bad as the tourists most of us loathe. The cameras come out, and the selfie poses run amok. I saw a wedding proposal happen at exactly this part of the ferry ride one year when my parents took me and Rog on one of our “city adventures” to play tourist and see all the Christmas décor and the big tree at Rockefeller Center. Reminiscing about the more romantic tendency of this locale, I glanced over at Murph and caught him looking at me. He grabbed some colored pencils from his bag and started to feverishly scratch at a page.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

His head was down, focused on the book before him. Without stopping his shading he said, "I'm making my palette."

"Oh," I said. I wanted to kick myself for not having more to say. If we were texting, or if I were writing online, I could come up with something, but this was different, and difficult. I looked around and saw everyone else occupied with their views, their pictures, and their phones. I took out my phone and started typing.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Murph's attention turn to me, "What're you doing? You can't have service," he said.

I did have service. I had just received an "off hours" thumbs up from Amy (I guess she was bending our "no texting during classes" rule for today's "event"), but that wasn't really the point. Can't a girl do stuff on her phone without an interrogation? "Doesn't mean I can't type something," I said, "this phone does more than connect to the Internet." Which was true, even if you'd never know that based on my typical usage.

"I guess so." He went back to his book. It looked like I wasn't the only conversationally challenged one in this pairing.

Mrs. Krimble directed us out of the ferry terminal by shouting various commands as she ran up and down the sides of the group ensuring that we stayed together. She herded the eleven of us like a metropolitan shepherd. It was masterful work. Personally, I wasn't too worried about getting lost because Murph hadn't let go of my hand since hearing the "All ashore!" call from the ferry workers. I wasn't about to make the first move.

We were loaded into the ancient and sensory-assaulting subway station under the ferry terminal. There's a newer one outside the ferry terminal a bit, but since Hurricane Imelda hit it had to be closed for renovations. The older station is a nightmare, even on pleasant days. The first design flaw was in the tile color choice for the walls: white. They are never actually white so, the second you see them all around you, you feel like you're filthy. I wondered what Murph, a connoisseur of color, thought about when he saw them. Our clutched hands began to get clammy. Murph uncurled his fingers and cascaded them back down one by one probably in some effort to air them out. I knew this was a lost cause. Mom and dad used to make me and Rog hold hands when standing on subway platforms. This was, and shall always be, torture. The air underground New York is hot, muggy, and almost hard to breathe in. I was grateful it wasn't summer, but the longer we waited for the train to arrive, the hotter it got. I was beginning to feel bad that I hadn't let go of Murph's hand sooner, but letting go all of a sudden seemed like the wrong message to send. What does that look like? What would that mean to him? I started to imagine my actions: release hand and then — what? I mean, obviously, the first thing I'd want to do would be to wipe the subway sludge off my palms and onto my jeans, but how would that look? I began to feel beads of sweat welling up on my brow from the stress of it all when I was saved by the ultimate insanity of the station: the sound.

The New York City subway system has almost 40 different lines connecting four of the boroughs (Staten Island is deemed “the forgotten borough” for a reason, we're not even included in the train system!). I know one — the 1 train. The station under the ferry is the first — or, if you are traveling downtown, the last — stop on the subway line. In the new station you know that because the conductor tells you so. In this old station everything tells you so, most notably

the sound the train makes when pulling into the station. It's a sound so physically painful it must harken the end of the line, if not, you'd be sure it heralded the end times. The newer station was built so that the subway platform where passengers get on and off the train is separate from the area where the train turns. The old station, on the other hand, put the platform in the middle of the arcing tracks. Trains are loud, that's true throughout the city, but turning trains? They make catastrophic-level sounds. As our train barreled toward us with its familiar logo of white number 1 inside a red circle, it carried its typical train-levels of sound, but the second it hit that first curve, Murph yelled, dropped my hand and clutched his ears. I quickly wiped my hand on my jeans before doing the same.

"I always forget about that!" Murph screamed into my face. "Why does it have to be so loud?" His efforts to continue a conversation in that din was amusing to me. I looked around to the rest of our class and saw most of them wearing headphones they didn't have on before. *Smart*, I thought. When the train stopped, I pointed over to our headphone-wearing classmates stepping out of the way of the crowds rushing out of the train. "Next time we should follow the crowd," I said.

"Let's!" he said, waving his hand in a grand gesture signaling me to get on the train before him.

Once the train started moving, Murph was taking pictures left and right — of the subway stations we passed, of a group of students, of me, and of weird little things like our hands holding the pole. Brenda McNeil was the first to say something about it, "Hey Murph," she yelled while snapping her gum, "this your first time on the subway or something?"

"Funny Brenda," he said. "Of course I wouldn't expect you to find the beauty in the mundane."

She rolled her eyes. “Whadda ya mean?” she asked flipping her raven-black, pin-straight ponytail back over her shoulder.

“Cause it’s hard enough for you to find it in the mirror!” He pointed his camera at her face and clicked while laughing.

I gasped. Brenda was gorgeous. Then Brenda laughed and biffed him on the head. “And people wonder why I date your cousin instead of you! You are such a dork.” I didn’t want to say anything, but I couldn’t imagine anyone wondering that at all. It was pretty well-known that Murph is not Brenda’s type at all. It’s the only reason I didn’t feel threatened by their banter. At the very least, he’s the wrong gender!

She looked at me, “He’s a smart ass, Turner, you sure you can’t do any better?”

I knew she was joking, but how do you answer a question like that? This girl was so much cooler than I was. Her perfect make-up. Her stylized clothing. Her comfort with, and comprehension of, her sexuality. I was pretty sure we didn’t even speak the same language.

If I assumed her question was rhetorical and let it sit unanswered, then I looked like I’d been struck dumb. If I defended my position with Murph, then I was publicly admitting my affection for him. Was I ready to do that when I hadn’t even really let him in on my terribly held secret? If I agreed with her, then I was pretty sure I’d be insulting Murph even though Brenda’s original comment was most likely meant only as a joke.

In the end, as my mind scrambled for a response, Murph said, “She has no choice in partners on this trip.” Then he pulled me closer to his side adding, “Turner is the subject of my latest piece!” I could tell these two were used to their sibling-like banter. “It’s on Miss K’s orders, anyway,” he said, raising his voice to pull Mrs. Krimble out of her focus on some museum brochure, “Isn’t that right, Miss K?”

“Huh?” she said. “Oh... yes. Your model.”

Brenda looked me up and down and said, “Well Turner, you make sure you tell us all the tale on your Tumblr page when he’s finished with you. Spread the good word about our budding artist.”

“That’s a great idea,” Murph said. And it was, but I was shocked that Brenda was familiar enough with my page to mention it.

“I would love to be one of Talia’s Tales,” Murph said with a smile.

I knew both Brenda and Murph followed my page — everyone did — but I didn’t think anyone was really following it, you know what I mean? I had always imagined that my posts were those things that everyone but Amy scrolled by in their feed. Maybe they clicked a “like” or reblogged a post here and there, but I doubted they connected the content with the creator. Amy gave me hearts, reblogged, and commented every time I wrote, but I had been sure that was it from the people in my “real life”. I never thought anyone else pictured me when interacting with the stuff I posted. I was sure all the people who participated on my page consisted of the endless, faceless fans from the depths of the anonymous Internet. I knew them as avatars and usernames, not as real human beings. I functioned so fluidly and freely on the web because I was sure I was perceived the same way. An awkward wave of pride and insecurity washed over me as my previous writings flashed through my mind.

And then it hit me — didn’t Murph realize he was one of the main focuses of Talia’s Tales? I’d written countless poems about my unrequited love for Murph – I wondered, *Did I ever mention his name?* I smiled back at him, sure my secret crush was not a secret at all and maybe this whole trip was just a part of game he was playing with me. Maybe Brenda was in on it. I needed Amy to be here to assess the situation. I needed her to tell me that I was being paranoid, or that I needed to blow him off. I needed her in this scene with me, Murph and

Brenda, to tell me what was really going on because I was about to let everything unravel, or believe that there was nothing there to unravel. I stared at my feet and listened to the clacking of the train tracks beneath us. I allowed myself to fall into the rhythm of the subway, to meditate within the thunder and pretend no one else was there.

But that wasn't meant to be, because Princess Jones, a girl in my science class that I have never talked to even though we have been in school together since the fifth grade, overheard everything. "Wait a second." She tugged on my left shoulder so I was facing her. "You're Talia's Tales?"

I nodded, wondering why she had to be so physical about it.

"I follow you!" she was surprised. I was not. Like I said, everyone followed me. I followed everyone else back. That's the way it was on tumblr, wasn't it? "You're funny, girl," she added.

"Thanks," I replied with a smile, unsure of what else I was supposed to do. Was I now expected to be funny on demand? – because that definitely wasn't going to happen. My written me and my real-life me were two totally different people.

Princess was already turning to other classmates on the train and spreading the word. She was behaving like I was some sort of celebrity. I watched as my classmates leaned over each other's shoulders nodding and smiling to each other making comments here and there. I even heard a couple of Wow's. Only Rainbow Diaz looked unsurprised. "Natalie's blog has always been my favorite. I always thought using Talia was so clever!"

"Now you're famous," Murph said in my ear, "and every guy is jealous of me. Too bad they didn't know how cool you were already."

Everyone else in the train disappeared. My insides melted and I wanted to savor this moment for all the juicy emotions it offered up. How could I translate all of this into the written word? How could

I express my heart melting without using the cliché of “my heart melted”, because, let’s be honest, that’s been done too much.

And just when a moment of calm teased its way into my psyche, a question rushed through: *who does Murph think I am? Be Talia! Be Talia!* Started swirling in my head, but I couldn’t reconcile it. Maybe Murph thought that’s who I was all the time and it’s not. I’m not. I mean, on one hand — yeah — of course I am Talia, but me, in the real world? No. I don’t know how to do that. That is my struggle. If I knew how to “be Talia” then all these people wouldn’t just be discovering that’s my blog, they would have known already. Princess wouldn’t feel the need to tell me I’m funny because we would have been laughing, together, for years. Their shock and surprise was not a compliment, it was a symptom of my inability to be as cool as my words were. I looked at Murph smiling at me and wondered what was going to happen when he realized he was on this trip with Natalie, not Talia.

I smiled. Now that everyone noticed me I could no longer pretend I was alone. I lifted the veil covering the rest of the occupants in the train and nodded back to them terrified of what came next. I knew Amy would have been excited and amazed. She would have known how to use this moment to make connections. Amy knew how to make me a part of the world. She’s the one who made my tumblr page in the first place.

I used to write in notebooks. For me. Maybe a little bit for her... Amy was the only one I would show my stories to. She borrowed my books one night — she said she wanted to finish reading my stories before going to bed. Instead she typed up my poems and stories as all separate posts on a newly created tumblr page called “Talia’s Tales.” When she showed me, I had no idea what to do with it, I started by adding stuff as a *Barista Boys* fangirl. After a little while I got into

the fanfic, then — before I knew it — I started posting more of my own stuff. It was never planned. And I wasn't expecting anyone in my real life — besides Amy — to know about it. Now it seems that they did. Somehow, everyone in my class was a fan of me. The thought was laughable.

We walked three blocks from the subway station to the New York City New School Museum, our destination for the day. Murph squeezed my hand and said, quietly, “I can never get used to this sight.” I guess I had because I hadn't thought twice about it until he said that. It wasn't a huge building, but it was striking. The building was covered in some sort of mirrored glass which reflected us, a bit of the sky and busy street in front of the large apartment buildings behind us. Since it was built on the edge of Central Park it looked like it was a doorway to a mysterious urban landscape in the middle of all the green.

I started composing a blog post all about the vision before me — how it made me feel, what someone might think about it if they didn't know what the building was, about what it must look like at night. I even snapped a picture of it on my phone to upload with the post. Aside from the natural awesomeness I expected from being with Murph — my Captain Distraction — it was becoming clear that hanging out with a visual artist had its perks all their own. I wanted Murph to know I recognized this. I wanted to share all the new observations I was making thanks to him. Here's what I came up with, “yeah. it's cool.” And — yeah — I left it lowercase for a reason. That. Was. Weak. I knew it the moment the words left my mouth, but

as if to underscore its pathetic-ness, Murph let go of my hand saying, “Sorry. I need to take a couple of pics. D’ya mind?”

I shook my head. Of course I didn’t mind. I understood. I fought the tears that welled in my eyes as he stepped away from the tiny crowd our class made in the front door of the museum since Mrs. Krimble said we needed to wait outside the building for a couple of minutes. I stepped away in the opposite direction and dove into the sweet abyss in my palm.

After posting my thoughts about the museum along with the picture, I scrolled through my feed. My fan fic post on my blog was more popular than I expected. It already had 232 reposts, 459 likes and 42 comments. The first was from Amy, of course.

Lol. This is perfect! I’m working on my answer, but you know me — notebook first!

I wiped a traitorous tear from my eye. Amy’s story would be great, I had no doubt about that, but the disappointing reality would play itself out and be reported back to her long before I ever saw it. She took forever to write things. She wrote everything by hand first, then, if necessary, she would type it. Not me — fingers to the keys — from my brain to the web, stuck forever, no turning back. I very rarely made edits after posting. I loved the purity of my words caught as I felt them. Don’t get me wrong, I thought about my stuff long before I wrote them (I can’t blog through every single class, after all), so there was a little mental revision from time to time, but nothing like the way Amy wrote. I texted her,

You know you could help me out if you could just write faster!

I didn't wait for a response. I went back to the other comments. Something I came to regret, very quickly. Most of the initial comments were of the "good luck" nature, some promised epic tales to come, but a wave of very recent comments struck me cold.

"I think he likes you too, Nat." ~stellar98

"Y'all see how he looks at her?" ~2morrowzqueen

"Murph's got more than sketches on his mind! Lmao!!"

~b@tt3rUp

"I'm not telling him about this, but I can't wait 'till he sees it when he does his nightly check-in to his girl's blog!" ~mickeybee

My eyes grew wide and my stomach lurched inside. The time stamps for all of these were in the last five minutes. I looked up at all of my classmates with their heads down feverishly typing and giggling. I was looking at people write comments on my blog. I could see their faces, they only had to turn their heads to look back at me.

ONE OF THEM WROTE MY NAME ON THE BLOG! The screams inside my head were becoming corporeal and trying to claw their way out of me.

"Matthew! Natalie!" Mrs. Krimble called out the names of the only two stragglers, the two everyone was talking about. It was all about Murph and Natalie right now. No escaping it. No escaping my own mistake — my typing without thinking, my sharing with the "faceless" Internet, my beautiful bubble of delusion being popped right in my face.

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 10:11AM

THIS MUSEUM

Okay peeps. It's not like I've never seen a mirrored building before. It's not even like I've never seen this building before. It's just that I never noticed it before. As we approached this morning I swear I wasn't even looking at it. It had become ordinary to me, ignorable. Then this guy that's here with me (he is an artist) is stopped in his tracks, basically awestruck over the vision.

Someone does something like that and you have to ask yourself why... What does he see that's so interesting?

I'm looking at a box, that's really all it is, almost a perfect cube of construction, but now I see so much more. I've added a picture for you, so you can join me in this reflection. Look closely, think deeply, wonder at the vision.

Inside that box are ideas, relics of the past, and hopes for the future. This place is defined by its contents, but seems to be betrayed by its context. From out here we see none of what its about. We see reflections of ourselves and the city around us. As Central Park surrounds it, it looks like it doesn't belong at all.

Is this what my artist-friend sees? Is this what he wonders at? Maybe I'll ask him. Or maybe I'll just ask you... what do you see?

~Talia

#NYC #newschoolmuseum #centralpark #perspective

Chapter Four

Robot Rosie

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 10:16AM

Hey everyone! Thanks so much for all the comments and interest in today's fanfic post. Day's been really nice so far.

~Talia

#siprep

Just as Murph and I joined the rest of the group, Daria Abel took off running away from us, toward the street, screaming, “What are you doing here?”

She ran up to a skinny, hooded girl wearing sunglasses standing in front of an “Access-a-Ride” car and threw her arms around her. All eyes were on the two of them. I was elated to have the distraction.

“Oh shit. Is that Robot Rosie?” Colin whispered.

I gasped grappling with the impossibility. “Is it really her?” Murph whispered to me.

Dustin punched Colin in the arm. “Don’t be an asshole, man.” Dustin was right, of course. Calling her “Robot Rosie” wasn’t nice,

especially since she had no idea about the nickname, but that's how we knew her. And the name fit. Rose Summers was — technically — a student in our class, but her presence was more like that of some artificial intelligence inserted into our classroom than an actual human.

“Did you know she was coming?” Murph leaned in to ask me.

I shook my head no, feeling his breath on my cheek. “I didn't think she could...” I said quietly, hoping she didn't hear me as she approached with Daria. Who was I to determine who could and couldn't come on a class trip?

Rose attended Staten Island Prep from the comfort of her own home. Half the time I forgot she was there, but every once in a while Mrs. Krimble would call on her in class and a voice would come out of a screen in the back of the room where we could see her face like she was some YouTube personality acting as a high school science class spy. I wasn't sure if anyone knew exactly what was wrong with Rose (except, maybe Daria), but I had heard every rumor from the extreme diagnosis of brain cancer, including brain surgery, all the way to what some students suspected was anxiety. I figured it had to be somewhat serious since the school made so many accommodations for her. Plus, she needed Access-a-Ride to get to our trip.

“No fair! How come we all didn't get car service?” Russ called out. A couple of other voices echoed the sentiment, but all I could think was *No thank you!* My grandmother needed Access-a-Ride and it was nowhere near as cool as it seemed. Here's how it is supposed to work: call a number, give them a time and place, they send a ride to your home to take you there, you pay the same you would for a city bus ride. The problem? They never came on time, a bunch of the drivers drove crazy (like my grandmother doesn't get on an Access-a-Ride without her rosary beads clutched in her hands kind of crazy), and, most times,

you ended up spending more of your day on their buses and in their cars than at any destination you needed to go to. I remember on one trip Rog and I took with our grandmother to the grocery store while staying with her. Rog and I kept saying, “Grandma we could have walked here so much faster!” and we begged her not to call them to drive us home. We hadn’t realized at the time that her arthritis had taken away that option for her.

Rose must have gotten up at the crack of dawn just to make it here on time. As I watched her smile and chit-chat with Daria, I wondered what took the regular travel option away from her.

“So happy you could make it with us today Rose,” Mrs. Krimble said as Daria and Rose walked up to the group. She had her clipboard in hand and wrote something down. “Nice to see you and Daria are already friends.” Mrs. Krimble looked uncomfortable addressing Rose, as if she were as weirded out as I was by the actual humanity of Robot Rosie. “Are you feeling up to this?” she asked with an edge of seriousness.

Rose nodded while chewing wildly on a green piece of gum, and gave Mrs. Krimble a thumbs up. “I’m taking it one hour at a time, Mrs. K. I’ll let you know if I need to tap out.” I couldn’t see because of her sunglasses, but something about Rose’s movement made me think she just winked at Mrs. Krimble. There was an irreverence about her that felt both intimidating and charming.

Daria laughed and threw an arm around Rose’s shoulders. “I’ll keep an eye on her Mrs. K. I promise. You lead the way into the big box of knowledge and we’ll follow along.” Then Daria pulled out her phone and looked like she was about to snap a selfie, but instead started talking to the camera. “Buenos dias, mi gentes!” she said with an enormous smile.

“Here we go,” Colin said. “Daria’s broadcasting!” Then he elbowed Russ, and grabbed Dustin. They ran around behind Daria bouncing up and down making all types of silly faces just like those randos trying to get their fifteen seconds of fame behind a local reporter on the six o’clock news. “I’m coming to you from the Big ol’ Apple,” Daria continued unaffected by the hi-jinx. “I’m a bit early and that’s cause there’s a surprise that just needs to be shared live: Thorny Rose is with me!”

Daria was a vlogger. I didn’t subscribe to her channel, but I tuned in a couple of times. Daria’s Day was a great place to get caught up on any big happenings in Staten Island Prep when you didn’t have your own social circle to tap into. She tilted the camera so it faced her and Rose, “Tonight’s edition of Daria’s Day is gonna knock your socks off, so make sure you tune in to capture it all as soon as it posts. Soo that’s a wrap —“ She pointed to Rose.”

A wrap!“ the boys in the background echoed.

“Go take a nap,” Rose said dully sliding her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose peering over them flashing her hazel eyes.

“A nap!” the echo shouted again.

“And remember the comments are your place to clap!” Daria ended with some twisted duck face.

“Clap! Clap! Clap!” the boys sung while slow clapping. Daria stepped out of the way, facing the camera right on them before tapping it to finish recording. The wrap-nap-clap thing followed by some funny face was Daria’s sign off. Sign-offs were a great idea — especially when you saw how much it resonated with the audience. It made me think I needed to seriously consider a signature for my blog.

Mrs. Krimble, who had remained quiet for the entire recording, blinked twice before saying anything. “Yes... well... Now... that was exciting. Why don’t we get Daria and Rose some material for their

big production?” She turned to lead us to the nearly imperceptible entrance of the museum in the middle of the reflective cube. I typed while I walked, grasping onto the tendrils of an idea.

Posted to TALLIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 10:21AM

SIGNING OFF

Hey peeps. I'm having a thought. What about goodbyes? I'm conflicted about adding a sign off or something more than my name in a signature because I feel like our conversation is constantly ongoing. But I just watched a vlogger use a sign-off as a sort of nod to her subscribers and it got me wondering, am I missing the point? Looking for your opinions about sign-offs on blog posts — do they make sense? If so, any suggestions for a TALLIA'S TALES sign-off? Let me know in the comments.

~Talia

#imnogoodatgoodbyes

Chapter Five

Chaos

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 10:25AM

Starting Soon:

Silly Search

Scavenge

Sight-see

Snap Shots

Science Student Sign-off

For Some Seconds

So Sorry Subscribers

See you Soon!

#Alliteration #schooltrip #slightlysignedoff

I crossed the threshold of the museum leaving behind the bright autumn morning in exchange for the blue-hued lighting of the interior of the museum. I think they used those light bulbs that were supposed to be like sunlight, but after just being in the real thing, I can tell you these did nothing to emulate the experience. As I blinked to

adjust to the change, looking ahead for Mrs. Krimble's next instruction, Murph leaned over to me and said, "Ready for some Krimble chaos?"

"For some what?"

"Come on. Don't tell me you never heard of the Krimble chaos theory," he said with a crooked smile that really needed to be worshipped by the masses. I could imagine Murph as a character in *Barista Boys* — he's the starving artist that comes to the shop faithfully to do his sketches, the barista boys are jealous of him, the girls all fawn over him, but he only has eyes for one: me.

I was drifting away in a flurry of fanfic in my mind when a handful of worksheets were handed to me by Brenda. "Here comes the crazy," she said, rolling her eyes as she did. I took a sheet and handed one to Murph before giving the rest to Daria. Rose declined one, evidently Mrs. Krimble had to email her everything the night before so Rose could have them on her tablet.

Every year Mrs. Krimble's trip followed the same pattern: "find, share, learn, teach." First we'd have to find stuff through her scavenger hunt, then we'd have to share what we found, then usually we'd break for lunch, after which we'd either go to a lecture, or an exhibit, or a movie, or something where we learned stuff and then our "big assignment" to culminate the trip would be a personal teaching project. Mrs. Krimble was pretty open-ended about how we approached this — video, presentation in front of the class, podcast, or (the option I always selected) the basic written report.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Murph said, raising one eyebrow and brandishing the worksheet between our two faces. "This thing is always pure chaos. Or, at least, that's the hope.

"The scavenger hunt? I looked down at the worksheet in my hand and wondered what the glint in Murph's eye was all about. Was he

excited about this thing? Looking at it I was struggling to comprehend what looked a lot like glee in Murph's eyes. "You are hoping for chaos?" I asked.

"Of course! The Krimble chaos theory states that the more chaotic the activity, the more fun you will have. You sure you've done this before?" he asked, elbowing me playfully before securing his bag strap tightly across his chest and pulling his phone out of his pocket. "Get your phone ready," Murph said, nudging me again. "We gotta have everything ready!"

"Is it 'game on', Murph?" Terrell asked.

What the heck is going on?

"Isn't it always Falcon?" Murph answered back.

I was so confused.

"Oh hell no," Daria chimed in from behind us, "you boys are going down!"

I had been on this exact trip twice before, with almost all of these same people, when did it become so charged with energy? When did my class start to enjoy the assignments given? My memory served up quiet, tortured walks through the halls of the museum, taking poorly-lit pictures and doing the bare minimum to get this job done.

"Okay guys. You know what you're doing," Mrs. Krimble said from the front of the group.

I don't think I do...

"All pictures need hashtag SIPrep and hashtag Krimble," she continued. I watched Murph studying the worksheet and nodding along.

Is this a competition? Is there something to be won? My heart began to race with worry.

"Remember that there's no running!"

Was that even a threat?!

"Aww come on, Mrs. K!" Rainbow moaned.

What?! Rainbow too?

“No need to run. You have ninety minutes starting...” she raised her phone in front of her face, “NOW!”

Murph tugged my arm and said, “Let’s go!”

My phone rang. I’m guessing any normal person would have ignored it, let that one go to voicemail, and stayed by the side of the insanely cute guy that wanted her to join the fun with him. I’m only guessing that’s what a normal person would do because I don’t know. I didn’t do that. When my phone rang I grabbed it, saw it was Amy and escaped into the distraction she unknowingly offered me.

I auto-responded “In public,” because I had no intention of actually picking up the phone to talk to her. I couldn’t risk being overheard. I texted,

Everyone knows I’m Talia

Verrrt. Amy texted almost immediately.

HOW IS IT GOING?

It was obvious we were off-sync in our conversation — she wasn’t responding to my text, she had one of her own.

I looked around as the rest of my class split up around the room reading placards aloud, debating over which exhibit represented a particular “find” for Kringle’s chaos. I watched them jab each other in jest, pair off conspiratorially trying to take selfies no one else noticed. I saw Rose taking pictures of the placards and then examining her phone by bringing it real close to her face as Daria captured it all on video. I nodded politely when Stella signaled to me that the weird bird in the corner was something of note. I typed my text as Murph pulled me gently to one side to frame me in a selfie with him in front of some

artifact behind us that must have counted for something else on the scavenger hunt. I forgot to smile as I pressed send on the text,

It's weird. I think it's going well, but I don't feel like I should.

Verrt.

That's great!

Amy's text came through, again — hopefully — not in response to what I had just written. Then the three little dots, she was typing, probably trying to fill in the awkward gap between my worry and her congratulations. I pointed Murph in the direction of the weird bird and slowly followed behind his dash toward it while I waited for Amy's words to appear.

I wish you would just talk to me. Is everything okay with CD?

“Everything okay?” Murph asked, echoing Amy's text as I reached his side, as if he somehow sensed he was being discussed and needed to know what the conversation was about. “Do you want me to wait for you to finish texting?” A look of concern flashed across his face and then I realized that he must have assumed that there was some sort of emergency since I felt the need to type away instead of partake in the fun we were supposed to be having together.

“Nah. I'm okay,” I said, already beginning to type my response to Amy. “I can text and walk. You lead the way, I'll follow.”

“Right... of course,” he said. The space between us and the rest of the class was growing.

With him now

I texted quickly to Amy, shoving the phone in my back pocket before Murph could see that I was writing about him. Then I looked up at him and saw that he had been deflated by my lack of enthusiasm. I smiled and said, "Let's catch up!"

Murph beamed at me, looked down at his worksheet and said, "I know exactly where everyone's going next! We've got this!" Then he turned and walked like the power-walking old ladies every Sunday morning in the mall.

"I'm not running!"

Verrrt.

I did not keep up. I walked forward, but not quickly.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket desperate to see what Amy texted back.

OK. Sry. Have fun!

It was a closing. A send off. An "I'll talk to you later" kind of text. But I wasn't done. I hadn't received the guidance I needed.

What should I do?

I heard more laughter up ahead. Amy texted back,

?!?!?

"Let's do the big guy all together!" I heard Princess shout from the room in front of me. Meanwhile, I clarified in a text to Amy,

About Talia?

I reached the room with the rest of the class. I looked around as I watched Murph reading a placard shouting to no one in particular, "Princess is right. This is the one!"

Amy's text was, sadly, predictable.



BE TALIA!

She sent it with a gif of a cheerleader jumping up and down thrusting pom-poms in the air.

Oh no she didn't.

"Wait for Natalie!" Rainbow shouted.

"Hurry up Nat, get in this one!" called Brenda who was crouched at the base of an enormous dinosaur skeleton along with the rest of the class. From the looks of it, I was the only one from our trip missing from the photo-op. I walked up and stood in front as my phone buzzed again. I looked down to see Amy's last text.

Bell rang. Gotta go.

My heart sank, the camera flashed.

"It never stops, am I right?" I heard the question over the voices of everyone else asking to see the picture before it was posted, but didn't realize it was meant for me. Daria walked in front of me and then said, "The creation... the art-making... It's like that part of your brain is always working, always ready to upload something new." She was looking right at me. No ignoring she was talking to me. Daria had this cool short blonde hair that hung over her left eye whenever she wasn't vigilant about pushing it back or, as she did then, flipping it away by rocking her head back the way the ladies on the shampoo commercials did with their much longer locks. I must have looked as confused as I felt. "I caught you typing away over there while I was getting more video. Figured you were adding to the blog."

"Oh..." I said noncommittally.

"I see how prolific you are on *Talia's Tales*. You are an animal! Now it makes sense. You must be writing every minute of the day. I strive for that kind of production. Maybe someday. The editing kills me. Slows me down so much, you know what I mean?"

That was a question. I was meant to interact with it, but I didn't know what she meant and I didn't want to insult her in any way by saying so. She let me off the hook by continuing. "I feel like the Internet, or at least the part that follows me, is constantly waiting for something new from me and no matter when I post my stuff I'm late for somebody." She stopped, looked down at her camera in her hand, like it always was. Daria's camera could have been an appendage she was born with. She smiled. "I love it, though. Don't you? I thrive on it." Then with a simple swipe of her thumb across her tech appendage she turned the camera on and focused it on both of us. Her face transformed. She was on. "Surrounded by scientific discoveries through the ages and ideas that will thrust us into a prosperous future, my greatest discovery of the day so far has to be this girl here standing right beside me." She flipped her hair again, somehow not head-butting me in the process. "This little thing has been hiding out in my plain sight for at least three years. Nothing but stealth right here, *mi gentes*. I know a good portion of you count yourselves as this little lady's 'peeps' — including me — so I couldn't be more honored to be the one to bring you the big reveal right here on *Daria's Day*. *Mi Gentes* — fellow peeps — I present to you the creator of *Talia's Tales*, this is the Talia herself." Daria stopped for a moment to act out a look of complete surprise. Then she switched back to pro-vlogger mode, "I can attest to the fact that she's been writing up a storm while on this trip! Brace yourself for juicy fanfic on locale, reflections about our place in this world, and maybe," she looked over the camera scanning the room before stage whispering, "maybe even some personal romance!" She elbowed me while arching her eyebrows comically. I was speechless — not in the "oh I am so flattered" way, reflective of overwhelming modesty — I was stunned silent. I was also scarlet. That is not an observation based on an internal feeling. It was a fact. Daria's camera

was in selfie mode and I was staring at my flaming red face. I was on fire and couldn't decide if I wanted to stop drop and roll, or let the whole museum go up in smoke with me inside. The Internet loves the phrase "all the feels" which usually denotes the warm and fuzzies, but as Daria flicked her thumb again to stop the recording all my feels were raging through me. Daria looked down at the camera in her palm, replaying the capture most likely trying to decide if she needed to do a retake, and I started to pull apart everything that fueled my fire. Here are all of the feels I mapped out:

1. Fury. This girl took it upon herself to bring me into the public eye without bothering to even ask me for permission. Is that legal?
2. Fear. The second this video hit the web, the world — not just this group on the class trip — would know who I was. Could I — should I — stop her?
3. Embarrassed. She gave me no time to prepare. She didn't even let me speak. She mentioned my not-so-successful up until now romance. What did I look like?
4. Pride. She spoke to her followers (a pretty enormous bunch) as if they should all know me. She said she was a follower of me too, something I, at least until now, hadn't bothered to reciprocate. Before recording she was speaking as if she looked up to me. Should I feel happy?
5. Happy. It was over. Whatever the hell it was, or whatever I felt, it happened and I didn't die. Yet. Smile, Natalie, Daria is one of the good guys.

I desperately clung to the last two emotions and tried to feed them while the other three monsters continued to wreak havoc in my psyche. I started to regulate my breathing and tried to click the autoresponder saying “in public” for whatever device controlled my tear production for the day. Daria finished watching the clip back and said, “Thanks. This is great. Your face is perfect. You look so surprised. Are you okay if I use this? I won’t, if you don’t want me to, but I needed to get your pure reaction for the best shot. You were perfect.” Her face was so soft and gentle — so human. I saw a trace of insecurity in her questioning eyes. This was not the face of the all-popular vlog *Daria’s Day*, this was Daria Abel, my classmate, my peer, the other girl with two faces for the world, asking me for a favor. “Natalie, the peeps will love this!” Her smile oozed with sincerity. I thought about how different she looked when on the camera. She had a face she presented to the world. She didn’t show them what she showed me. I didn’t have a face like that. What she recorded was me, Natalie, not Talia. I remember thinking it was courageous for Daria to bravely show the world who she was, but she didn’t show them who she really was. I wondered if I could be Talia for Daria, for her “gentes”, for my “peeps”, for me.

“Are you women of the web done with your tiny convention over here?” Murph appeared out of nowhere interrupting my train of thought. “We have a scavenger hunt to complete!”

“Nat?” Daria asked. “What do you think?”

I think I am not brave enough. I do not want them to see me. I think you deserve a better subject than me. I think I am not Talia. I think... “No. I’d rather you didn’t,” I said drowning in a wave of new conflicting “feels” wondering why those words weren’t as liberating as I thought they would be.

When Murph caught up to me he was full of questions I didn't want to answer, "What was that? Did you guys have a fight or something? Daria looks upset..."

I kept walking, with no destination in mind when I said, "It's nothing." And maybe it was, but it didn't feel that way. Daria and Rose walked by, Daria didn't look up, but Rose turned back with a questioning, though not accusatory, look.

"Natalie?" he said as his warm hand closed gently around my elbow. "Wait a second. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. We didn't get all the pictures yet, did we?" I searched all my pockets looking for the damn scavenger hunt worksheet when Mrs. Krimble walked by.

"Ten minutes left!" she announced. She had been walking through the halls of the exhibit floor where the class was scattered about. My classmates were shouting back and forth about what parts of the worksheet they thought we still needed. The chaos Murph had described earlier wasn't a competition, it was a wacky, unified front. No class ever completed the whole hunt in the time allotted. Everyone knew that, hence my previous attempts being so lackluster — what was the point in getting all crazy if there was no expectation of ever finishing it? The rest of my class saw it differently. In their eyes it was our job to make Staten Island Prep history. With ten minutes left, as everyone shouted what they thought we were missing, I scanned the one sheet Murph and I were now sharing and scrolled through the class' online posts. Every single item on the list had at least one photo. It looked like we were done, but the way we knew if we had found the right item was whether or not Mrs. Krimble liked the photo. There was one item left on the list that had a bunch of entries, but so far no like from Mrs. Krimble. It was the very vague request to find "The beginning."

The pictures posted were varied and all held their own validity. Colin dragged Rainbow into the hall of reproductive science and took a picture in front of the diagram of the ovaries, and added two emoticons — a chicken and an egg along with the caption “The egg came first!”

That received no response.

Stella, Princess, and Brenda took a picture in front of the indoor, translucent water wheel generator. Their comment was “All life begins with water.”

No like from Mrs. Krimble.

I thought we were really on to it when Murph and I took a picture with an exhibit devoted to Lucy, the first human ever found. The comment we left was “our beginning.” I was so confident I hadn’t even realized we didn’t get it until Mrs. Krimble gave the ten minute warning and I was double checking the list.

“The beginning!” I said to Murph. “None of us got ‘the beginning!’” Murph relayed the message to everyone else. The class gathered around.

“That’s Lucy,” Terrell said. “Weren’t you guys the ones who posted it?”

“No like,” I said.

“What?” yelled Colin. Then he leaned in. “I’ve got forty bucks on this guys. Gino’s class couldn’t do it last week and I bet him we would. He’s been texting me all morning.”

“Tell me you’re joking,” Terrell said. “Gino’s got me for fifty!”

“I’m gonna kick his his ass,” Daria said, “I bet him twenty!”

Murph and I looked at each other wide-eyed. He asked the question. “How many people here have a bet with Gino?” Eight hands went in the air.

“Dammit!” Dustin yelled, yanking his hand out of the air. Then he stepped out of the group so he was facing everyone. “Listen up. I’m sick of him pulling crap like this. Let’s find this damn thing, post it, and win. I don’t even want his money. I just want him to squirm for the rest of the day thinking he’s got eight people he needs to pay off in the morning. One night of torture for him is more than enough for me. Anyone else?”

“I’d like the money...” Russ said quietly.

“Do what you want with the bet,” Dustin said. “Let’s just figure this shit out.”

“What about the first exhibit?” Rose said quietly. “You know, like the beginning of the museum when we came in the door?” We took off not-running as fast as we could. Mrs. Krimble followed us, watched us take the picture in front of a replica of Thomas Edison’s light bulb, and then she watched as Dustin posted it. She made absolutely no move to head to the Internet to like it. She smiled softly, and said, “Seven more minutes.”

I stared at this woman and tried to figure her out. I really thought I had her with Lucy. That was definitely a right answer, it just wasn’t her right answer. I tried to think back to class, to the things she talked about, to any reference to what she thought was “the beginning.” I could think of nothing. I looked at her and couldn’t remember past the last 24 hours — the subway, the ferry, the ferry terminal, detention. All this woman spoke about was the sun. *The sun?*

I didn’t think it was worth sharing with everyone, but in our desperation I stepped away from my class. “I’ll be back in a sec,” I said to Murph. On a whim, I walked out the front door. I stepped far enough away from the museum to get a clear view of the sky above. It was almost noon, so the sun was basically right above my head. I put my phone’s camera in selfie mode and held it at my waist. I looked down

before snapping the shot. I posted the picture with the caption “In the beginning, there was light. #SIPrep #Krimble.”

Almost immediately the picture was liked by @siprep_krimble. I could hear the cheers of my class before I even reached the door. That’s when I decided not to open it.

Posted to TALIA’S TALES

Oct 6 @ 12:03PM

Hey Peeps.

Maybe you could help me with this thing I can’t figure out. I don’t like attention. Not real life attention. Not even a celebration of me. I hear cheers and I feel sick. And yet, here, in the wiggly world of the web, I love it. I love subscribers to my blog, I love followers on Twitter, I love to find that my online contributions are trending. I desire almost every kind of virtual attention... until I find one I don’t.

I’m currently finding myself immersed in a bunch of things I probably shouldn’t be complaining about, but I have no idea how to process them.

*Questions: How important is it for you to know who I *really* am? Are you happy with my avatar, or do you need more? Is it ridiculous for me to feel uncomfortable with the idea that my *true* identity may soon be revealed?*

Super Scary Question: For those of you who recently found out who I am IRL, does that change how you see me, or this blog? (Remember we can be honest here, it’s the Internet!)

~Talia

#isntTaliaenough

Chapter Six

Lunch

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 12:05PM

Rumor has it that there are storms a-brewing on that big ball of fire in the sky, but I see nothing but the light. Look up, my peeps. The sun is shining, at least on this part of the planet and, as a result, it is beautiful outside. Thanks to my teacher's current obsession, I have a feeling I'm going to know a heck of a lot more about what a sun storm's like after lunch, but for right now I can't help but sing:

Sun-ny days chasing the clouds away! On my way to where this class is free!

It's lunchtime!

I'M GOING TO CENTRAL PARK!!

~Talia

#Yay #BeJealous #NYC #CentralPark #muppetsrock #sun-storms #stillworkingonasignoff

Murph was the first one at the entrance door. He opened it to come out, followed by Daria holding her camera up and

walking backwards filming everyone else as they poured out the door singing “We Are The Champions” by Queen. Murph raised his eyebrows and smiled, looking right at me when he pulled me into a hug. He whispered in my ear, “I bet Gino a hundred bucks! Thank you!” Before I could react to this news, Daria surprised the heck out of me with a one-armed hug of her own. When she pulled me into her shoulder she said, “I just wish I could see the look on Gino’s face right now!” Next Dustin was at our side, screaming through the singing, “This will be the best Talia’s Tale yet!” He began a chant, “Ta-Li-Ah! Ta-Li-Ah!” which caught on faster than I would have imagined.

“Post the pic on Talia’s Tales, Natalie!” yelled Stella.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Give her space,” Rainbow yelled, with her arms outstretched. “If I know Natalie, she probably stayed out here to post the story right away!”

Daria and Dustin stepped away quickly each giving me looks of approval and Murph said, “Oh, man! I’m so sorry, Nat! I wasn’t thinking. Finish up, no rush at all. This is a great story.” He pointed out the benches near the entrance of the museum. “We can sit on the bench so you can finish.” I was about to argue — to say I wanted to go to the park, not sit still, have lunch, be with him — when my phone rang.

My face scrunched in confusion in the seven seconds it took me to pull the phone out of my back pocket as I tried to figure out who could be calling me now.

“Rog?” I read the caller ID aloud, fearful of the implications. I looked at Murph, hoping to convey the urgent need to answer this without interruptions. Then I stepped away in an effort to find some solitude from the crowd full of my classmates, my peeps, my two identities at war. I needed it all to fade away. My brother needed me, the rest meant nothing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, infusing each syllable with the urgency it deserved. My heart raced.

He whispered his response, “Nat, I need you to go to the castle.”

Images blazed through my mind — Rog’s school (it was on Castleton Avenue), Curtis High School up the block from the Staten Island ferry (known as “the castle on the hill”), the White Castle down on Bay Street (was that even still there?) — but none of it made sense. I knew I needed to leave at once to help my brother, but I had no idea where to go. I sucked in a short, desperate breath.

“What castle, Roger? Where do you need me to go?” I asked, lowering my voice in an effort to keep him, and myself, calm.

“The castle in the park. Will you go for me? Jaime just said Russ is going to get the dragon’s egg at lunch and I was thinking that you could go too.” He spoke quickly and kept his hushed tone even while his conversation started to unravel into the maddening. And then he started to ramble. “You remember how to catch a critter, right? I mean, I know you don’t really play anymore, but you did and you know how hard I’ve been working to catch all of the critters, but mom and dad still won’t let me go into the city. The city critters are the most rare. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it this morn—“

“Rog-er!” I yelled, stopping him as soon as I realized what the hell he was talking about.

“Yeah?” the optimism in his voice annoyed the crap out of me.

“I’m not going on a quest for some stupid game for you!” I was furious. This was my trip, my time with Murph. This was — I don’t know — maybe a chance for... something.

“What else are you going to do? It’s not like Amy’s there.”

Ouch.

“I’m giving you something to do.”

Shit, Rog.

“It could even be something for you to write about on Talia’s Tales.”

My god...

I was crushed. Was that it for me? I thought about how all my classmates — including Murph waiting on the bench for me — assumed that the only thing I wanted to do at that moment was blog. I thought about how Daria assumed any and all typing I was doing on this trip was for my blog. It didn’t occur to her that I might have a friend I was communicating with. I thought about that friend. Lately Amy’s response to everything was “Be Talia,” as if there was no other thing in the world I could relate to. None of these things stung the way Rog’s words did.

I filled my broken heart with the life-blood of big sister authority and let it surge through my veins. *How dare he imply I had no life without Amy!* “You must be out of your mind right now! Dad is going to kill you!” I swung for the fences. This kid was cutting class or something because of *Catch’em Crazy* — a game our parents had threatened to delete from his phone at least three different times. Now he wanted to cast his own indirect judgements about how I lived my life and spent my time? How dare he imply that I only do things for Talia’s Tales!

“Nat... Please don’t tell him.” I had crushed him as quickly as he’d crushed me, but I was intentional with my attack. It felt horrible. “Nat? Please? Forget the castle. I’m sorry, okay? Just don’t tell dad, please?” *How dare he know me so well...* “Nat?”

How many times had I left my own classes to text Amy? How many times did Rog cover my ass when he saw me up way past our tech-curfew? What was the point of this?

I hung up before whispering, “Sorry, Rog.” Then I shoved my phone in my pocket, and walked back to Matthew Murphy, the real-life human being I was about to spend my lunch hour with.

Rog never called back.

The lunch hour was the part of the trip that I had been looking forward to long before I had any idea I might be spending the time with Matthew Murphy. Mrs. Krimble told us on both our freshman and sophomore trips that when we came back as juniors we would be allowed to have our lunch in Central Park instead of the museum cafeteria, weather permitting. This morning I secretly thanked the super bright solar storms above for shining their light down on us for this event, but all day I had been terrified by the thought of un-choreographed time with Murph. I imagined a full hour of awkward silences, interrupted only by bizarre eating sounds made by me, and a litany of other embarrassments. Now, fueled by the fury instigated by my little brother’s pathetic expectations of my social stature, I needed this hour to play out in a more magnificent manner. I needed to do something.

“So, I take it we are officially free?” I asked, taking the seat next to Murph as he shut his sketchbook and slid it back into his bag.

“Yep,” he said, sitting back and lying one arm on the back of the bench behind me. I wanted to lean back into it, use his arm as a pillow to lie my head on and let all my remaining insecurities drift away on. But I rebelled against the stillness of that act. I wanted to get moving. I wanted to act, live, make a memory that had a life of its own without me transcribing it onto my blog.

“Want to get a pretzel or something in the park?” I asked, hoping this would inspire some romantic park adventure — a picnic on the Great Lawn, a walk along one of the lakes, a visit to Strawberry Fields where we could talk about all the things we like to imagine — just the two of us — for the hour ahead. Something I would not blog about, something I would just talk about. Something I would shock Rog with.

Instead, Murph’s response shocked me.

“That’s a great idea! We can grab them on the way!” he said with a smile, jumping to his feet. “The rest of the group is headed out to some castle. I told them we’d catch up.”

You have to be kidding me.

“A castle?” I asked squinting up at him.

“Yeah. I didn’t even realize there was one in the park. It could be a great sketching opportunity, you know?”

“Uh-huh, but why is everyone else going?” I asked, pretty sure I already knew the answer.

“Oh! For the castle critters!” Murph lit up just like Rog when he said it. “You play, right?”

There it was.

Here’s the thing. Everyone played *Catch ‘Em Crazy*. Everyone. So, yeah, I played, but the excitement of the game lasted about a month for me, then it just got annoying. Rog was obsessed enough for the two of us and I was sick of losing sleep, and — more importantly — battery life, over a stupid game. Evidently Murph was not. I could not believe this was happening to me. I started to laugh.

“Not in a while,” I said scrolling through my phone checking to make sure I still had the app, “But, yeah, I’ve played.” I found the app and opened it up. “It’d be kind of great if I could get one of those dragon eggs.”

“Yes!” Murph exclaimed, grabbing my hand and lifting me to my feet. I was excited. I was looking forward to getting Rog his stupid egg.

So, for some reason, there is an actual castle smack dab in the middle of the park. It sits atop a small hill next to a tiny pond. It doesn’t have a moat or any kind of drawbridge like the castles in the storybooks my mom read to me when I was little, but there is no denying that this building is supposed to be a tiny castle. I have no idea if it was actually old, or if it was something built more recently to add to the growing list of city expansions for the tourist crowd, but it was cool. There were stone stairs surrounding it in every direction and, thanks to *Catch ‘Em Crazy*, everyone in my class — and my brother — knew about it. Oh... and so did every other human being in the park that day. The place was packed. It was like a carnival popped up in the middle of the park.

“You ready?” Murph asked with his phone in his hand.

I took mine out and scanned the interactive map on the app, “Second floor?”

“I see it! Let’s go!” We both took the steps two at a time, squeezing through the crowds in a way that would have mortified my mother. Manners have no place in augmented reality. Rog would be so proud of me. My avatar levitated through the animated version of the castle and closed in on a cartoonish yellow dragon critter I was hunting.

I caught it with one swipe and shouted, “Critter caught!” The group of people in the room with us cheered me on and one guy fist bumped me. It was all quite ridiculous.

“Nat,” Murph said, “There are so many critters here! I think we can catch the rainbow!” Rog would love this guy. “Catch the rainbow” was such a Rog-thing to say. I laughed and looked down at my map. Murph was right, there was a dragon of every color hiding out in this castle.

“Are there any eggs around?” I asked.

Murph must not have heard me because his response was, "I'm headed for the orange one downstairs!"

The fist pump guy said, "Gotta find a green dragon. Only the green critters lay eggs."

I looked back down at my map and spotted a green critter on the other side of the floor I was on. "Thanks!"

There was some sort of time limit for the critters, I couldn't remember what it was, but once one showed up on your map your clock started ticking. I couldn't remember if the green dragon was there when I went up the stairs or if it just showed up when I spotted it, so I ran. There was no way I was going back to my brother without this stupid egg. Pretty much everyone in the building was there for the same thing, so those who were alert enough slid out of my way as soon as they saw me coming. The hallways were tiny and dark. The last one could only be managed by walking single-file. It was torture. I burst into the room with the green dragon and began swiping at my phone immediately. I heard curses throughout the room as people yelled, "He's a runner!" This basically meant you had a certain number of swipes before the critter disappeared. A voice I recognized said, "Running don't matter when you're egg-hunting!"

"It doesn't?" I said trying to pass by a couple blocking the middle of the room to get to the voice. They swiped and swiped at their phone with their feet planted in some sort of power position as if they were actually wrangling a real animal in the shadowed room. They each had their phones aimed at the same blank spot on the floor in front of them. I wondered how crazy we all must have looked to anyone who didn't know anything about the game. I walked around the couple finding one of my classmates down on one knee aiming his own phone at a different corner of the room. "Russ? Is that you?"

“Got. It. Yesssss!” he said and shot both arms in the air. “Brother of the year!”

“Hey... Russ?”

“Oh hey, Natalie!” he said, finally noticing me standing there. He looked so happy. “You get the egg for Rog yet?” I had no idea Russ knew Roger, never mind that he felt comfortable enough to call him “Rog.”

“Uh... no. I don’t remember how,” I said, looking down at my phone.

Russ took a single step and was next to me, peering down at my screen. “Tap him! Hurry up! You’re running out of time!”

I tapped the screen like crazy, nothing seemed to affect the dragon.

“On the head!” Russ said in a panic and then started to tap my phone with me. “Come on. Come on...” he said as he tapped. I couldn’t help but laugh as we both frantically tapped the head of an imaginary dragon on the screen of my phone.

And then, I don’t know if it was from one of my taps or one of Russ’s, but the dragon started to glow and out of the glow a green egg with yellow speckles on it appeared. “You obtained an egg!” my screen announced and Russ and I started jumping up and down together.

“We did it!” I said. “Nice job, Turner!” Russ said. “I would have felt really bad if Jaime got an egg and Rog didn’t. This stupid game is about the only thing the two of them ever talk about in my car.”

“Your car?” I asked.

“I got my license over the summer.”

“Sure, I get that, but when is my brother in your car?”

“I drive him home from school sometimes,” he said shrugging.

My eyebrows lifted. Russ laughed. I was a little uneasy with this news. I didn’t know Russ that well, and what I did know made me question whether or not I wanted my brother in a car with him. And

in case your wondering what kind of intel I was hanging on to, here's what I knew about Russ: Russ smoked.

"To be honest with you, I think Jaime's got a crush on the little man. I don't think your brother has any clue, but I don't think he minds the perks."

"Wow." I had no idea what else to say. Maybe Rog had every right to judge me, he was obviously already leading a much more exciting life than I was.

"Let's send them their eggs, they'll be out of lunch soon." I followed Russ' lead, but was also struck by the fact that he knew so much about his little sister's (and my brother's) school schedule... and life. "They should get the notification, but let's send them a pic anyway. Come here."

Russ put his arm around my shoulder. I smelled the trace of a cigarette he must have smoked on his way to the castle. He turned his phone on selfie mode while saying, "Greatest siblings ev-er!" I laughed and he captured it perfectly. It was a great picture, not that I really wanted a picture of Russ and me, but that was one of the best pictures taken of me. Ever. He sent it to his sister and asked me for my number so he could send it to me. I sent it to Rog saying, "We did it!"

"Thanks so much, Russ," I said, still smiling, when I looked up and saw Murph standing in the entrance of the room. He wasn't looking at me. He wasn't looking at his phone. He was looking at Russ and he didn't look happy.

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Oct 6 @ 12:42PM

EGGS FOR LUNCH!

We took it way back for lunch here in the Big Apple, my peeps. I traveled to a castle, fought and captured dragons, and gobbled up

one giant dragon egg to ensure my status as sibling of the year holds steady. What am I talking about?

CATCH 'EM CRAZY!!

Don't you dare roll your eyes!

I know you all played and I know you all enjoyed it too!

I recaptured that joy for a moment. Today I'm sending big love out to all the faithful catchers out there — I had forgotten what fun that game could be — there's definitely something special about those of you who hung in there, still finding the joy in its cooperative simplicity. The way it drags you out into the world, playing with others, even while cradled within the safety of its virtual realm, is maybe exactly what I've needed all along. I kind of connected with someone today, learned something new about them, something I probably should have known all along, but I never reached out. CATCH 'EM CRAZY played me right into their hands.

~Talia

#Catchemcrazy #castlecritters #bestsiblingsever

Chapter Seven

Disconnection

Text-versation Amy and Natalie

10/6 @ 12:48PM

Nice pic!?!?

What pic?

Russ???

Did he post that?!

Yes!!

OMG

EXPLAIN!!!

With CD. Talk l8r?

Heading back to the museum was awkward. Murph didn't "catch the rainbow." He was missing a green dragon, and he wasn't happy about it. Or maybe he wasn't happy about Russ, I wasn't sure. I also wasn't sure how to address it. He wasn't talking, and Amy kept texting me about the picture of me and Russ that Russ had evidently posted somewhere on the Internet. The awkward silences I feared had finally fallen upon us. I ended the text and tried to break the curse.

"I'm going to get a bottle of water before we head back," I said as we approached the cart we bought our hot pretzels from earlier. The shared lunch seemed so far away. Murph stood quietly by my side as we waited. That's when I noticed Amy never texted me back.

I guess she didn't have to, I wrote, "With CD. Talk l8r?" Maybe she thought not responding was response enough. But I put a question mark there. A question mark means I'm asking something, all texting etiquette demands a response. It was also unlike Amy to leave a text-versation like that. I was due a glib remark, a gif, or at the very least an eye rolling emoji! She was curious and I left her hanging — about a picture of me with a boy... a boy that wasn't Matthew Murphy! As I walked up to the line at the hot dog cart I dug my phone back out of my pocket to see if maybe, just maybe, I hadn't felt a buzz. That's when I discovered that I couldn't get any service.

Daria was in front of me muttering over her own screen, "What the hell? I can't post the castle clips." I tried to remember if I had any connectivity issues by the cart earlier.

"You can't live without that thing, huh?" Murph said, pointing to my phone as I slipped it into the back pocket of my jeans, distracted by the cacophony of the traffic's blaring horns on the street behind us. We had plenty of traffic in Staten Island, but nothing quite so noisy,

or animated. The street was pretty far off, but I was pretty sure I saw some people getting out of their cars yelling at each other.

“Huh? No – I-I mean yes! I think I could if I had to,” I said defensively. That’s when I heard the loud alert beeps from phones of people passing by us in the park.

“I don’t think I could live without my phone,” Daria interjected. “No apologies from me, either,” she added, still checking for service. “YouTube has changed my life.” Daria had a real reason to be incessantly connected — she was earning money doing so.

“I guess so,” Murph said. Then he turned to me and said, “I’m gonna sit down while you wait.” He climbed up onto one of the giant rocks off the path. He sat down and immediately pulled out his sketchpad. Murph could criticize my phone usage all he wanted, he had his own crutch.

“Sounds like an Amber Alert or something,” Rose said, who was standing just ahead of Daria. “You guys getting anything yet?”

I checked again and still saw nothing coming through.

Rose shook her head in the direction of Murph and said, “You know, he can talk all he wants, but I wouldn’t be on this trip without my phone and my tablet. There would be no point.”

“Keeping me company would be the point!” Daria said.

“I can do that at home,” Rose answered leaning her head on Daria’s shoulder looking a bit cartoonish.

“You feeling okay?” Daria asked her. These two were a lot closer than I thought.

“Little swishy, but maybe it’s just the long day. You know this is the most excitement I’ve seen since my last ER visit in August! I’ll take it slow this afternoon.” Rose pulled the strings on her hood a little tighter. It wasn’t the least bit chilly out. She turned to the cart

attendant and ordered two bottles of water and two sports drinks. The girl must have been extremely thirsty.

“She’s not kidding about her tech usage,” Daria said to me. “We take so much for granted — our sight, our ability to get around, the reliability of our own body. Being with Rose has taught me so much about that stuff, you know?”

I didn’t know, but I didn’t have time to ask because Rose was done and Daria was ordering. While she did so I watched Rose. She stepped to the side of the cart, loaded her backpack up with three of her drinks and stuffed her money in one of the pockets. Then she turned on the flashlight on her phone to look around inside her backpack finally pulling out a long, hot pink box with a ton of flaps on it. She turned the light off, but kept the phone on the box, opening the camera app and immediately zooming the screen. Her thumb traced along the flaps, opened one and dumped out three enormous pills into her palm. She looked at the pills through the camera screen while she turned them over in her palm with her thumb counting them. Finally she seemed satisfied by what she found there, so she popped all three in her mouth following them up with a long drink from the bottle of water she purchased. She closed up the pink box, shut off her phone, and put everything back into her backpack.

“You good?” Daria asked her as she waited for her change.

Rose gave her a thumbs up and then swung her bag over her shoulder. “But I did put my phone away.”

Daria looped her arm around Rose’s and asked, “Need a guide?”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she said as she placed her hand over Daria’s.

Daria turned to me and said, “See you guys inside!”

“Well... I might not be able to see you, but —”

Daria jabbed Rose in the side. “Don’t joke around like that!” They both laughed, already immersed in each other, no longer in a conversation with me.

As I waited for the cart attendant to dig out a bottle of water for me I wondered what Daria had meant by taking things for granted. Was Rose blind? I thought about how the conversation all started, with Murph questioning my phone usage. I was just trying to talk to my friend. I wasn’t making money like Daria. I wasn’t physically dependent on the technology like it seemed Rose was. I was just... what? Pathetic?

I walked over to the base of the rock Murph was on. “I’m ready,” I said. Murph put his sketchbook away, reached down and grabbed my hand, pulling me up to sit next to him.

“What are you doing?” I said. “We’re going to be late.”

“I just want to ask you something,” he said. “I see you typing away all the time, eyes on your screen, your mind on who knows what. You’re freaking out the second you lose connection — I mean... don’t you just want to be here?”

I guess I had insulted him somehow. *Was this a date?* I tried to figure out if what I had done was rude. If what I had done was weird, or obsessive, or any different from anyone else on this trip. Before I could respond, or ask for clarification, he went on and took my breath away.

“Blinding screens — blazing thumbs — emoticons showing — we’ve gone numb,” he said.

I gaped. That was the beginning of one of my poems. One of my very old poems.

Had he memorized it?

“The screams of nothing — the loudness of the mundane — I sit back and see — how this world’s insane.” He knew even more! He stopped and looked at me, “Didn’t you write that?”

“Yes,” I said, uncomfortable with my words exposed.

“Did you mean it?” he asked.

“Of course...” I didn’t know what to say. How could I begin to explain to him that my one friend in the whole world was torn away from me and the only means of communicating with her was digitally? Would he understand that? Would anyone? I felt childish in my need for connecting to Amy. I thought about all of the people on this trip with me. Couldn’t they be enough? Then I thought about *Talia’s Tales* and looked down at Murph’s bag sitting beside him. Why couldn’t he, of all people, understand the importance of a different kind of expression — one that doesn’t always happen “here.” Murph had spent so much of this trip pouring his soul into his sketchpad and for that he was deemed an artist, but if I do the same with a phone instead of pen and paper I’m suddenly deemed a disconnected soul?

“Whatever.” He cut off my thoughts with a bit more of an attitude than he had any right to. That pissed me off — which is saying something.

I found my voice. “What do you mean, ‘Whatever?’” I asked, trying to suppress a wave of annoyance. “You’ve had your sketchbook and your phone out more on this trip than I have!”

“I was taking and sketching pictures,” he retorted.

“I don’t get the difference, Matt. It’s not like you were even talking to me the whole walk over here. Is it so wrong that I was connecting with someone else? Plus — just now, when you made your little comment — I didn’t even begin to do anything on my phone. There’s no service here,” I said, flustered. I don’t like confrontation, but I felt like he was attacking me for no reason.

“The difference is that you live there and I live here.” He patted the gray stone in between us.

That hurt me more than I wanted to admit. “I do not live there.”

Is that what everyone thought of me?

“Natalie, honestly, when was the last time you talked to anyone in this class before that train ride this morning?” He asked it so softly he must have known how much it would sting.

“I don’t know,” I lied.

It was with Amy.

Amy talked to everyone and, since I was usually with her, I would get looped into the conversations. I didn’t know how she did that. I didn’t know how to do it on my own.

“And how often do you write back to people on *Talia’s Tales*?” He was looking right in my eyes, with pity. I hated it.

I stood up, “That’s different.”

“Maybe it is,” he said, grabbing my arm, “but that’s my point. I know how active you are online. I follow you.”

“Says the guy who ‘lives here,’” I said, pointing to our rock.

“Sit down,” he said, raising his eyebrows, “Please?” I sat down, wondering what would come next.

“I do live here,” he said with a smile, “I’ve been out there trying to find you.”

“What?” I looked around and realized we were all alone. There was no one left on line at the hot dog cart. Our classmates had probably all made their way back to the museum by now. Murph had no audience but me.

“Natalie Turner, I like you, but you are hard as hell to talk to,” he said looking down at the space between us. I was sure I was hallucinating the entire thing. Then my butt buzzed.

Verrt.

And buzzed again.

Verrt.

And again.

Verrt.

And then came the long, loud alert buzz.

Verrt Verrt Verrrrrrrrrrrt.

There was no ignoring all of that.

“What the hell?” Murph said as he grabbed his own phone. “Bad timing, huh?” He laughed.

“Me too,” I said, grabbing my phone, happy to have a distraction from a situation I had no idea how to handle.

It was a text-plosion, which was especially weird, since I had no reception just a couple of minutes ago. First two texts were from Rog and Amy, both saying they had a blackout in their school. Then there were three different texts from Notify NYC — a service I signed up for to find out about snow days the moment they were announced — about ConEd responding to power outages in my zip code. The alert buzz was not an Amber alert like Rose had suspected. It was from something (someone?) called NOAA and said,

Expect intermittent power disruptions from
4AM 10/7—5AM 10/8.

“Looks like NOAA has no — uh — idea what they are talking about!” Murph said laughing. His phone had a similar rundown to mine — his cousin Tracie, his mom, and the NOAA alert. “It’s a little disturbing when my mom can give me news before one of these ‘real-time’ alerts. Looks like there’s a blackout at home, which means NOAA is off by about a day.” But even with that news, Murph was more caught up in the news from Tracie’s text. While we walked back to the museum he talked of nothing else. She said there was a blackout back at SI Prep too. Murph went on and on about how he always misses all the coolest stuff and tried to figure out what Mr. Gideon would have done without his SmartBoard, and how Mr. Chancey

would have to cancel all of his counseling appointments for the day because he had no idea who any of his students were without the aid of the electronic grading software the school used.

As Murph continued running through all of his subject teachers and what types of quandaries he was sure they were facing without him to witness the mayhem, I was stuck thinking about one other fact: Amy doesn't go to our school anymore. Amy didn't even live in the same state as us anymore. I finally said it out loud, "You know, my friend Amy moved to south Jersey last semester. That's almost seventy miles away from us."

Murph's face contorted in confusion, "And?"

"Yeah, well, she had a blackout, too," I showed him the text.

"That's weird," he said.

I agreed.

After an hour outside in the clean crisp air of Central Park, I wasn't looking forward to those harsh artificial lights inside the museum. That's probably why I noticed they were missing right away.

"Lights out here too," I said to Murph as we stepped inside.

"They just went out as your class came in from lunch," the girl at the front desk said. She looked understandably bored with her position at the front desk. Days like this must have been a nightmare for her — the NYC New School Museum was open to the public six days out of the week, but every Wednesday was trip day which meant one class had the whole building to itself. "Your teacher's upstairs in Astronomy Alley. Not sure what you guys can do up there without any power, but I guess she'll let you know." The whole time she spoke

to us she did not look up from her phone. Then she scrunched up her face and threw her phone on the desk in front of her. “This thing is such a piece of crap! I swear to god every time those bastards release a new phone, my phone starts doing the craziest shit. It’s a scam! They always find a way to make you need the newest phone!”

I smiled politely and Murph laughed while we made our way down the hallway.

“Oh hey, hey, hey, hey!” the desk girl called out to us. “Gotta take the stairs. Hang a left at the end down there and look for the blue door.”

The stairwell was creepy as hell. It was one of those “no one really uses these” kind of stairwells. I don’t know why, either. The building wasn’t tall at all — four floors, maybe five with storage space — the elevator was an unnecessary extravagance. They designed it to be more like an exhibit than a means of traveling from one floor to the next. Inside the elevator, screens surrounded you and, depending on what theme your teacher picked for the day, a mini lesson was played during the ride. I wondered what Mrs. Krimble had lined up for us today.

When we found Mrs. Krimble she was preoccupied and sucked dry of all of her typical cheeriness. I found this particularly disconcerting considering our location. This was her dream locale. I wasn’t alone in my observation, our whole class stood uncharacteristically silent in front of her waiting for direction, or just some acknowledgement that we had arrived. It was Rainbow who finally spoke up, “Mrs. Krimble? Should we go in?” We had been standing in the hallway outside of what we had all come to call the “space theater.”

Mrs. Krimble took out her cell phone and looked back at Rainbow, “No... I think we have to go.”

Murmurs erupted in the group, “Go? Go where?” I was just as confused as everyone else. It was barely one o’clock, and Mrs. Krimble

hadn't even gotten her shot to drown us in science yet! If we went back to school now, surely we would have more classes to attend. No way. We were not going back. This was our trip, our day out of the building, our day at the museum. Why would Mrs. Krimble, of all people, suggest we leave before we had even begun to explore?

Two men approached Mrs. Krimble. The three stepped aside for a quiet conversation. The shorter man, wearing glasses and — I'm not kidding — a pocket protector, said to Mrs. Krimble, "It's honestly the fastest moving CME I've ever seen. We expected effects on the Earth's surface, but not until tomorrow, at earliest."

I won't even pretend that I had any idea what any of this meant, but the mention of tomorrow made me think of that NOAA alert.

The other man, a much taller, lanky and good-looking in a geek-gorgeous kind of way, added, "Merle, let's not forget that our prediction software hasn't been truly tested. Some of these early effects are atypical. I think we may have missed something."

Mrs. Krimble interrupted them, bringing her voice down to a very low whisper while casting a sidelong glance at our group, "I'm sorry, guys, listen — I don't want to seem alarmist, or anything — but I have twelve kids here under my charge, one who is technically disabled. Do you think there was an EMP or not? I need to get them home. Was NOAA wrong?"

There it was again. What the heck was NOAA? I pulled my phone out and googled it, using all caps just like it was on the alert text. The top site was the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. I clicked it. The picture that came up was familiar, and that frightened me. It was the same picture of the blazing sun, with enormous bright yellow arcs of what must have been the lava-like substance that covered the sun's surface that were on the screens of every computer in detention the day before. I clicked the link and saw... well... science

stuff. There were graphs, some funky green lined satellite pictures of earth on a black background, and a bunch of numbers that meant nothing to me. I scrolled down and saw three boxes next to each other, one with a green version of the picture of the sun labeled as “The Sun’s X-rays,” one with a bunch of bright white lights on a blue background labeled “Coronal Mass Ejections,” and the last one was another satellite picture of the Earth with some big orange ring going around it labeled “The Aurora.” Scrolling down some more yielded only more confusing graphs and things that were way beyond my comprehension.

What I couldn’t find anywhere was EMP. I googled it and suddenly didn’t want to be on this quest for knowledge on my own, too many of the results said something about an attack. Everyone knows New York City is a hot target for terrorist groups. I was not as hyper about these things as my mother, but I was raised on her stories. She was walking to the Staten Island Ferry when Tower One of the World Trade Center tumbled to its demise on September 11, 2001. She saw it disappear before her eyes. I am a victim of terror by association. Any day could be another attack — we tried to live like that wasn’t the case, but smaller threats always made their way back to our city — shootings, pipe bombs, mysterious packages — New York City continued to be a large target. I thought maybe that could explain Mrs. Krimble’s attitude, her worried look, her frightened request of the science nerds.

Murph looked distracted, deep in a conversation with Brenda about something that was making her roll her eyes at him, so I asked Rainbow, who was on the other side of me playing with her phone, “Do you know what an EMP is?”

“A what?” Murph said, looking half amused. “Isn’t that some kind of biological warfare or something?”

“What?!” Rainbow asked louder than I had hoped.

“You’re an idiot,” Brenda said of Murph’s explanation. “An EMP doesn’t have to be a weapon, plus, even if it is, it’s not biological warfare, it would be, well, I guess it would be technological warfare. It wipes out electricity. Like that show *Dark Times*.”

Murph stared at her. “You watch *Dark Times*? My grandmother watches *Dark Times*!”

“Whatever, Murph. At least your grandmother wouldn’t go around sounding like a complete idiot!”

I asked Brenda, since it seemed Murph was going to be of no use to me, “Hey, Brenda, you have any idea why Mrs. K would think there was an EMP now?” I pointed over to her corner conversation.

“She said that?” Rainbow asked.

“Oh shit!” Brenda said, “Did she say that? That’s more than lights out. That means stuff gets fried.”

“Just a second ago she was asking about it.”

“There was a blackout at school. Was there one in here too?” Brenda asked.

Princess leaned over, “Hey Bren, remember the stairs? There is currently a blackout in this building.”

“It’s been like this for a little while,” Rainbow said. “Stella and I came in to use the bathroom and all the lights were out in here and on the street too. The cars were going crazy out there without the street lights.”

“Oh — hey — I heard all of that noise,” I said remembering how crazy the traffic sounded when I was at the hot dog cart.

Stella must have heard her name and decided she should contribute to the conversation. “But did you guys notice that some of the lights are on up here?”

“You guys all need to chill,” Dustin interrupted. “Didn’t you get that alert? They said there’d be power outages.”

“Yeah, but that’s not supposed to be ‘til tomorrow,” I said, noticing the lights Stella pointed out for the first time. They were different than the blue lights on the first floor. They were warm and less assaulting to my senses. “They must have a generator here or something. Those things run through everything. My dad bought one after Hurricane Imelda.” I kept trying to talk my way through this without addressing the news that was sounding an alarm in my brain: Amy’s blackout all the way down in Jackson, New Jersey.

Of course, because I had to go and open my big mouth in an effort to keep myself calm, fate stepped in and put me in my place. The lights went out. Evidently those generators do not keep everything running all of the time.

Mrs. Krimble pulled out her cell phone again and looked at it. The two men leaned in over her shoulder. Her expression can be explained in one word: dismay.

I checked my phone to see if I could understand what the problem was. No WiFi. No 4G. No LTE. No Service. *Okay*, I thought, *that’s typical blackout-scenario stuff*, but then my phone began to flicker in my hand. I never saw it do that before. “Look,” I showed the group.

Everyone pulled out their phones. The same things were happening.

Daria yelled, “What is this?”

Colin cursed at the phone in his hand, and our group got louder with the combined complaints of what we were all experiencing.

“This isn’t supposed to happen,” the taller man said.

Mrs. Krimble clicked her phone, turned it to the man and said, “It just did.” I checked my phone again — it was stone cold dead.

The moments following the death of my phone flashed in a blur of activity I observed but didn’t participate in. The panic in me reached a level of incomprehension. It was gone. The screen was black, the

buttons pressed in, but yielded no result. I thought back to the tiny whisps of power I woke to two days in a row and wished I could gather them up and put them to use. Oh what I could do with 3% power! Now, nothing.

Mrs. Krimble sank to the floor with her head in her hands while the two men at her side spoke excitedly, debating how our reality was not scientifically possible.

“Okay, okay,” Rainbow whispered while digging through her oversized tote bag. “I’ve got this. No big deal. We can fix this.” She began to sing as she searched. It was soft, and to herself, but it was nice. Next to her, Russ was flipping a cigarette from one finger to the next while biting his bottom lip with such ferocity I wondered if I would see blood dripping if we didn’t have any answers soon.

“I don’t get it,” Murph said. “What happened to my phone? Is it you too, Nat?” I felt him lean over me to get a better view of my inactive screen for himself. “Brenda? Do you have power?”

“Nothin,” she said while she tapped, like crazy.

That was enough for Murph, I guess. He took out his sketchbook and walked over to the window. It could have been how he dealt with stress, or maybe he realized that was as close as any of us would get to taking a picture of the chaos around us.

Rainbow pulled a long white cord out of her bag and said, “Got it!” She had a wild look in her eyes as she walked away from the group toward an outlet in the wall.

“They said it’d be tomorrow,” Dustin said. He began to pace back and forth within the space of four square feet. “But they said black-outs. Not this. What is this?”

“If this is terrorists, I want outta here now,” Princess said.

“Oh no,” Rose said as she sank into a crouched position. Daria, who had already plugged her phone into one of the back-up battery chargers she carried with her, followed her to the floor.

“What is it?” Daria said.

“I have to get home. Soon,” Rose said.

“Is it one of the bad ones?” Daria asked.

“So much worse,” she said. She rubbed the side of her head. “I think something’s wrong with my shunt. This is weird. I don’t like it.”

“Shit,” Daria said. She stood up and turned in the direction of Mrs. Krimble who had yet to compose herself. I understood Mrs. Krimble’s panic. I was frozen. I hadn’t moved since realizing my phone was dead. My classmates, on the other hand, lived within that reality and each found their own ways to cope with it. And in between their coping, their idiosyncratic natures — those little things we each do in times of stress and boredom — began to emerge. All the things long kept dormant, hidden under our texting fingers and plugged up with our headphone-clad ears.

What was funny is that everyone had something to do.

Except me.

I was just watching. I was waiting. I was wondering. My mind was racing with what to do next. I grabbed my phone at least four different times to text Amy. Three times to check *Talia’s Tales* and six different times to jot down a thought for a later post.

A later post, I thought, *on what?* If this EMP had reached home — and considering the school had a blackout too, that seemed likely — then my computer was fried. Was it all gone? Everything I had ever written? I gasped at the thought.

“Looks like the traffic lights are out too,” Murph said to no one in particular while sketching the scene outside the window.

The shorter doctor walked over to the window and said, “Shit.”

“What Dr. Smithe means,” the taller Dr. Davies said, “is...” he walked over to the window, looked outside, then pushed his hair back with one hand while the other hand clenched his hip, “well... shit.”

“Oh god,” Princess said. “Are we under attack?”

“This is not an attack,” Dr. Smithe said, still standing by the window. “This is an astrological event.”

“The solar storm,” Mrs. Krimble said staring at nothing.

I couldn’t help but think of my great loss the last time Mother Nature decided to act out of character. I lost —

Amy.

The weight of my phone doubled. I looked down at it, again, and saw nothing, but this time I realized the deep, painful implications of it. “Will landlines still work?” I asked in a shaky voice.

“I’m sorry?” asked Dr. Smithe.

“Phones,” I said louder than I wanted to. “Older phones, like plugged in ones. Will they work? Can we call anyone?”

“Depends on the phone model,” Brenda said. “But probably more important is which phone company your using.”

Mrs. Krimble raised her eyebrows at Brenda.

Brenda shrugged. “*Dark Times* knowledge. I keep telling my mom, the TV’s not rotting my brain.”

Dr. Smithe’s eyes shone with an attempt at compassion, but I felt nothing. “I imagine most types of communication will be down for quite some time.”

Communication’s down.

Amy’s lost.

Again.

Chapter Eight

Talia Talks

Hey Peeps,

Are you all wondering why I haven't given my two cents on the super-trending topic "where the heck did NYC go"? Well, the world is ending. Obviously. At least mine is. Am I missing out on tons of global conversations? Are you all in the dark too? Is everyone okay? Answer in the... I don't know.... I miss you guys already. One last thing: Is it completely weird that I am crafting a mystical blog post in my head when there is no way that I can actually post it to the Internet?

~Talia

#justwondering #impossiblementalpostings

Yep. I was losing my mind. It had been less than one hour without power and my brain hadn't figured out that blogging was no longer happening. Or maybe it had figured it out and just refused to accept it. I don't know. I almost always mentally drafted my posts, even if it was only in the few minutes it took me to load up the platform to write on, but what was the point of doing that when there was literally

no way to post it? I wanted to connect with my peeps. I needed to blog about what was happening so I could process it. The whole reality around me wasn't sinking in, no wonder I was hallucinating blog posts in my head. It was like the power loss hadn't reached its full potential because I haven't blogged about it. I couldn't stop myself from pulling my phone out of my pocket to tap at the ineffective buttons, or swipe across the dead screen. It felt heavier than ever before, like I suddenly could feel that it was only a smashed together bunch of chips and plastic with glass and some metal. It had transformed into *a thing*, rather than being the familiar passageway to the universe it had always been.

"You okay?" Rainbow asked. Her voice was soft and concerned. I wondered what my face must have looked like since she picked me, out of all the people here with us, to ask if I was okay. I didn't want her attention. I didn't know how to answer her. I didn't feel okay. I felt like I was going crazy. I was blogging in my brain to absolutely no one. Would that sound weird? Was that something normal people did? Or was that yet another symptom of my overwhelming social ineptitude? Maybe Murph was right, maybe I did live "out there" — if that was true, what did that make me now? Was I dead?

"Alright," Mrs. Krimble said, saving me from myself, and from having to answer Rainbow. "We're going home. Now. Anyone who needs to go to the bathroom better go. We'll walk downtown to the ferry if we have to and I don't want to stop until we get there, got me?"

I adjusted my backpack straps and readied myself for the trip. I was ready to move five minutes ago. I clung to some tiny bit of faith that I could find a solution at home, where I was so used to connecting to the Internet, chatting with Amy, and hanging out with Rog, who made his own digital connections. Home held the solution. I was sure of it.

Let's go! I thought. I hooked my thumbs into my backpack straps and bounced on my heels in anticipation of moving.

Dr. Smithe turned to Dr. Davies, "Actually, Rich, I really need to check on Donna. Maybe we should lock down."

Yes! Yes! Lock the doors! LET'S GO!

I saw Murph slowly closing up his sketchbook and tried to will him to go faster.

Dr. Davies shook his head. "I'm going to hang out a bit. You go. I want to go over our notes again. I'll lock up when I go."

K, bye Dr. D! Nice knowing ya! I bit my bottom lip in anticipation. I was sure I could have been halfway to Times Square if we had left when my world ended.

Dr. Davies turned to Mrs. Krimble, continuing his unnecessarily long goodbye. "Also, I agree you guys need to find your way back to Staten Island. It's probably going to take a long time to get the power back on."

Wait. I stopped all mental forward momentum. *How long?*

"Call me if you need—" Dr. Smithe stopped himself mid-sentence.

He can't—

Dr. Smithe shook his head and continued, "So... How are we doing this, Rich?"

"Three days?" Dr. Davies said.

"What?" Dr. Smithe asked. "Come back here in three days?" Dr. Davies said, then he shrugged. "Hurricane Imelda was longer because of the flooding, but without the environmental element this time, thinking 9-11, that's how long we waited before going back to work, wasn't it?"

I can do three days. I thought about what kind of blog post I wanted to post first. What would be my first connection? A tale of where I was when "It" happened?

Hey Peeps! I'll bet none of you came up with a fanfiction version of my day out in the "Big City" as eventful as what actually happened...

Or will I share a story of my journey home?

Drop that old dusty Tolkien book, Peeps! I have a much more exciting journey to take you on #truestory...

Maybe I'd have some great story about me and Murph by then...

Peeeeeeeps!!! I have a boyfriend!!!! #bereallylikesme

Normally, if it were something I wanted to post later, I'd jot down post ideas in the notes section of my phone. That wasn't happening. I wished I had a basic pen and pad to do the same. I told myself I just had to remember it all until I got home. In just a couple of hours I would get my hands on some form of documenting tools to gather up all my ideas and wait for the reinstatement of power and my internet connection. By morning I would have the most well-planned and edited post my followers had ever seen. Maybe this would turn out to make me a better blogger. Maybe this was exactly what I needed.

"Doctor?" Stella was actually raising her hand as she interrupted my blogging daydreams. "Will everything be back to normal by then?"

Wasn't that what he meant? I blinked hard trying to reset my vision of the world around me. It was so unlike Stella to interrupt adults, or even change topics. I found myself glued to my position wanting, so desperately, to know the answer to the question I didn't even realize needed asking. Stella might as well have asked, "How long until Natalie can breathe again?" Because that's what this felt like — a held breath, my life on pause.

Dr. Davies furrowed his brow when he turned to Stella. Before the words came out of his mouth I knew they wouldn't be good. "Unfortunately, I don't think we will be experiencing anything close to the kind of 'normal' we've gotten used to for an extremely long time."

I hated that “extremely” and the emphasis Dr. Davies placed on it. I was transfixed by the man’s words, thirsty for more detail. My mental blogger screamed out for her peeps, finally starting to realize that the tether was gone — too many emotions had gone undocumented in these minutes — I should have blogged at least three times by now. Talia, the true voice of every interaction I had online, was adrift in a sea of blackness, disconnected from all signs of others, desperately clinging on to the life preserver of expressive need. She still had so much to say — I had things to say — but did it matter if those words could never be read, if I had no place to share it? Mrs. Krimble didn’t seem interested in what the doctor “thought” we “might” be seeing in the future. I think she was more interested in getting rid of us. “All the more reason to get home to find whatever form of normal we can cling to while we wait.” She readjusted the large tote bag on her shoulder, throwing her useless phone into the bottom of it. “Thank you Doctors Smithe and Davies,” she added before walking past the group of us to leave.

On the floor, next to Daria, Rose groaned and clutched her head with her hands.

“Mrs. Krimble? Rose’s not okay,” Daria said. She sounded calm, but her eyes told a different story. I felt sick to my stomach. I think I would have felt better if Daria was more specific about whatever the hell was going on, but the vagueness of “Rose’s not okay,” and the look on Daria’s face rocked me. And I wasn’t alone. Mrs. Krimble stopped walking, looked straight ahead and took a breath so deep that her shoulders rose up with it, before lowering on the exhale. Otherwise, she didn’t move at all. She didn’t turn to look at Daria, or Rose, or anyone. It was like she had become physically paralyzed by Daria’s outburst. “Mrs. Krimble!” Daria yelled, “I don’t think she can walk that much.”

Rose was sitting with her arms wrapped around her head leaning on her knees, and now she was rocking back and forth. Daria's assessment was on point – Rose did not look okay. As soon as Daria saw Mrs. Krimble turn her way and take note of her existence, she got back down on her knees and started rubbing Rose's back. Murph, who had gotten up after putting his sketchbook in his bag to leave, approached Daria and Rose. I was about to head over there myself when Dr. Davies stepped in front of me to offer a suggestion to Mrs. Krimble.

"We should have a wheelchair available," he said. "Hold on one sec," he added as he left the room. At the end of the hallway, he opened the stairwell door and yelled down, "Val? Val!" He must have heard something in response because he then said, "Yeah, just for a minute!" before coming back to us saying, "She'll be right up."

Val, who was the girl from the front desk, turned out to be a less than gracious aide in the situation. When she got upstairs and saw us all gathered around Rose she blurted out, "What the heck is wrong with her?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder with an attitude that turned my stomach before adding, "Is she some sort of mental case?"

What did she just say?

I snapped. Rage joined the myriad of feelings swelling inside of me. This needed to be discussed with my peeps!

How offensive can one front desk bimbo be? You know when you see something horrendously offensive and you want to say something but then you realize you weren't really involved with the whole thing in the first place so you should probably shut up? Peeps, tell me people can't behave like this in public!

My hand was in my pocket, clutched around my phone, ready to pull it out to text Amy about Val, then write a post to my peeps about how inconsiderate people could be in the face of someone suffering — all the words and ideas for what I was going to type had come to me

in a flash, the only thing stopping me from getting them all out of my head was — “Are you kidding me?” I yelled at Val. Without warning, nothing was stopping me from getting the thoughts out my head. Talia was done waiting for a connection. She must have been pissed that she hadn’t been able to blog through this crisis, so she found a way to fight back, she found her voice, she took mine. I don’t want to sound like a split-personality here or anything, but while there is no denying that these words or actions were mine, it felt like a foreign intelligence had possessed me. My insides trembled when I realized what I had done. What I had said to Val wasn’t typed words blasted on a screen that I could hide safely behind. They were words blasted directly out of my face — me, Natalie, the girl who hadn’t even had a real conversation with most of the people she came on this trip with before that afternoon. I had engaged in an exchange that was face-to-face, visceral, in real time, and had all the ugly, unedited bodily reactions with it. There was no turning my phone off to compose myself before reading the reactions from the intended audience. I had just thrust myself into a real life confrontation with instant ramifications. I looked at where Daria and Rose were sitting on the floor AndThenISpokeAgain...”That’s what you have to say when you see someone suffering like this? Are you kidding me?” I was so furious, the repetition of the question seemed unavoidable because — let’s be honest here — she had to be kidding me, right? Also, the Natalie side of me realized every moment I kept talking, Val couldn’t deliver any retort. “For your information Rose has a physical condition that — for whatever reason — got really bad right now. But, even if it was a mental condition, how ignorant do you have to be to judge someone y-you d-don’t e-even kn-now l-like th-that?” My shaking insides dribbled out onto my last couple of words. I had to stop talking before I started crying. First, there was silence all around the room, just as empty and

unresponsive as the pathetic piece of tech in my pocket. It felt like that moment right after you press the “publish” button on a post — before anyone has found the post, or finished reading it — the sweet bliss of feeling like you are writing to no one and the terror that you just spilled your guts out to everyone in the universe. It did nothing to calm me. Then I’m pretty sure it was Princess who said, “Tell her, girl!” and Colin who said, “Yeah man, what the actual fuck?” Without question, though, the soft, “Thank you, Natalie,” behind me was from Daria. The timing was perfect, it kept me from vomiting all over the place.

Val, on the other hand, set fire to my nerves with just a look. She stared at me like I was an alien life-form that appeared in front of her and presented her with the keys to its spaceship. I wondered if she would believe that I was just as shocked by the outburst. Russ, standing next to Val, elbowed her in the side and said, “Hey — uh — Val, is it? I think you owe Rose an apology.” I exhaled a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Val shook her head. “Whatever. You can all gang up on me. I honestly don’t give a shit. Rose is having some sort of breakdown? Well, guess what? I’m not a psychiatrist or a doctor. Sorry, Rose. Don’t know what’s wrong with you, don’t know why I asked. It’s not like I can help you.”

“Actually,” Dr. Davies said, his face flushed with either anger or embarrassment. “I’m pretty sure you can.” When Dr. Davies pulled Val aside to ask her about the wheelchair, Russ approached me. “You okay?” he asked, stooping to look into my eyes. It was that moment that I realized how fast my heart was beating inside my shaking body. I guess I had a bit of an adrenaline surge with my tiny bout of insanity. I took a deep breath before answering, hoping my words wouldn’t still be shaky.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“I was about to,” Russ said, laughing. “I only hesitated because I don’t want to get some sort of angry-guy reputation.”

I had to stifle a laugh. Russ, the volunteer middle school car service was concerned that people might view him as an angry guy. I guess we all had warped views of our external presentations. “You’re not angry,” I said, slipping back into the comfortable limited syllabic conversational rhythm of Natalie Turner.

“You don’t think so?” he asked, tilted his head like a curious puppy. “You just let everyone know you’re spending your afternoons carpooling middle schoolers and I think you’ll be fine,” I said.

“You think that’s a good thing?” he asked, raising his eyebrows, jutting his chin in my direction while putting both his hands in his jacket pockets.

“Yeah,” I said, noticing my heart wasn’t slowing down as much as I thought it should have by this point. “I might be a little biased since my brother gets the benefits, but I think it’s pretty cool.”

“Daria, honey,” Mrs. Krimble asked. “Do you think we can get Rose downstairs? Val’s going to find a wheelchair for us.”

Russ looked over my head and said, “I should help,” while he stepped around me to the place where Daria and Murph were helping Rose to her feet. Murph looked at me, nodded, and gave me a thumbs up. At the same time Rose’s hood fell back exposing a bandana covering her entire head. It might have been chosen for the style, but, in this moment, it just made her look more sick to me. It reminded me of the women with cancer who wore scarves to cover their heads after losing their hair from chemo.

“It’s just so much pain so fast,” Rose said quietly to Daria. “I can do it. Just slow. I’m afraid of—“

“Shhh,” Daria said. “Take it slow. We’re gonna do this.”

“Lean on me if you have to,” Murph said to Rose. I ran over to take his bag since it looked like it would be difficult to support Rose on one side and his bag on the other.

“Thanks,” he said as I grabbed the strap on his arm. “And — wow! — I didn’t know you could be such a bad-ass, Turner.” He pulled Rose’s hand further around his neck. I was struggling to find the right response to Murph when Rose whispered, “Seriously, Nat, that was pretty f-ing epic.” And then she winced before she could continue, if she was going to continue. I still didn’t know what to say.

“I’ll take this side,” Russ said, stepping up to Rose’s right. “One step at a time.”

I stepped out of their way and tried to process everyone’s reaction through the only filter I knew — The Internet — and the sinking, sickening feeling in my gut was all too familiar. There were plenty of times when Amy would text me not to read my comments on a particular post because she spotted a negative before I did and she knew I wouldn’t see anything else. Intellectually, I could see the silliness in this type of reaction — thirty people love what you wrote, but one person hates on it and any normal person would think, “I did a good job on this post!” Not me. All I would think about was how I failed that one person. Every time. Which is why it was no surprise to me that with positive comments from my classmates — including a literal thumbs up from Murph, all I could think about was Val’s discontent over something I shared with her. It made no sense. Daria slid back to stand next to me as the boys walked with Rose toward the door with Mrs. Krimble. She looked at me and said, “I know,” shaking her head, and then she hugged me, tight and muffled words into my shoulder. “I’ve never seen her like this, Natalie,” Daria said. I was taken a-back. Hugging was so... intimate. My mom and dad hugged me, Rog would do it on demand, but they were family. This hug was like the one Amy

gave me before leaving. Even that was weird because we had never hugged before, but it made sense and I leaned into it. I didn't know how to react with Daria — was this romantic in some way? Did she think I was super sad about Rose — not that I didn't feel bad for her, of course I did, but my head was in a completely different space just then. Is this what friends are supposed to do? Is this one more sign of my disconnect with live humans? My body turned rigid and I felt a cold sweat begin to develop on the back of my neck. I don't know if Daria felt it, but she pulled away and continued talking like the hug didn't even happen, leaving me even more confused than ever. "She told me about how bad it gets, but I didn't know her before her surgery."

"What is it, Daria?" I asked, desperate to make the conversation about something technical. "What does she have?"

"Her head's all messed up. She told me that it's kind of like she has a brain tumor — like she gets all the same symptoms as someone with a tumor even though she doesn't have one herself. The surgery helped a lot. She got this shunt thing put inside her that takes the stuff causing problems out of her head and spills it out into her liver or something. But, she was just telling me that she thinks something's wrong with the shunt. Like she felt it break or something. Just like our phones." She turned to look at me. "I'm scared, Natalie. I don't know how to help her."

"We're all here to help — I mean, even Val's on board now," I said with a smile, trying to take the weight off of the conversation. "And, anyway, we'll be home real soon now, and Rose gets to roll the whole way."

Daria smiled a little. "Yeah."

"Mrs. Krimble will know what to do," I said.

"You think?" Daria asked, scrunching up her face.

"Oh sure! Without a doubt!" I said, and I believed it.

The problem was, I was wrong. About all of it.

Chapter Nine

Communter Communications

We went downstairs leaving Dr. Davies upstairs to continue his study of whatever had happened to my entire life in what felt like the blink of a computer cursor. Downstairs, Dr. Smithe told us to, “Get home safe,” not wasting any time as he walked out the door. At the same time Val went to look for a wheelchair in a closet kept on hand in case of emergencies.

I stopped in the bathroom which I was very grateful to find had a window. The sunlight landed right on the mirror illuminating the entire room. The last thing I wanted to do was paw around in the dark to find the toilet or how to flush it. Not that it mattered, everything was state-of-the-art in this bathroom, which meant, of course, that none of it worked. The toilet was one of those that — on a normal day — would flush when you stood up and, in case that didn’t work, there was a tiny black button to press to flush it. No surprise, the button didn’t work. What was worse, though, was the fact that the sink was one of those “magic” ones too. No amount of waving my hands in

front of the sensor would give me any water. I said a quiet thank you to my mom who always had me carry a small package of baby wipes in my backpack for all types of bathroom emergencies. I wiped my hands off and threw the wipe in the pail.

“Oo, can I have one of those?” Rainbow asked, seeing me through the mirror in front of the malfunctioning sink she was pleading with.

I didn’t think twice. I pulled another wipe out of the package and handed it to her. As Rainbow thanked me, I put the package back in my bag and noticed how much thinner it felt. I made a mental note to replenish them as soon as I got home, thinking of how many places I knew with these suddenly pointless state-of-the-art facilities.

When we left the bathroom I saw Val rolling a wheelchair down the hallway toward Rose. “Normally these aren’t allowed off-premises, but — you know — whatever.” Val shrugged. “Exigent circumstances and all that.” She rolled the wheelchair behind Rose. “Look... I’m sorry about before.” She shook her head as she stepped away from the chair before looking back at the stairwell we all just came down. “Dr. Davies is probably gonna fire me for that later — he told me to go home— but I’m totally stressing right now. My phone just up and died on me. Of course I didn’t get the insurance, and — you know — it’s not like I live with my parents anymore. This is all on me. I hate this stuff. I don’t think I did anything to make it break, but I’m totally failing life right now, because, well, really —the worst part of it all is — I was in this really intense conversation with my boyfriend.” She swallowed hard. “Or maybe not my boyfriend anymore. I don’t know,” she tossed her head back and looked up at the ceiling as if she could force the tears back into her head. “It was just bad timing and all.”

Rose nodded slowly while lowering herself into the chair. Then she leaned her head back to face Val, before rolling her head slowly

back to face those of us in front of her. “Someone tell her. Put her out of her misery.” Her voice was cracking and she looked paler than I remembered her looking when she arrived.

“Everyone’s phone died,” Terrell said. “It’s some big thing going on. You’re not failing life. And I don’t think you’re fired, we’re all leaving.”

Val wiped her eyes sloppily as she turned toward Terrell, “For real?”

Terrell produced his phone so Val could see for herself. “For real.”

“Oh my god! I have to find Frankie!” Val was all smiles as she squeezed Terrell’s arm. Then, placing one hand over Rose’s hand she said, “Good luck, Sweetie! I really hope you get better soon.” Then she turned, reached behind the front desk to grab her bag, and left.

I felt my phone in my pocket and wished that reaching for it could actually make a difference. I wished that I could reach out to my peeps with a blog post explaining what happened, send it out to them, and relieve just the tiniest bit of stress, just like I had when I handed Rainbow that baby wipe, just like Terrell had when he told Val what had really happened. Val’s problems weren’t solved — she still had to find her boyfriend, her phone was still fried — but she was so happy with a little bit of knowledge. They say knowledge is power and, in that moment, it felt that way.

Mrs. Krimble watched Val go and then turned to us and said, “We need to go too. We can take turns pushing Rose.”

Daria was already behind Rose hanging her backpack behind Rose’s on the handle of the chair. “I got it for now.” Daria looked defeated. Nothing like the energetic, caffeine-pumped face of *Daria’s Days*. I wondered if she would remain so subdued until she found her way back to power, or if Rose was the key to her identity.

After everyone finished with the bathroom, Mrs. Krimble opened the doors to the museum and held them open for all of us. “Head toward the subway first,” she said pointing toward the street where Rose

was dropped off, only a couple of hours ago, by the Access-a-Ride car. “Nothing lost by checking it out.”

Maybe if I blurred my eyes and didn't look at the details of the scene in front of me I could have believed it was a typical afternoon in Manhattan. There were people on the sidewalk, there were cars in the street, conversations were happening, and the bustle of the busy city simmered there beneath what was actually happening. Looking closely, though, the oddities were un-ignorable. This wasn't a typical put-your-head-down-and-get-where-you're-going New York City sidewalk — people were tapping strangers as they walked by, asking questions, gathering in groups, comparing electronic devices, pointing to the street, and, in general, attempting to work together.

“Here they come!” a woman's voice shouted from down the block. I looked to see where she was and I saw a mass of people erupt — no, ooze — from the subway station we were headed for. The woman standing at the top of the stairs clapped as they walked by her. Each commuter exiting the train went through the same transition as they emerged from the station squinting in the sun. Too many of them pulled phones out of their pockets, and bags attempting to make a call, send a text, or to find out what was happening. They stepped out onto the sidewalk in tight postures of annoyance, inconvenience, and stress. As they tinkered with their uncooperative tech they turned their heads left and right looking confused by their destination. One guy came out of the train cursing, racing to the top of the stairs, rudely pushing others out of his way without a care in the world. He rushed to a taxi

pulled up to the curb. He leaned into the window and asked, “Penn Station?”

I couldn’t hear what the driver said to him, but, whatever it was, it forced the guy to stand back, look around, and take note of what was going on around him. “This is ridiculous!” he said, reaching into his pocket pulling out a large smartphone replicating the confusion we had all suffered in the last hour. Again, forced to look around at the world around him, his shoulders tensed as he engaged in an animated conversation with a couple of other commuters as they came to their own conclusions about the weirdness of this new world. Nothing appeared to be calming him, he was still agitated. He bounced from person to person and it did not look like any one of them had the answers he was looking for.

It reminded me of Val and how she reacted to Rose because she was unable to understand what was actually going on. She thought she was all alone in her world unraveling and the minute Terrell told her about our shared misery, it helped. None of the people on the street had any idea what was happening. None of them had Mrs. Krimble, or Dr. Davies, or Dr. Smithe with them. I had information that none of these people had. Maybe I couldn’t blog about it, but I could tell them. I could share my knowledge. I was so good at sharing information...before...

Sharing information was so much simpler just a couple of hours earlier. I was so cavalier with it — throwing it all around the Internet, barely taking the time to tag a specific person who needed it — the true value of information was lost on me. On that street, in this new world, the weight and value of information seemed to grow exponentially before me. It had to be shared person to person, face to face. It was suddenly so intimate. I wasn’t sure I was ready for it, but I wished

someone was. The beautiful flow of ideas, opinions, information, and entertainment had been stagnated.

The traffic on the street in front of me was a different kind of standstill. There was only one vehicle moving. It was a van that I think was supposed to be some shade of green. It was the kind of rusting, pathetic car that gets passed down from generation to generation and no one says thank you for. It looked like it had magical powers the way it was moving on the street where no other car could. It slowly proceeded through an entanglement of raised hoods, confused drivers, and lots of shouts. Some people were trying to push their cars, but I didn't see where they could go. As we got closer to the street, one man stood up, covered in sweat, from pushing his black BMW, and shouted to the approaching van, "How'd you fix it?"

He didn't fix it! I wanted to scream out. I wanted Brenda to tell him all about *Dark Times*.

"Never broke!" the passenger said with a shrug. "How much you pay for that POS?"

The man with the BMW stood tall and said, "Maybe I'll just leave this POS right in your way. What do you think about that?"

The shouting grabbed Mrs. Krimble's attention just as the passenger of the van was threatening to get out and go face-to-face with the BMW man.

"Stay here," Mrs. Krimble said as she power-walked to get ahead of our group. Then she stretched her right arm out to the side as if doing so created a magical barrier which we couldn't pass.

I wish I could say that the magic worked for me. It normally would have, but as the men in the street became more and more animated, as the Penn Station guy riled up the people on the sidewalk, as one blonde woman screamed something about how she needed to pick up her special needs son at exactly 2:15, and when another woman

began to mutter something about a targeted attack — as it all hit me like a barrage of unwanted pop up ads blocking my view from my illegally downloaded file of the unaired *Barista Boys* pilot, I had the overwhelming need to clear the screen one ad at a time.

I stepped away from Murph and my class, ignoring Mrs. Krimble's imaginary barrier, and walked past a cab that I would have assumed was parked on the side of the street for some off-duty down time if it weren't for all of the other cars in the same immobile position. I saw the Penn Station guy next to the cab again, looking as frustrated as ever. His furrowed brow was damp with beads of sweat that were not warranted on this comfortable October afternoon. He had begun to fumble with a backup phone battery he dug out of his attache case. "Excuse me, sir," I said in a squeaky, unpracticed voice.

I can't say that I was surprised to find that he was annoyed by my interruption. His head snapped sideways and he glared at me, "Walk away, little girl. I don't have the time or the patience—"

"T-that's not going to work," I said, looking down at my feet halfway through the sentence. Murph came up beside me.

"What are you doing?" he whispered while grabbing my hand.

It was a good question. A question I hadn't bothered asking. What was I doing? I could tell myself and Murph that I was trying to help — and I was — but it was something more than that. I needed to say something. Not just to this guy who had no interest in what I had to say, but to each and every one of the people around us who didn't seem to know what was going on. I needed to put the information out there, if no one wanted to listen maybe I could be okay with it. What if talking to people was just like blogging? What if I let my words float out in front of them with no expectations? Sure, they had to see me, but maybe I didn't have to make eye contact, maybe I didn't have

to care if they answered. Maybe I could just engage with those who comment...

“He doesn’t know,” I said to Murph. “None of them do... like Val.”

“What do you mean?” Murph asked.

“I mean, we can tell them what’s wrong,” I said.

“What the fuck?” the guy screamed, ripping the backup battery off of his phone forcefully and chucking it into the street. “What a piece of shit! This is not happening,” he looked up and down the street not looking like he was actually absorbing any of the world around him. “Someone has to be fucking kidding me! Someone has to be--” Then he reached out and grabbed Murph’s shoulder, “You! Lemme borrow your phone, kid.”

Murph winced under his grasp. “I-I can’t.”

“No shit about what your mama told you about strangers, kid. This is a fucking emergency!” There was a wild look in the guy’s eyes which made me wonder what kind of trouble he was in.

“I’m sorry --” Murph began, but the guy shook him.

“I’m not looking for apologies! I’m looking for a —”

“They’re all dead!” I screamed — which, upon reflection, was probably not the best choice of words to yell on a NYC street full of people on the hinge-point of panic. I felt the attention of the world turn in toward me and it was nothing like a blog post suddenly being noticed. It was humming, expectant, demanding, and terrifying. I had one hand on the tensed arm of the man — I didn’t even remember reaching out to do that — and felt his muscles relax the slightest bit when I spoke.

“W-what?” the guy asked in a suddenly shaky and soft voice. Fear replaced his fury. I had no idea what this guy was going through, but it suddenly felt like so much more than a rough commute.

“The phones,” I said. “A-and the backup batteries, and the lights, and the stupid automatic toilets and sinks... you know, all the electric stuff is fried.” I swallowed and took a deep breath when I saw the man blink hard as if trying to decide if I was a hallucination of his. I took another calming breath before continuing, using every ounce of willpower within me to maintain something close to eye contact. “There was a storm on the sun and it messed us all up.” Then I remembered Brenda understanding all of this in an instant because of a TV show, so I asked him, “Have you seen the show *Dark Times*?”

Then the guy looked me up and down, and then turned to Murph. He shoved him out of his hands. “Are you fucking kidding me?” He spun around, spotting our class, Mrs. Krimble’s scene on the street, and then he looked back at the crowd near the subway. “What is this, some kind of guerilla marketing for a goddamned television show?” He stormed away toward the gathering commuters near the subway. I saw the blonde woman who was worried about picking up her kid look up at him as he approached. He engaged her in some conversation pointing me out and then walking away, heading downtown, probably planning on walking down to Penn Station after all. The blonde wiped the tears from her eyes and then made her way toward Murph and I. I gave her a small sympathetic smile and relaxed. She must have known the show. She must have understood what the other guy couldn’t have. Her face was still blotchy from the crying she had done, but her emotions had held when she stood before me.

“I watch *Dark Times*,” she said with the hint of a tremor in her voice. She must have been coming to grips with our new reality. “You tell your boss, I’ll be ready to sue the pants off of him and the entire network after this!” And then she slapped me across my cheek while screaming, “You can’t play with people’s lives!”

I thought there was thunder overhead. I was sure I was struck by lightning. I have never experienced anything so loud and so painful in the same instant. Murph rolled me into a hug, shielding me from everything in the world around us, but my fear was stuck inside with me. That was not what was supposed to happen. That woman was supposed to be relieved now that she knew what was going on. That guy was supposed to understand there wasn't any point in going to Penn Station. These people were supposed to say, "Thank you, Natalie. Thank you for sharing what you learned about our situation," and then move along. I felt the fabric of Murph's shirt scrape against the heat of my wounded cheek and I started to cry. The tears coasted along the stinging flesh in hot rivers bringing no kind of relief. Murph was saying something to me, or something to someone else, but all I heard was the muffled syllables reminiscent of the adults in that old Christmas movie my brother, Rog, loved to hate.

Rog.

Thinking of Rog brought a whole new surge of emotions as I thought about him trying to interact with this harsh, unfiltered world, raw with emotion and reaction with no room for someone like me. I prayed Rog was already home, or just stuck in school with his friends and not out on the streets with panicked people.

"Are you ok?" Murph said as he pulled away enough to let the painful light of the sun enter into the safe haven of his arms. I shook my head. My voice was broken. I had said enough.

Chapter Ten

The Fall

I decided I didn't trust anyone that wasn't on the trip with me. So, when Murph said, "Oh shit!" as he lead the way back to where our class had gathered on the sidewalk my eyes darted all around to every face I didn't recognize, suspecting every single one of some sort of malice. Nothing registered until I saw Rose clutching both armrests of the wheelchair pushing herself into a standing position with her eyes locked on Mrs. Krimble in the street. Mrs. Krimble had her energies locked on the dilapidated-looking van which still appeared to be the only operating vehicle on the street.

"You're going to need to move," she yelled at the man with the BMW blocking the van's way. She spun her head around whipping her hair behind her with the speed and focus of a high-end dancer in a hip-hop music video, facing the van again. "And you're going to give me a ride! This is an emergency!"

Shut up shut up shut up! I wanted her to stop talking. I wanted her to get out the street and come back to us. The van didn't look like a sweet escape to me, it looked like doom on wheels. Who was that man driving the van? Why would he help us? Why would he care? What was to stop him from letting us into the van only to drive us far away

where no one could ever find us again? I was spiraling out of control. I knew that, but being slapped in the face by a perfect stranger can have that effect on a girl. Mrs. Krimble stepped closer to the van and it inched closer to the space where she stood. The driver leaned on his horn.

“No shit!” he yelled back. I hated this man. This was no time for sarcasm. Did he truly understand what was going on, or did he think this was just an ordinary blackout? I mean his car worked fine, maybe he thought everyone else was overreacting — especially Mrs. Krimble. When the van’s horn quieted, the sound of the rumbling engine echoed off of the buildings across the street. It was loud. It was attention-getting. An easy to ignore, white-noise background effect of the city street only an hour ago, the van’s engine suddenly sounded foreign in this world void of mechanical, technological click-clacks, and revving parts. Mrs. Krimble wasn’t the only one who noticed. The human masses surrounding our area no longer moved in the familiar random nature of a group of individuals each with their own destination. Like a scene from a zombie film, the horn seemed to wake them from their stupor and turn them toward the noise that promised the power of automation they thirsted for.

“I can’t let her do this,” Rose winced as she spoke, but her words uttered the exact thoughts I was having at the moment. We had to find a way to stop Mrs. Krimble from making a huge mistake. “She’s trying to get me a ride.” Rose’s head dropped so that she was looking at the ground in front of her. “Shit.” She stomped a foot. “Shit. The goddamned flashes.” Every new symptom Rose experienced freaked me out. What the hell did she mean by “flashes”? Was it pain? Was it sound? I squeezed Murph’s hand hoping to convey my worry without uttering it aloud.

Daria grabbed her left arm. “What flashes? What does that mean?”

“Got up too fast. Tiny blackout.” Her knuckles were white from the tight grip on the chair. “Can’t see yet. Give me a sec.”

Daria looked wide-eyed at me and I felt her panic, I mean when Rose said, “Can’t see yet” what exactly did that mean? I don’t know what kind of condition just decides to sporadically take vision away or give “tiny blackouts” for standing up, but I was beginning to understand why Rose was incapable of participating in a normal school schedule. I was also beginning to see why Mrs. Krimble might be nervous about being responsible for someone like Rose in the middle of this nightmare of a school trip. Most of all, I was beginning to understand how important it was to get Rose home, or to a doctor, but I was still pretty sure Mrs. Krimble’s miracle van was not the path to our salvation.

I pulled away from Murph. “We have to get out of here.”

Dustin said, “I’m pretty sure that’s what Mrs. K’s working on, Nat.” He was trying to be his typical joke-in-any-situation self, but I saw the worry in his eyes when he looked at the back of Rose. Stella elbowed him in the ribs.

“Not sure that’s going to work, though,” Brenda said, continuing to be a constant voice of reason in this mess. I wanted to say something more -- to agree with Brenda, to expand upon my reasons for distrust. I wanted to rant away about how all these people were in a panic — how I might be seconds away from the same — and how all I wanted to do was get Mrs. Krimble and get off of the street. But I didn’t say anything, I just walked away.

“Nat!” Murph called.

“What is she doing?” I heard Princess ask.

“I dunno,” said Colin. And maybe I didn’t know either, but my gut was telling me to get to Mrs. Krimble. Murph came up beside me and grabbed my hand, spinning me around, unintentionally turning our

world upside down. I lost my footing and fell into the guy standing next to his BMW.

“What the ff--?” he said, spitting on my neck as he pushed me up and off of him and right back into Murph who stumbled backwards. I tried to steady myself to turn to apologize when Mrs. Krimble yelled, “You keep your hands off of my students, you asshole!” She swung her big arm bag right into his head, which the man grabbed with both hands and then pushed back on. At the same time, the van lurched forward filling in the space Mrs. Krimble had left behind when she swung her bag. I heard the screams from all around us before I processed what happened right in front of me. I guess that’s why the police came. A couple of officers on horseback came from the direction of the park behind the museum, another group — maybe five officers — came from out from one of the cross-streets, looking pretty on edge, running toward the screams. The BMW guy took off running, but didn’t get far. One officer had him, and three officers surrounded the van that was finding it difficult to weave between the stalled vehicles all around. Two of the other officers found me and Murph trying to hold up Mrs. Krimble. Mrs. Krimble had been shoved right into the moving van. She fell back over the the side of the hood, but due to the momentum, her head kept moving backward and smacked real hard off the rear view mirror hanging on the side of the passenger side door. She looked at me and said, “Doctor,” in a cracked voice. She looked like someone who had just been woken up in the middle of dream, not a woman who had just been screaming and swinging in the middle of the street. It was terrifying. There was no question that she needed a doctor now, too. I was so happy the police had arrived to help. One of the officers put his arms around Mrs. Krimble, taking most of her weight away from Murph and me. The other held her head. “Ma’am, let’s lay you down nice and slow for a minute.” He was

looking right into her face, but her eyes hadn't left mine. I tried to follow the officers down to the ground with her, but it was awkward, so I stayed standing, but staring, while they, and Murph, cradled her like a small wounded animal to be cared for. I grabbed Murph's bag strap as it slipped off of his shoulder. Mrs. Krimble winced as they reached the ground. "Docto--" she started to say again, interrupted by another wince brought on by something I couldn't identify. How bad does an injury have to be if the first words the person utters are to get them a doctor? When the wince passed Mrs. Krimble was still staring at me. I couldn't move. "Davies," she continued. "Doctor Davies," she said again, and she was talking to me.

"Oh," I said as the cloud of confusion lifted from my brain and I realized Mrs. Krimble was not requesting a medical doctor at all. "Oh... Davies... O...K. Yeah. I'm on it," I said, and I took off running for the museum. I didn't know why Mrs. Krimble wanted Doctor Davies. I didn't know how he could help, but I knew that was what she asked me to do and since it was basically my damn fault that she was laid out in the middle of a Manhattan street I decided I needed to light a fire under my ass to go get him. Running was awkward for me on a normal day, adding my backpack and Murph's bag that I unintentionally dragged along with me, and I was sure I was going to fall on my face long before I reached the museum's entrance. I hoisted Murph's bag onto one shoulder and slowed my pace as it began to bang on the back of my thigh. I tried to think of what I would say to Doctor Davies when I got to him. What if he didn't want to come outside? What if he decided he didn't care what happened to any of us once we left? I got to the door and pushed when I should have pulled, feeling sparks of panic as I was convinced he locked us out. I banged on the door screaming, "Doctor Davies!" before I remembered to try pulling the door instead. When it opened in my direction I heard a

voice behind me that I slowly realized had been screaming my name a couple of times already.

The door was pulled out of my hands, opening even wider when Russ said, “Natalie, what is going on?”

I looked quickly over my shoulder to see worry in his eyes before saying, “She wants me to get Doctor Davies.” I wish I didn’t see Russ’ eyes. He was right to worry. Rose was in trouble, now Mrs. Krimble, too. Maybe we all were. I know I didn’t cause the whole solar storm, but I was making things worse by the second. I wished Russ would get away from me before I did something to him too. I just wanted to do something right, do what my teacher told me, and help. I turned back to the next set of doors, opened them and ran toward the stairwell, wiping tears out of my eyes, with Russ right next to me. His long legs looked like they could move so much faster.

Russ grabbed my shoulder, stopping me as he asked, “Why?” I looked up at Russ.

“I have no idea, Russ. It’s what she said. It’s what she needs. I need to help her.” I shook my shoulder free of his grip and turned saying, “I need to fix this.” I took two stairs at a time — a risky venture in my clumsy body — but Russ had slowed me down. “Doctor Davies!” I shouted into the dim. “Doctor Davies!” I was panting. Murph’s bag was getting heavier and heavier by the second.

Doctor Davies met me at the top of the stairs. “You’re back?” his hand, still clutching his pen, was pushing his hair back away from his face. His other hand held a bunch of papers. He looked almost as dazed as Mrs. Krimble did. He must have been neck-deep in some intense research or something when this random teenager came bursting back into his life.

“Mrs. Krimble — our teacher — she’s hurt. She needs you,” I barely finished the last sentence when he pushed me and Russ aside, shoving

his papers into Russ's hands as he ran down the stairs. I have to admit, I wasn't expecting that. He didn't even know her, or us. What did he care? Doctor Davies' footsteps faded in the distance and it was just Russ and me standing there, and I don't know how long that was.

"Are you okay?" Russ asked. It echoed in the stairwell. It was so quiet. I kind of didn't move after Doctor Davies pushed me aside. I had let Murph's bag slide off my shoulder and sit, leaning up against my shin and then — what? — I just stood there? "Natalie?" Russ asked again.

"Huh?" I said. Finally. Not knowing what I was thinking about, or what I was doing, or what I was supposed to do next.

"Um... Are you alright?" he spoke so low, as if he was trying to keep my weirdness a secret from the world around us.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I mean... yeah?" I looked at him, not needing to look up because he was standing a couple of steps below me and already eye to eye. "Right? I mean, I should be alright, shouldn't I?" I grabbed the railing I was unconsciously leaning on. "It's not like it was my head that just got smashed open on the street." I saw a vision of Mrs. Krimble's head jerk back into the mirror and the far off look in her eyes the second it happened. That was a bad, bad hit. And it was my fault. I didn't want to cry in front of Russ, but I didn't know how to stop it either. "I just --" Nope. Words were not helping. I choked back a sob, took a deep breath, and -- no -- that wasn't working either. I tried to speak again, "It should have been me, you know?" Every word quavered. I wasn't crying, but any fool could tell that's what my psyche wanted.

Russ stepped up and hugged me. I froze, my arm still on the railing of the stairs. His jacket smelt smoky and felt rough on my cheek, Doctor Davies' papers crinkled at the back of my head. The only good thing about the gesture was that it was so out of left field it shocked

me straight out of the crying fit that was about to take me over. He pulled back and then said, "It should not have been you. Please don't think that, okay?"

"Okay," I said nodding, slipping out of his reach while reaching down to grab Murph's bag to put back on my shoulder. "So I think I should get this back to Murph, you know?"

Russ cleared his throat. "No. Yeah. Of course," he said as he started to walk into the hallway of the second floor. "I should probably put these papers back in Doctor Davies' office, too. That's probably why he gave them to me. I'll catch up to you." He disappeared into the darkness and I turned to walk back down the stairs where I was about to be greeted by another surprise — my classmates shuffling back into the building.

"They want us to wait here," Stella said to me, putting one hand on each arm of mine like she was trying to hold me steady for this news. "I think it's a wonderful idea," she said, sounding like my mom whenever she's trying extra hard to convince me of how good something will be for me even when it sounds like crap. "It's getting a little crazy out there and there's going to be a curfew."

"And they took Mrs. K," Princess added, though not nearly as calmly as Stella.

"Took her?" I whispered to no one in particular. "She's gone?"

Then Daria came storming up to me with tears in her eyes. "But they won't take Rose, Nat," she spoke quietly, through gritted teeth. "Why didn't Murph make them, Nat?"

I looked around. Why was she asking me? I wanted Murph to answer her question — for her and for me. He was right there, in the middle of it all, Daria was right to think he could've said something, but maybe he overheard something, or was given a reason why Rose was left behind. Maybe they were coming back for her, or getting a

doctor to come to her. Maybe Murph could make sense of why we got pushed back into the museum, why we were moving backward on this trip home. Maybe Murph could answer any of these questions if I could find him. “Where is Murph?”

“With Mrs. Krimble,” Colin said.

I shook my head. “No, Princess said they already took Mrs. Krimble.”

“Yeah, they did. He helped,” Colin said.

I looked at Brenda who was standing next to Rose in her wheelchair right at the museum entrance. “He’s gone, Natalie.” She held the bent elbow of my arm holding Murph’s bag. “He went with them in that van. I guess to the hospital or something. That damn knucklehead just left.”

My arm dropped along with Murph’s bag and my heart. I looked through the glass doors, out into the street. It was too far to see who was and wasn’t there, but Brenda had no reason to lie to me. I couldn’t believe it. Murph was gone.

Murph left... me.

Chapter Eleven

Rainbows

It was my punishment. That is what I concluded. The universe looked down upon the scene, saw Natalie Turner wreaking havoc amongst the people closest to her and decided she needed to be stripped of whatever security she had left. It even made sense that Murph was furious with me for causing all of this, that he chose to get as far away from me as possible by whatever means necessary. I looked around the room and wondered how many of the others felt the same. Daria was angry-faced and crying, still asking what Murph was thinking, occasionally shooting the question back in my direction. “What’s Murph up to, Natalie?”

Brenda was trying to calm her, but losing more and more of her own composure by the second. “None of us know, Daria! It doesn’t matter how many times you ask us!”

Stella rolled Rose’s wheelchair away from that drama into a shadowed corner, asking her what she needed to be comfortable. Dustin trailed, carrying both their bags, while Colin and Terrell discussed whether or not waiting was the smartest thing to do. Princess pulled out Val’s chair behind the front desk muttering something about “bullshit” and “stupid asses holding me back.”

Which was me. I was the stupid ass, I knew that much for sure. I looked away quickly before Princess could make eye contact to confirm it, before the tears welled back up into my eyes, before they all turned on me with their true feelings about my betrayal through stupidity.

Rainbow walked over to where I was standing — still at the door of the museum, giving everyone the space I was sure they needed. She patted my back. “I’m so sorry, Natalie,” she said in a whisper.

This girl. *She* was sorry. What the hell was she sorry for? Sorry to know me, maybe! Sorry that she had the unfortunate opportunity to be stuck on this trip with a stupid ass like me. I knew what she was sorry about. I didn’t know why she had to say it. “Are you okay?” she continued. She sounded so sincere. Like, maybe she really was concerned about me and not asking about my mental acuity. I turned to look at her, fearing I couldn’t hold the tears back if I saw the disgust I deserved. Her red hair, braided to the side, showed signs of the long day it had already endured. She never allowed this kind of physical disarray at school. She wasn’t a perfectionist in any way, she was a calm and steady person. Rainbow never got frazzled. She went with the flow and tamed loose hairs as she found them, never letting anything build up to the point of overwhelm. She was quiet, but not shy. She was friendly, but not popular. She was pretty, but not a bombshell. She was eternally kind, but you never really noticed how kind until a moment like this — when the world was falling apart, her world too — and she took the time to stop and ask if *you* were okay. She meant it. She smiled a tight-lipped, guarded smile, like she knew I was about to crack and she didn’t want to push me too far one way or the other. I shrugged. I was unable to meet her kindness. I didn’t deserve it, and didn’t know how to interact with it. I shook my head, hoping to get rid of the rising emotion inside. I didn’t deserve to be comforted. Murph had left me.

That was the right thing to do. *Leave me. Leave me alone, Rainbow! Save yourself!*

I wanted to scream the words. I wanted them all to go, just like Murph, just like Mrs. Krimble, just like... Amy. It suddenly felt like Amy's moving wasn't just a kid trapped by the whims of her parents, but a well thought-out abandonment. Like maybe Amy and her family weren't leaving behind an unfixable home. Maybe they were escaping the true disaster: me. I wanted them all to find their way to safety and to leave me alone in this shell of a museum.

"He shouldn't have left you, Natalie," Rainbow said, her hand now on my shoulder. "I know you guys aren't like really dating or anything, but you were... together today, and that should count for something, I think."

I couldn't speak. I didn't agree with her, but I couldn't protest without openly sobbing, so I just kept shaking my head hoping she understood the *No! No! No!* That I wanted her to hear. "Just know you are not alone, Nat," she said. "Don't shut us out because Murph was a jerk. We're all still in this together."

I broke away, finding my solace in the shadowed stairwell. I don't know where I had planned on going, but once I saw the stairs I stopped, sat down, and started rifling through my bag. My sweatshirt.

Useless.

A half-drunk bottle of water.

Useless.

My wallet, keys, a brush, baby wipes.

Useless, useless, useless, useless.

My phone sat uncomfortably in my back pocket, now digging into my buttock. I pulled it out of my pocket, threw it into the bag.

Useless.

There was only one thing I needed: something to write with. I needed to be Talia. I needed to write about what was happening. I needed to stop being *in* this moment and I needed to start reporting on it, sharing my thoughts about it, observing it. But there was nothing in that bag to help me. No way to connect, no way to write. No way to escape the people whose lives I was slowly ruining and connect with my safely distant peeps. Murph's bag leaned against my leg. I had been absent-mindedly dragging the weight along with me, not even remembering what it was, what it contained: sketchbooks, *pens*, *paper*... Murph's tools for trapping the world's fleeting visuals in a permanent way. Murph's escape, his private comfort. All those blank pages, abandoned for who knows what? All that ink — unflowing — dropped into my care, for what? Was I to carry all this around and ignore it? What kind of artist leaves his passion behind? I opened the flap of his bag and saw a mess of opportunity. Pens of every color, three different notebooks of different sizes, pencils of different widths, lengths and color, and a ziplock bag of what must have been some sort of colored chalk. It looked like this was where rainbows died. The interior of the canvas bag was streaked with colors of every shade and medium — chalk, ink, paint, marker — there were tiny rips and frays, and his notebook covers looked like they had been run over by the A train. It was a heartbreaking look behind the curtain of Murph's prized possessions. I didn't doubt that Murph liked his art, but did he *care for* it? I'm no neat freak, but something about this bag felt discarded, like trash, like maybe Murph was out there, running away from all of this madness, not even giving a second thought to what he left behind. It was such a turn-off. Not only to Murph, but to all he created in that bag. It felt false and unworthy of the praise I once bestowed upon it. I was angry. I wanted to write, but not there, not on *those pages*, with *that ink*, not with the tools Murph used to fool

me into believing he cared about something. Against my wishes, hot, furious tears welled in my eyes. I didn't hear the steps behind me. I was startled when I heard, "I didn't think you were waiting for me. I wouldn't have taken so long —" It was Russ. I guess he was still upstairs all of that time and didn't realize I had left the stairwell, found that there was no escaping, and returned to wallow in my misery. I wanted to pretend that was true, because even my panic after sending Dr. Davies out to the street felt slightly better than the furious abandonment I felt now.

"I didn't," I admitted to him.

"Didn't what?" he asked.

"I didn't wait," I said turning my head up to see his lanky figure with its crazy hair standing over me. "I'm just back. Everyone is —"

He sat on the step next to me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, not really, we're not *all* back. Mrs. Krimble and Murph are gone. Dr. Davies too, I guess," I said with a shrug. "But everyone else is back there." I pointed toward the door to the hallway.

"Nat, this doesn't make any sense. We've gotta get home. What about Rose?" He looked out into the hallway, then back at me. "What about Rog, don't you want to get home to your brother? See if he's okay?"

Really? I could not believe Russ was pulling the sibling card on me, like I chose to be so far from my little brother at a time like this. "Russ, do me a favor, go ask someone else what's going on. I don't know and I don't understand. Do I want to get home? Yes. Now more than ever, but that is what I was told. I know this is all my fault, but that doesn't mean I know how to fix it."

Russ stood up quickly. "Listen, Nat, at some point you are going to have to wake up and realize this isn't all about just you. This isn't happening to just you. But most importantly, this —" He waved his

hands wildly above his head in a very non-Russ kind of movement. “This is not all your fault.”

I was stunned silent by his outburst. I didn’t know he had that level of energy in him. He walked away without waiting for my response and, for some reason, I kind of hated that. I was angry again, but different somehow. I wasn’t angry with Russ himself, it was with what he said. I didn’t think this was all about me, did I? And Mrs. Krimble’s injury was my fault — he couldn’t deny that. All he had to do was ask anyone else waiting out in the lobby. They knew, even if he didn’t — “Oh—” Russ was back in the doorway to the stairwell with a hand in his jacket pocket. “I almost forgot,” he continued as he walked toward me. “I found this upstairs and grabbed it for you.” He pulled something rectangular out of the pocket and dropped it on the stair next to me. “I just thought of you when I saw it, so—” He didn’t say any more. He shrugged, turned, and walked right back out the door.

I looked down and grabbed what he left there. It was a thick, black spiral New York City New School Museum notebook with a pen clipped into the coil.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the moment Russ Sandberg became my hero of the day.

Chapter Twelve

The Notebook

I looked at the notebook Russ brought me and all I could think was *The Notebook* makes people cry — not that this notebook made people cry— because my mom always cried when she watched the movie, *The Notebook*. It was as if the notebook sitting in my hands was nothing more than the phrase “the notebook” which had only one other meaning to me: a movie title. A movie, by the way, I have never seen and have no idea what the plot was. I was pretty sure the movie was romantic, which led to another thought in my head: *The Notebook* is romantic — and that made me blush. Russ brought a notebook out of Dr. Davies office because — how did he put it? He thought of me? That was nice, I guess. Was it more than nice? I didn’t get him. At all.

That much was clear. But it was nice.

It was exactly what I had been looking for and he just sort of knew. It was like a warm blanket being thrown over my shoulders on a cold night. The next step was for me to pull it close around me and snuggle in. In other words, it was time to write.

It was awkward. I’m a blogger, not a “real” writer. I type my words — I always have. I sat there quietly contemplating this, knowing that it was the silliest excuse for writer’s block, but there it was: finally an

opportunity to write, the tools clutched in my hands, and my mind unwilling to make the connection. This was a perfect way to express myself if only I could conjure the QWERTY from the pen. I decided to start with something automatic: a time stamp, something the Internet always provided for me — writing the day, date, location, and time (for this entry it was a vague approximation of “afternoon” rather than the typical preciseness Internet connectivity provided) — I slid the pen across the paper feeling the slowness of this unplugged, one-handed expression. I thought about what I would do if I suddenly got power and an Internet connection. The answer was simple: Amy. I’d write to Amy. She was my best friend, and she’s always been the only person I thought was reading what I was writing anyway. I began to write.

Written in Natalie’s Notebook

Afternoon 10/6, stairwell NSNM

My heart hurts — I mean really, really aches — when I think that I don’t know how to connect with Amy...or Rog...or my mom and dad.

Or when I think everything posted on my blog might be gone forever. I felt so deeply connected to the permanence of my page — it was turning into a reference manual of my life, one that only I and Amy could decipher (I have always hoped!). Memory feels so unreliable and limited, the digital copy of my emotions could let me know who I was on the days I wrote. The gifs and fandoms are fun reflections, but all I’m thinking about is my writing. It’s funny — until this moment I didn’t realize I felt so attached to it. I thought it was a silly thing I was doing for Amy. I thought it was my version of gaming — a mindless time suck that filled in the in-betweens of my life. I thought the fandoms were my prized productions, not my original stuff...Crap. I feel like I’m about to

cry right now (AGAIN!) and that makes me feel extra ridiculous. The tears won't stop today and while many make sense, does this? I wish I could talk to Amy to process all of this. Even my mom — not that she would get it — but she'd probably do something to make me feel better. I think the scariest part about this is that I don't know what happens next.

...But at least I have this notebook now. I guess I should thank Russ for it.

Chapter Thirteen

Secret Closet

“**G**irl. You know you’ll go blind like that, don’t you?” Princess’s voice echoed in the stairwell and scared me to my bones. I slammed the notebook shut and almost threw the pen from my hand. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to notice. “There’s plenty of light in the lobby with all those damn windows if you must write — and Lord knows our Talia needs her tales! But you’re gonna help me first.” Princess was walking into an even darker corner behind the stairs, a space I hadn’t noticed before.

“What are you doing?” I asked while shoving the notebook and pen into my backpack.

“You ever heard about ‘Night at the Museum’ — that sleepover thing?”

“Of course!” I said. Adding, “Yeah,” hoping I didn’t sound too excited at the mention of the event. Ever since I found out about the “Night at the Museum” sleepovers when I was in middle school, I begged my mother to take me. It was always a no-go.

“It’s too expensive!” mom said. Her argument was that it was not fair unless both my brother and I could go, and that simply made it way too expensive to consider. Amy tried asking her mom, but she

didn't take her seriously at all. It was a long-held fantasy of mine to sleep in that lobby, under the dinosaur bones and dream of all of the adventures one could have if only something would come alive, just like it was the movie, *Night at the Museum*.

"Well, I found something on Val's desk about them." Princess walked in the darkness sliding her hands along the wall beneath the stairs. "There should be a closet around here somewhere — I could really use a damn flashlight about now — that has all the supplies."

This seemed completely out of character for the tough-chick, seen more of the world than me, more grown up than me, Princess that I thought I knew. When I was young and dumb I believed in things like a museum sleepovers being fun and exciting opportunities for fantasy to come to life. Now I realized that the Night at the Museum was some organized event with rules and learning and probably some super-early bedtime. It might be nice to see how it all went down, but I didn't see how Princess had decided this was the best time for that. I mean, I knew hanging out in this museum with nowhere to go at the moment must have been boring for someone who wasn't just gifted a notebook full of blank pages just begging to be written in, but exploring darkened corners looking for a supply closet seemed like a level of desperation that approached entirely too soon. So I asked, "Ooo-kay, but why do we need to find it?"

Princess stopped her search. She whispered, but it felt like she wanted to yell. "We gotta help that girl, Natalie. She said she needs to lie down. Those fools out there are trying to lay her down on the floor! On the floor! I mean, come on! You'd think not a single one of them ever had to take care of someone in pain!" There's the Princess I knew — swearing we all had the same life experience as her and, as a result, we should all know better.

“I don’t think I have,” I admitted to her. “I mean, at least, not alone. My mom was always around whenever my grandma got really sick so, you know, I was more like an order-follower.”

Princess exhaled. “Yeah, well, then I guess you’re perfect right now. I’m ordering you to help me find this closet so we can get the girl a damn cot.” She turned and continued talking, but I wasn’t sure it was to me, or just utterances for the darkness to swallow up. “I look at that girl and I see my grandma and I can’t even imagine trying to lie that woman on the floor when she had the real bad days. It’s unbelievable!”

I squinted in the shadows, now that my eyes had adjusted I could make out some of the details it hid. “In the corner!” I pointed to what looked like something that could have been a door knob. “Is that it?”

Princess swept over and pulled. I heard the manic click-click of the knob being turned back and forth more times than was necessary to open it. “It’s locked,” she said quietly.

“You don’t have the key?” I asked.

Princess turned on me and I immediately regretted asking the question. This was not a girl I ever wanted to piss off. “Why would I—” Mid-way through her obvious path to ripping me a new one, she realized what I was thinking. The same desk where she found the info about the closet probably contained the keys to the closet. She ran off and I waited. I’m not sure why. I didn’t know what to do with myself. Princess had given me a tiny purpose — to help her get this cot out — so I waited for her so I could do just that.

I thought about what Princess said, about us never having to care for someone in pain and I realized she was right, we were wildly unqualified to take on Rose’s care. She really did need to see a doctor. Why didn’t Murph remember that she needed help? I had gotten so annoyed about him leaving me behind that I forgot what his truest crime was — leaving Rose behind. As much as Daria had shouted it

at me, it didn't become real until that moment. She was right to ask about him leaving her. Now I had the same question. And Princess was right too, Rose was our responsibility now. We needed to take that seriously. I didn't know what that meant yet, but I knew that I wouldn't make the same mistake Murph made. I would help Rose find the help she needed to get home, or to a doctor, or to get into a damn cot instead of the floor if she needed to rest.

When Princess came back with the keys, she brought Terrell and Colin with her. I didn't think getting a cot required four people, but maybe they were bored too. It took some fiddling with a whole ring of keys to find the right one, but the door finally opened and revealed an even darker cavern before us. No one took a step forward.

"You know where the cot is?" Terrell asked before making a move.

Colin didn't give her a chance to answer. "Move out of my way, you big chicken!" he said pulling on Terrell's shoulder to pass him.

"What?" Terrell said, following him in. "Doesn't make sense to go in blind if we have more information!"

Princess and I followed behind, laughing at the two of them going back and forth. All four of us were inside and not bumping into each other or any types of shelves. The closet didn't feel like a closet at all, it felt more like a room. Maybe in museums closets have to be this big, but I know that if my mother ever had a closet with this much walking space in it, her crafting hobby would reach uncontrollable levels and my dad would have to forward his paycheck to Michaels, the arts and crafts store.

I walked slowly, holding my hands out in front of me because there wasn't any eye adjustment going on in here, just blindness. It smelled stuffy, but clean, not like an old attic or anything, more like the room Rog and I always stayed in at our Aunt's house. She had a separate room just for people to visit. She couldn't have visitors all the time,

so what did that room do the rest of its days? It was weird. Anyway, that was this room/closet thing. I guess people came in to visit — to take stuff out and put stuff in — but for the most part it stayed empty. Maybe it was Val's job to keep it clean. I was frustrated not being able to know more about the room because of my lack of vision. I walked straight until I couldn't walk anymore and felt something cool in front of me. I bravely slid my hand to the side and felt a change in texture and temperature. The thing in front of me was either another door or a window, I decided. I groped down and up and finally felt a latch above my head. I turned it, then pushed up the window and — BAM — blinding light in my face paired with a warm breeze pulling in some dust or dirt that lived on the outside of the windowsill.

"Whoa!" Terrell said from somewhere over on my left.

"Nice one!" said Princess next to me.

"Thank. You," Colin said from somewhere deeper within. Followed by, "Cots!"

"I got glow sticks!" Terrell said.

"Space blankets?" Princess asked. "Is everything in here labeled?"

I turned and saw an organizer's dream space. Someone in this museum had a serious obsession with everything being in its rightful place. Someone in this museum would have an instant heart attack if they ever set foot into my bedroom. The room wasn't huge and could rightfully be called a closet due to its size, but it was organized with an open space in the middle that made it feel airy and livable. Three of the walls were lined with shelves all containing labeled clear plastic boxes. I saw the bin labeled "space blankets" next to Princess and, of course, they were all folded neatly into small silver rectangles within. Terrell's bin of glow sticks looked as though they had been bundled in pre-counted batches, each with a rubber band holding them together. Colin was standing by the far wall which, instead of shelving, had a

stack of cots, folded and laying on top of one another. And — as if it were not clear to anyone looking on — there was a clearly printed sign on the wall next to each stack declaring, “COTS.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah. It reminds me of Miss V’s art room,” Colin said.

“You take Art?” Terrell asked.

“What? Of course I do! How am I ever supposed to perfect my skills?”

“She let’s you tag?” Terrell seemed genuinely interested. I was just confused that Miss V’s room was neat. After looking in Murph’s bag I assumed all artists were a hot mess. Wasn’t that a thing? Like the messier you are, the more creative you are? “It’s called street art, Terr, and it is all the rage. Miss V has even had me present photos of some of my stuff to the class!” Colin’s pride was palpable. I knew he was into graffiti and stuff, but I have to admit I was just as surprised as Terrell to hear that anything he did was school approved. “I’m even working on a piece to put on the back wall of her classroom.” He then turned and looked at the wall above the cots. “In fact, I could really spruce this place up, if they’d let me.”

“Don’t,” Princess had her hand on his shoulder before she even finished her sentence, “get any ideas. Just pick up that cot and get moving!” She turned her wide eyes at me as if silently saying, “Can you believe this boy?” And I laughed, shaking my head and shrugging.

Terrell jumped to Colin’s side saying, “We should take a couple out there for everyone to sit on, so we don’t mess up the exhibits and stuff. Who knows how long we’ll be here.”

What? Were we getting comfortable now? I looked at Princess hoping for another shared look of disbelief, but found her smiling at Terrell, “Good idea, Terr.” Whoa. What was that look? I think

Princess liked Terrell. That girl never let her guard down and I just saw a sweetness in her eyes that I didn't know existed.

I knew second guessing his suggestion would get me nowhere fast, so I tried a different tactic instead. "I — uh — wasn't out there, you know, so were we —like, uh — given instructions to —like, um, I don't know — wait for someone or something?" You know what I hate? I hate when you are nervous about talking at all and your brain thinks that the best plan of action is to make you stutter all the way through so that the whole damn thing lasts even longer. What. Is. That?

Princess turned toward me. "What?"

Oh god, really? Do I have to say it all again?

"I just — um — it's like we're staying if we take those out. Are we? Staying?" I stared at the cots all the way through.

It was quiet. The boys had stopped moving and no one said anything. I braved the reality around me and looked up at Princess. She was looking from Terrell to Colin and they looked back and forth. It was a silly game of mental pinball, each one of them bumping off my question and rocketing toward the other. I watched it go back and forth, back and forth, until all six of their eyes landed back on me. Right. No one knows.

"You know what?" I said, desperate to break the silence and get everyone off the hook — especially me, "whatever. Let's get Rose that cot before they lay her out on this miserable floor. One thing at a time."

Colin grabbed his cot. "Yeah, I got it." And left the room in a hurry. Princess and Terrell looked at each other again.

"The other cots are a great idea, too, Terrell. Why don't you bring them out there as well. You'll be everyone's hero!"

Terrell smiled, and Princess smiled that soft smile at him. “Let me help you,” she said, staring into his distracted eyes. They carried three cots together out the door.

I stood in the center of the room, surveying the supplies around me, taking a mental inventory of what was neatly stored for nights of fun and learning, items that were part of the program, and some that were stocked for those kids who forgot to pack them — pillows, toothbrushes, fuzzy socks, t-shirts, snacks, juice boxes, star maps, binoculars, museum maps, and, of course, blankets, glow sticks and cots. I itemized them all in my brain. It seemed important that I knew what was available to us. It seemed important that I knew something — anything— because this room froze a moment ago until I made a decision. All eyes were on me and when I spoke, they listened. I had no idea what I was doing, but doing something felt better than the silence.

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Afternoon 10/6

I'm sitting here in the middle of a closet, splayed out on the floor, terrified to go out to the group I'm with. I have questions

-Are we leaving?

-Are we waiting for someone?

-Does anyone know how to get Rose to a doctor?

-Does somebody — I mean ANYBODY — have a plan?

I don't even want to bother to ask any of these questions out loud because I don't think anyone has any answers and I don't think I can survive that silence again.

Chapter Fourteen

Sticking Together

When I finally admitted to myself that my notebook didn't actually have a connection to the faceless masses of my peeps who could quickly comment on my tiny internal freak out, I decided I needed to move into action. Before Princess dragged me into her cot mission, I was going to find Russ to thank him for giving me that notebook. That was an action still worthy of my time. I grabbed a pillow from one of the bins and brought it out, along with my bag and Murph's, to where the group had set up the cots and laid Rose down. Daria was gushing with gratitude over those who brought the supplies, while everyone else seemed to be gathering in groups around the other cots, each covered not in sitting people as they were intended to be, but in large pieces of paper.

I walked over to Rose whose eyes were shut. She didn't look like she was sleeping. Daria stopped me. "She's resting," she whispered.

"I figured," I said. Evidently the tension between us had not lifted. "I just got her this pillow," I said. I presented the pathetic offering.

"Oh shit," Rose said in a cracking voice. "Pillows are an option? Hook a sister up, Turner." She stretched her hand out, next to Daria which managed to move her out of the way even though it was clear

there was no power behind it. Her smile was crooked, but everything about her expression seemed forced. The pillow was not exactly what I expected when I took it out of the bin. It was an inflatable travel pillow. I guess it makes sense for long term storage and a quick fix on a museum sleepover, but it looked more like something that belonged at a pool party than a sleepover. I had brought it to Rose already inflated and placed it down on the cot next to her head so she would just have to lift her head a little bit to get it on there. It was a weird dome shape with an indent in the middle where your head goes. It didn't look all that comfortable to me, but Rose sighed when she settled on to it. "A head hug," she said. "How wonderful." Then she smiled a small, but sincere smile. It was something. Rose was still stuck here instead of in capable hands that could heal her, but at least we made her more comfortable. And I was a tiny part of that. It felt really good, even if it wasn't enough to warm Daria to me.

I turned to look for Russ. Maybe he thought his gesture was a tiny, unnoticed one, too. I felt the need to let him know differently. Everyone in the room who wasn't guarding Rose (I'm looking at you, Daria!), was deep in conversation and debate. The papers laid out on the cots were subway maps that Stella found on Val's desk while helping Princess find the keys to the closet earlier. While we were groping around in the darkness, everyone else had started a debate about the fastest route home — hoping we could beat whatever curfew the police had mentioned when I had come inside to get Dr. Davies.

Russ was in a corner with Colin and Rainbow. He was laughing and smiling at whatever Rainbow had just said. I felt a tug in my tummy. Rainbow was such a nice girl, so put together, sweet, and kind. I bet she was funny, too. I bet Russ noticed, too. In fact, Russ was unexpectedly kind, too — maybe Russ and Rainbow were made for each other. It almost made sense the second I thought about it. "Russ

& Rainbow” had such a nice rhythm too it. They could be R&R — The Railroad couple, or Rest & Relaxation — they would make such a catchy hashtag...

Rainbow looked up and noticed me staring at them like an idiot. She smiled and waved me over. I was about to shake my head no, when Dustin and Brenda’s discussion next to me started getting louder. Brenda, who was sitting next to Dustin hovering over the cot closest to Rose’s, said, “Dustin! These routes are just too long to take today!”

Dustin rolled his eyes. Then whispered, “That’s not a problem with just my routes, Brenda, I don’t think there is a path to get home before curfew if we don’t get moving fast — and continue moving fast.” His eyes darted over to Rose. “We’re going to need to do something soon.”

Stella looked nervously between Dustin and Brenda, remaining silent. I didn’t want to look back in the direction of the soon to be announced couple of the year R&R, or to imagine their perfect future together, so I let my imagination dive into the mystery of Stella’s look.

Stella was always so good at doing the right thing and following teachers’ orders to the tee, I wondered what she was thinking without any authority figure there to guide her. Was she trying to decide who was more teacher-like? Was she developing her very own “I am Miss Perfect” plan to rival them both? How the hell would she even engage in conversation with them if she didn’t have to raise her hand?

Damn. You’re just being mean now, Natalie.

Stella was such an easy mental target, and something in me wanted to strike out. But Stella was nice — irritably nice, sure — but still nice. The fact was, Stella was probably just as terrified as I was because maybe no one understood it clearer that there was no authority figure to make the decision for us. “Can everyone come here a second?” Brenda asked, hand on hip, turning to make sure everyone’s eyes were on her. “Rose, you stay, of course.”

It wasn't like the group had spread far and wide, but we gathered closer around her, using the waning sunlight through the windows to illuminate what she, Dustin, and the others had been working on all this time. I didn't turn around to see where Rainbow and Russ ended up in this gathering. Some evil imagination engineer in my mind had told me they were probably holding hands. Not that I should care. I should be happy for them. I came here, on this trip, with Murph, not Russ. Russ gave me a notebook. It didn't mean anything. I didn't even think I wanted it to mean anything. Right? I just wanted to thank the guy because it was a nice gesture, but I wasn't expecting anything else from that. And Rainbow — god — she was legitimately nice in the not annoying way. If Russ made her smile, then she deserved that probably more than anyone else in the room. I forced all the voices in my head to shut down and focus on the conversation in front of me.

Priorities, Nat. Remember where you are and where you want to go. Let's get home.

Focusing on my future paths home proved as confusing as imagining the future romantic pairings of the group around me. Together, the group had worked out five different routes to get to the ferry and two different routes to the Brooklyn Bridge.

Dustin suggested skipping the ferry all together and taking bridge routes since the bridge is always open to pedestrian traffic. He figured if cars could be knocked out, maybe boats could be too. Those routes continued on to the Verrazano Bridge. Those were the routes Brenda had complained about. And, once he explained it all the way through, none of us liked Dustin's plan. It was epically long, and Brenda pointed out that — technically — all bridges should be pedestrian bridges in our current predicament, so — according to her — he should stop trying to make up “technologically irrelevant detours.” I looked over at one of the maps Princess had started working on when she said,

“Speaking of pedestrian bridges, could High Line Park help us get downtown quicker?”

This started another debate over the waste of time it would be to walk to the West Side rather than just moving Downtown constantly getting closer to the ferry. Each person started shouting out their best path and argument. My mind drifted as all of their comments came barreling in and out of my brain.

“Can’t get lost if we take Broadway!”

“Cops and crowds will make that a nightmare!”

The sun wasn’t exactly setting yet, but it was behind the museum now, not directly shining on the entryway windows anymore.

“Let’s move east as we go downtown. It’s so much less tourist-y!”

“Are we really worried about tourists at a time like this?”

We had lunch at noon, maybe even a little after. That meant the sun had been moving down ever since.

“East side has more doctors —“

“West Side has Port Authority! Maybe they’re mobilizing some transportation efforts?”

How long had it been since lunch?

“I don’t get it. Do we want to find police or do we want to avoid them?”

“What about Mrs. Krimble... And Matt? You know, Murph?”

They all stopped. When the silence reached me I mentally sorted through the voices I had heard and realized it was Russ that last spoke. I turned to look at him and noticed all eyes on me.

“Are you waiting for Murph, Nat?” Russ asked. I felt someone step up next to me and squeeze my arm. I turned to find it was Rainbow. Did she notice it was the arm still holding Murph’s bag?

“I —uh—“ I tried to clear my throat, but my mouth was so dry I could barely muster any internal mouth movements. It turned into an

awkward, loud gulp. Russ shook his head and continued, taking the pressure off of me to answer.

“Because,” he said, looking around to everyone but me, “I just don’t think we should split up right now, so if Nat is staying around I think I’ll stay with her.” Rainbow’s hand squeezed a little tighter and I focused on that pressure to avoid thinking about all of the weird feelings she and Russ were giving me. Why did he use me as an example? Why did he ask if I was waiting for Murph? Couldn’t he have made the same point with the very obvious example of Rose and Daria? And why was Rainbow here by my side — to support Russ or to support me?

“You guys are going to have to leave me,” Rose whispered. I’m not sure anyone but Daria, Rainbow and I heard her.

Daria looked at her with wild and furious eyes. “Uh... hell no.” Daria was loud enough to call everyone’s attention to her.

“Whoa. What?” Russ asked.

Rose started to speak, but Daria spoke over her, “Absolutely nothing!”

“Rose wants us to leave her behind.” I don’t know why I said it.

Stella stepped closer to Rose and said, “Oh Sweetie.”

Rose smiled softly at me, but Daria turned red-faced and teary eyed at me. Russ’ arm flew between us just as she took a step. What was I doing? Sure this was a great distraction off of the question Russ asked me, but why did I continue to piss people off with my words? Maybe people were always this pissed off at me and I just never knew it because I never said them face to face, I always hid behind a screen and a keyboard. It’s just that Rose said something that I think she wanted others to hear. I didn’t think it was fair to shoot her down right away — even though I wasn’t sure what she was saying was the best idea either, but — you know what? — Maybe Rose needed to hear that it was nuts from someone other than Daria. And it was becoming clear that Daria

hated me anyway, so did I really have anything to lose? Didn't we owe it to Rose to have a voice here too? And, when I thought about it, Daria was being an idiot. No one was going to agree to leaving Rose behind, but Daria wasn't giving anyone a chance to tell her that for themselves. It was like everything Rose-related was getting filtered through Daria. I understood why that was happening, but maybe it was time to change it.

"I'm sorry, Daria, but I think we should hear Rose out, too." Who the hell did I think I was? As the words spilled from my mouth all I could think was *You pompous asshole*. I cleared my throat — this time successfully. "And I think, maybe, Rose should hear from all of us, too." Each word was thick on my tongue. I turned to look at Rose. "For my two cents, Rose, I agree with Daria. I don't want to leave you anywhere, but in your house or with a doctor of some sort." Daria softened.

"Yeah," Colin said, "I also am anti-leave-behind-plan."

"Think there's been enough of the flat-leaving for the day," Rainbow said, shifting her arm to circle around my shoulders that went slack under her touch. I have no idea how long I had been tensing them.

"I didn't get you the damn cot to cozy you up so I could walk out on you!" Princess said. "It's a temporary situation while we find you better accommodations is all."

"Alright, alright," Russ said loudly, looking around at everyone and then settling his eyes on me. "So it is agreed? We are sticking together until the end of this?"

He was looking at me.

I heard no one else's response. He was asking me.

He wasn't looking at Rainbow. I kept my eyes on Russ and nodded. We were sticking together.

Chapter Fifteen

Food Fight

Sticking together was one thing, but what to do next while sticking together was a decision still left unchecked. As everyone got quietly back to the work of planning out routes that would work for all of us, I was struck by the changing light in the room around us. Did anyone still think we were getting home tonight?

I don't think I ever noticed the sunset before — not how long it takes, or what time it happens, or how to actually see it in a city where buildings, and trees and people and cars all block your view. Stella had said the police were ordering a sundown curfew, but no one had come to check on us. No one. There were no police, no crazy tourists knocking on our doors, nothing to interrupt all of our own weird, internal discussions about what we were going to do next. But that lack of interruption also included no reminders concerning the passage of time — like the various alerts each of us set on our phones, the worried texts from our parents, the 3pm universal buzz letting everyone's phone know that today's HQ Trivia game was about to go live — time was passing, but everything that normally reminded me of this was missing. Everything except my body. I was getting hungry. My stomach was threatening to scream for outside assistance. My

quick hot pretzel lunch in the park was a cute idea at the time, when I knew I was heading straight home to one of mom's home cooked feasts probably waiting for me on the table, but now it seemed like the dumbest idea in the world.

Protein, Nat. Never forget protein. Then I remembered the bin of snacks in the closet and wondered how the light had changed in there. Would I be able to see? A little optimistic fool of a voice inside me reminded me that I could just use the flashlight on my phone to light my way, and I swear I took a moment to mentally slap her. There was no need to have a voice like that reminding me of all of my heartbreaks when I was hungry. I walked over to Terrell. "Did you grab any of those glow sticks, Terrell?"

"Huh? Oh yeah!" He reached into his deep, for boys only (a rant for another day!), jeans pockets. "You want one?"

"Yeah, please," I said. I smiled at Princess who was watching me closely. I have to admit, I was finding this whole Princess-crushing-on-Terrell-thing quite adorable. He pulled one out of the rubber banded bundle from his pocket.

"There's a bunch more in the closet, he didn't take them all," Princess said. Oh wow. She didn't even want me to ask the boy for a glow stick. This was serious.

"That's where I'm going. Just not sure I'll be able to see when I get there." I pointed to the stairwell hallway that now looked as dark as the closet when we first opened it. "I saw a bin with snacks in it. I figured I'd check it out."

"Snacks?" Dustin wasn't near me anymore, and I wasn't talking that loudly, but he heard me. "Dude. Show me snacks."

Terrell put his hand on my shoulder and said, "That is a brilliant idea."

Princess stepped closer to the two of us and turned to face Terrell. “Good thing I found that closet, huh?” she said, then turned to me with a forced smile and continued, “I’ll help you get them, Nat.”

“Did you see what they were, Natalie?” Stella asked.

“Guys.” Colin walked around the group to stand between me and the hallway to the closet. “Look, I didn’t want to be the stereotypical teenage boy who thinks of nothing but food... and... well, there’s ladies present so let’s just leave it at food,” he smirked and pointed at Rainbow when he said this. “But — well — I have to admit, food has been on my mind for a huge portion of the day.” He turned to me. “Natalie, your snacks sound like they could be fun — I don’t want to downplay them at all, and I really look forward to diving into them as an option as well — but I’m super worried about the food in the cafeteria not being eaten at all. There’s like sandwiches and stuff down there and I think they require refrigeration, so —“

“Sand-wich-es! Sand-wich-es!” Dustin yelled, as he hopped over to Colin’s side. “Sand-wich-es!”

“Yes!” Terrell added, jumping in and joining Colin, “Sand-wich-es!” He turned toward the group, clapping along with each syllable until it was clear no one else was joining them.

“I like sandwiches,” I said with a shrug — partially because it was true and partially because I liked the idea of someone else being in charge of the food. I motioned for Dustin to lead the way to the cafeteria.

After years of returning to this same spot for our class trip, and the cafeteria being our grand taste of freedom, we all knew exactly where it was and what it served. However, in years past we had taken the uber-fancy elevator to get to the bottom floor feasting. That meant, of course, that we were headed back to the stairwell — which presented two problems: darkness and Rose.

For the darkness, we did put Terrell's glow sticks to work. We cracked open five of them and, instead of carrying them, we spread them out on the stairs so everyone could actually see the steps as they walked down. It was a pretty simple and quick solution.

Rose was another matter. A matter I wish I never got involved in. First, Rose argued that she should just stay, which led to Daria saying she would just stay, which led to Stella reminding them that we all agreed to stick together for this whole ordeal. Dustin said he thought Stella was taking everything "a bit too literally," and Stella lost it. I don't know if it was that she was tired and hungry and losing patience, or if it was the fact that she thought she finally had a rule to follow in this whole mess and Dustin was trying to blow it up in her face — whatever it was, Stella was losing her Stella-ness. I actually felt bad for her, she looked like she was going to burst internally.

"Why don't we just bring the food back up here?" I suggested quietly. A simple solution, I thought.

"Oh hell no!" Brenda said. Evidently, I was wrong. "Please no bringing food all around this place. This place has to have bugs, or rats, or... something —" she mimed a gag — and I really don't want them finding the cots."

Evidently, I was a disgusting human being for even thinking about this horrible idea. Brenda sounded like my mom. I felt like I had been reprimanded. I involuntarily rolled my eyes and turned away. I felt like a little kid with stupid little kid ideas.

"Excellent point," Russ said. Yes. Russ. While I faced away from the girl who publicly dissed me for offering a suggestion, Russ decided to agree with her. I felt like such a loser. I felt like my intentions were completely misrepresented, once again, by the damn words that left my mouth. Russ must have been thinking, *How gross Natalie is! She's okay with living with bugs in her cot!*

Didn't these people understand that I was trying to help? Didn't they know that I, too, was a fan of hygiene? The prospect of bugs, rats, or whatever invading our cots grossed me out too! I mean, now that it had been brought up! I just wasn't thinking about that at the moment! I was thinking about helping Rose! I moved toward the hallway expecting Russ to say something about how maybe the group should abandon me and my filthy ideas before continuing on, but instead he spoke to Rose. "Look, Rose, we can help you down, if that's what you're worried about."

I didn't wait to listen to how the whole thing panned out. I cracked the glow stick Terrell had given me and started walking into the hallway. I threw it down the dark abyss of the stairwell going down to the cafeteria expecting to find a ton of roaches dispersing at the first sight of light. Terrell joined me, cracking two glow sticks and handing them to me, before cracking another two for himself. We walked down the stairs, separating the sticks so that the whole stairwell glowed.

It was simple. It was quick. It was silent work. It helped the group. But that happened after the conversation with Rose.

It taught me something: I am definitely more helpful when I shut my mouth.

The museum cafe reminded me a lot of Staten Island Prep. Since our school is so small, it doesn't have one of those auditorium sized cafeterias. In the museum cafe, there were ten tables with chairs and a small counter with three huge silver refrigerators behind it. Luckily, one entire wall was nothing but windows, probably to take advantage of the view of the park. For us, it meant taking advantage of what

was clearly the last hours of light. The sun was straight ahead of us, somewhere behind the buildings on the other side of the park. The sky above started deepening in hues and the oranges, reds and yellow lights that marked the sun's location were all straight ahead and becoming more and more obscured. Looking at all of those colors, I couldn't help but wonder where Murph was and whether or not he was missing his bag.

At the end of the counter, next to the cash register was a small square filled with bottled drinks and melting ice. I wondered if the refrigerators and freezers could do a better job of hanging on to the cold if they stayed closed. As thought entered my mind, I saw that Colin already had Rainbow behind the counter where he was opening the fridge. "I'm starving." He grabbed a clear plastic container that had a sandwich and a small pudding-like cup inside. "Turkey club and yogurt, Rain?"

"Sounds good," she said smiling.

"I'm taking two for me," he said and walked away from the fridge with three stacked high. Dustin followed and nodded for me to do the same.

I felt weird about it. Was any of this going to be considered stealing? I didn't have enough cash to pay for it, or any food for the trip home, not at Manhattan prices. If I remembered correctly there were only thirteen dollars left in my wallet. So, without any ATMs or use of my debit card, this was my only chance for food until I got home. I decided to start a mental I.O.U. List. I'd come back to the museum and pay them for the things I took when everything went back to normal. Stella, who very likely was debating the same moral quandary, came up behind me and raised a point that helped me to feel less guilty about the decision. "Remember, everything will go bad and end up in the garbage anyway."

“Well we’re not going to eat everything, Stella,” Princess said snidely.

Stella flipped her head in Princess’s direction. I couldn’t see her face clearly in the dimming light of the setting sun, but I had a feeling she was shooting Princess a dirty look. There was a new tension among the group since we all engaged in the tiny debate about how to feed Rose. “I’m not saying you have to,” she said, “but I thought you might want to think about taking some with you, since it will just go to waste if we don’t.”

“So, is that it? Are we going now?” Brenda asked. “Has it been decided?”

“Nothing’s been decided,” Russ said.

Stella huffed and spun around. “What do you want to do right now? Do you want to head out when the sun is setting?” She pointed to the view of our only time keeper.

Everyone got quiet quick.

“No, seriously,” Stella continued. “It’s either that or getting ready for the night here in the museum. We’re not getting any other help to get home. Mrs. Krimble’s gone. Dr. Davies is gone. Val’s gone. As far as I’m concerned, Murph made his choice — sorry, Nat,” she tilted her head quickly in my direction making my stomach skip. Then she turned and said, “And Lord knows how long Rose is going to hold it together. I think we need to get home.”

Everyone turned to Rose sitting at the end of one of the first tables in the cafeteria. The group came down ahead of her — everyone but Daria, of course, who walked every slow, pathetic step with her, taking two breaks on the journey to take a breath. Though they thought their expedition was a private trial shared between the two of them, every sound made and word spoken echoed through the stairwell and found its way to us. It had taken such an enormous effort for her to get down

the stairs to this room that she sat as soon as she could, in the first seat she could find. Daria had brought her food and she ate hungrily the moment it was placed in front of her.

Stella sat back down and shook her head. “Look. I don’t know, but if that’s not what’s happening, then what should we be doing?”

No one answered. Everyone looked left and right as if searching for the first speaker. And it was like I was back in that closet again, with Princess, and Colin, and Terrell, and the silence was weighing heavy on me again. Did no one have a suggestion, or an idea? There was one person who needed a voice — it wasn’t me, that was for damn sure — I was afraid no one was going to say anything, or even ask her, so I blurted it out. “What about you, Rose? What’s the best plan for you?”

Daria looked at me and smiled weakly.

Rose placed her sandwich down on her plate, took a long drink from her bottle of water, swallowed hard and said, “I don’t want to scare anyone here, but home isn’t going to help me much more than here. It’s pretty likely I need a hospital.”

Where is the nearest hospital?

I flinched — again — ready to grab my phone for a quick Google search. It was so hard to shake off old habits. As the twitches for my phone kept happening, I felt more and more like a part of my brain was amputated. I could still guess, I could still figure things out — my intelligence was unharmed — but my primary line of attack for all problem solving situations had been eradicated. Problems were everywhere and every single time I reached out my first muscle memory thoughts about how I could tackle them, I was crippled. After coping with that new, but increasingly familiar heartbreak, something even more frightening occurred to me. “Can a hospital help you? You know... like this?” I asked, almost terrified to know the answer.

Rose smirked and pointed at me, “And ding! Ding! Ding! To the girl who once had a blog!” Rose sounded tired which complimented her sarcasm perfectly. “Thing is, I don’t know who can help me and, if I’m being honest with you all right now, I’m pretty fucking terrified. I’ve been trying to say this all afternoon, but please don’t ask me to make the decision for the group — all options seem horrible for me — whatever you guys decide, I’ll do, but at some point you guys might really want to ditch me.”

“Don’t say that!” Daria said. “Well, on top of the brain-crushing pain that I am experiencing right now, I am starting to get dizzy again, which means all kinds of travel are going to be problematic for me. But, the real kicker is, if this doesn’t get resolved soon, I’m in real danger of losing my sight completely which means not moving forward is not the best idea for me either.”

“You can go blind?” Rainbow said, just barely above a whisper.

“I was pretty close to it before I had my shunt put in.” Rose pulled back her hood and took off her bandana, revealing short, funky hair that looked like it lacked a style, then she turned her head revealing a scar in the shape of a long, curved line with tons of tiny little lines crossing over it. “No one wants brain surgery, but sometimes it’s the greatest thing that could ever happen to you. I was getting close to being able to come back to school like a normal fucking human being. No more ‘Robot Rosie’ shit.”

Gasps around the room. A quiet “damn” from one of the boys — I suspected Colin.

“So, what do you think happened?” Terrell asked. “Why are you all messed up again?”

Rose shrugged. “You guys lost your phones, I lost my miracle. I think my shunt was affected by this storm thing.”

I didn't want to eat anymore. All of the feelings I had right then were sickening. What had I been mourning all of this time? How did that measure up to what Rose had lost and still had to lose? We were all quiet for possibly the longest we had been since we set out on our trip that morning.

"Excuse me," Rainbow said through a hiccup, and she ran out the door of the cafeteria. I followed her, using her sobs as my guide. I found her in the stairwell, she was hysterical."Rainbow?" I asked as softly as I could to still be heard above her echoing cries. "What happened?"

"My dad," she said, then started crying uncontrollably again. She took a deep breath. "I didn't even think, Natalie. I mean, I thought of him — of course I did. I thought of my mom, my dad, and my sister, and whether or not they were in a safe place," another deep breath, "but, my God, I didn't think of the—" more sobs.

I sat next to her and put my arm around her shoulder. "Rainbow, I'm sorry." I had no idea what I was sorry for exactly, but I at least I knew I was sorry she felt so badly.

"He has a stent in his heart, Natalie. His heart!" she broke down again. "Will it still work? Did he have a heart attack? Could he survive one if he did? Do those paddle things that they use to help people in those situations even help? I can't even call him to see if he's okay!"

I had no answers for Rainbow. I had a feeling she was spit-firing questions at me as if I were her new search engine. I couldn't deliver. Search engines no longer functioned in this world. I turned myself so I could get both arms around her and said, "I don't know Rainbow. Maybe we'll find someone who does."

And that's when I first had the thought that people — other real life human beings, not a device — might be the answer.

Chapter Sixteen

Souvenirs

Stella stood in the stairwell, took a hair tie out of her bag, and pulled her long, curly hair back into a high and tight ponytail. “It looks like we’re staying. For now. Everyone’s taking their sweet time eating. I want to go to the gift shop, you guys want to come with me, or do you want to wait for everyone else?” Stella couldn’t resist taking charge.

“I can use the distraction,” Rainbow said.

“Yeah. Why not?” I said, following the two up the stairs.

When we got to the door of the shop Rainbow said, “Thing is, Stella, I don’t think I can afford anything there with the cash I have left.”

When Stella turned, her ponytail flung through the air, missing Rainbow’s face by an inch. “Really Rainbow?” She turned to look at me. “Are you not getting this?” She spread her arms out beside her and said, “We are taking what we need. That’s all. It’s a state of emergency.”

Rainbow shook her head. “I don’t think I can. Food is one thing. Look, Stella, it’s not that long of a walk. I don’t think we really need anything that badly.” I had to agree with her. I was sure nothing in that one room gift shop was going to fill the gaping hole in my chest.

“We can pay them back later,” Stella said. “I’m not looking for some big haul of wind-up toys. Just look around and see if there’s anything that might be helpful — don’t they usually sell flashlights in these places?” She started looking around where the cash register was.

“A flashlight wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Rainbow said. “Maybe there are light pens, or something.” She took a tiny turn to look through the items right by the door of the shop, as if she wanted to be able to make the quickest escape possible in the event anyone walked by to ask what was going on. I watched both of them, looking, quietly through all the items. I stood my ground wondering what my parents would think about me taking part in this. Like Rainbow said — food was one thing — taking souvenirs like this felt entirely unnecessary. I thought about the story I wanted to tell Rog at the end of all of this. Was this a part of it? In the center of the gift shop there were the bins of crap that Rog was always drawn to in gift shops — filled with dino-shaped erasers, super bouncy balls, and keychains. Stella was right, sometimes you could find a minuscule flashlight attached to a key chain or, like Rainbow suggested, a pen, but they were barely functional. I couldn’t imagine finding something worth the crime.

“More city maps?” Stella asked.

“What the heck do we need the map for, Stella?” Rainbow asked. “Here’s how you get home: walk downtown. Keep going. Go and go until you are A: on the ferry, or B: swimming!”

I laughed pretty hard because Rainbow was right, getting home was easy, really easy, the debate over the best path home was a silly distraction, but I can’t think of one time that I was in the city, trying to get home and I didn’t — maybe out of habit more than need — take my phone out of my pocket and look at the GPS map. I kind of wanted to hold on to one of the maps just to have something to look at on our walk home. “Ha ha, very funny, Rainbow,” Stella said, sticking

her tongue out at Rainbow. “I guess I just miss my pictures,” she said pulling her phone out of her pocket.

I nodded.

“Really?” Rainbow asked, scrunching up her face. “You guys miss it that much?”

Stella laughed. “You ready for ridiculous?” She held up the map. “I was thinking it could be our GPS!” Stella bit her lip, trying to stifle a big laugh before it finally burst free. Rainbow and I joined in her laugh before she calmed to continue. “Look. I know that I know how to get home, but I don’t trust myself. I could use the map — like I used to use my phone — to verify my truth or something.”

I stopped laughing. *Verify my truth. Is that what it was?* Those last words hung heavy, and made sense. How much of my dallying online was about me verifying my own truth? About the world, about myself, about who I wanted to be?

“Pictures are pretty powerful is all,” Stella said, tapping the map in her hand. We were all quiet for a moment until Rainbow broke the silence.

“Oh-em-gee!” Rainbow squeed. “That reminds me,” she stepped out of the gift shop and looked both ways as if she was checking to see if the coast was clear for something. “Natalie, what’s the deal with you and Russ?”

I gulped, remembering the Russ and Rainbow moment earlier. Was she asking out of curiosity, or was she sizing me up? Rainbow was sweet, but girls got real funny when it came to boys they liked.

She turned to me, “That pic he posted was so adorbs! I wanted to ask you about that as soon as we got back from lunch. And then all this happened.”

I kept looking through the bins of dino-shaped erasers, super bouncy balls, and key chains. So far nothing useful. Nothing to help

me hide my blushing. “Oh. That was from the Catch ‘Em Crazy stuff. We just caught a rare dragon egg.” I said.

“So, you didn’t spend lunch with Murph?” Stella asked, squinting in my direction.

“No, no. It wasn’t like that. The egg — It was for my brother. Russ got one for his sister. They’re friends — my brother and his sister. It was just a minute, that’s all.” I shrugged and dove back into the bins.

“What did Murph say?” Rainbow asked.

Oh Rainbow, now you’re killing me. I looked back up at her thinking back to Murph’s face when he saw Russ and I together, and the awkward post-lunch lack of conversation. And then I was thinking about how he left. “He didn’t say anything. It really wasn’t a big deal.”

“I’ll bet he never saw it. Knowing Murph he wasn’t even online yet,” Stella said.

“Oh that’s true!” Rainbow said.

I wondered why these girls knew about Murph’s connectivity habits. “Well,” Stella said. “It’s always good to know who’s around to help you make your boy jealous.”

Rainbow laughed. I didn’t. Make Murph jealous? Why would I ever want to do that? And even if I did, how would I go about doing that? The idea seemed so ridiculous. The idea that Russ would linger about waiting for the moment for me to use him as a pawn in some scary game of relationship strategy was bizarre. I shook my head. I was going to leave it at that — continue looking through the bins and distract myself out of this weird conversation — but I couldn’t just let it stay like that. “I don’t think so, Stella. Today was probably the first time Russ and I ever spoke. He took that picture for his sister. That’s all.”

“Hmmm,” Stella said. “You might not see it, sweetie, but I never saw that boy move as fast as he did when he was running after you

heading back into this museum this afternoon. He thought you were in danger, and he was scared.”

My mind started to fill with re-phrasings of retorts about how Russ would have done that for any one of us in danger. He was a nice guy. That’s all it was. Then I saw a bin filled with plastic cylinders that I thought looked familiar. I walked over to get a closer look. I reached in, pulled one out and, grabbing each side of the cylinder with one hand, I bent it until I heard and felt a crack within. The fluorescent glow began at the center and, when I shook the cylinder, spread throughout. I thanked every guardian angel that ever took a shift watching my back. “These should be useful with lights out, right?”

“More glow sticks?” Stella hopped off the counter, came over to me, and helped me put all of them into my backpack. “These are perfect! As our reward for a job well done I say we all pick up a little something for our boys of the moment.”

I waited for some comment about Russ when Stella decided to change targets. “I’m sure you can find something Colin will like, Rainbow.”

Rainbow turned scarlet and picked up the banter with Stella. I didn’t want to hear her correct Stella and tell her that it was really Russ she liked. I focused on finding something for Rog, the only boy I had been planning on getting a gift for in this shop today, anyway. Super easy shopping: a package of slime. I was putting it into my backpack when I spotted a box of sketching pencils that would be perfect for Murph. I couldn’t help but think of how happy he would be if I had a chance to give them to him. Even if he didn’t like me anymore, he would like the pencils. I slipped the package in his bag.

I took an extra pen for myself and I was about to leave it at that. Then I remembered what I was going to use that pen for: my new notebook. Which led me to thinking about why I had that notebook

in the first place: Russ. I looked around quickly and told myself that if there was actually anything between me and Russ then I should be able to think of something to get him in the gift shop. I was stumped. I didn't even know Russ well enough to know what to get him as a souvenir. That settled it, right? It was pathetic, all I could think of was — I grabbed a key chain — a token of thanks for all the car rides he gave to Rog and for the notebook. That was all. I was being polite. It meant nothing more. "I'm done shopping, I'm just going to head out to the cots, okay?" I said to Stella and Rainbow who had moved to the extra careful selection of the "perfect" gift for their boy of choice. They went from one item to the next, pulling each off the counter, discussing their "meanings" and giggling. I didn't want to watch, and I didn't want to participate — especially if it turned out Rainbow was shopping for Russ.

"That was quick!" Stella said. "What'd you pick up?"

"Just something for my brother, you know —" I said with a small smile. I don't know why I didn't tell them about the other things.

"Oh, okay, you stick in the mud! I do forget how shy you are sometimes, Natalie. We will crack you out of that shell someday, I hope!" Stella was back to her sugary sweet self. It was strangely sickening even though I kind of believed she had good intentions. I forced a laugh as a sort of thank you and left.

No one had come back up to the lobby yet, and everything was still scattered all over the place — a couple of cots, the maps, Rose's "area." I decided to park myself under the dinosaur bones which sat under a huge skylight until someone came and told me to do differently. I looked around and realized that I was still expecting the lights to come on. I hadn't fully internalized that they weren't coming on, I had a thought that they were coming on a bit late today. It was maddening

every single time it happened. *The lights are gone! The power is gone, Nat! Stop expecting something different!*

I sat with that for a moment. The lights were not coming on. It was only going to get darker. I had those glow sticks, but I have tons of experience with glow sticks (Rog was kind of obsessed with them as a toddler), if I crack one now it will glow through the night and there's no way to turn it off in the day, so it will glow all the way through tomorrow and probably have nothing left for tomorrow night. So the glow sticks are great... for now. Then what? Darkness all the time? I couldn't just sit in the silence thinking about it. I opened my backpack.

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Sundown 10/6

The shadows are stretching. It will be dark soon. I fear the dinosaur will come to life if the stars don't come to light our way. I know that's a ridiculous thing to write, but this is scary. Maybe not because of an impossible threat of dinosaurs, but maybe because I don't understand how to live in this world that my teacher and some science guy seem to think might be stuck this way for a while. A world where miscommunication can lead to physical injuries, not just nasty comments. A world where, when someone walks away from you, you really don't know how you will ever connect with them again.

Chapter Seventeen

Decision Time

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Later (sun is still up) 10/6

I just came back from the bathroom and there, where the shadows are sharp, it is easy to see how much they have moved. I never thought too much about the question "What time is it?" The answer was never far from me — my phone screen, the computer, the cable box. I wonder if the clocks in our classrooms still work, or my dad's watch. Here I am forced to contemplate the actual passage of time. It's no longer just a change of numbers on a screen, now I am reminded that we are moving. That everything is changing

all

of

the

time.

Sitting here now, after seeing how far the sun has moved while we've been doing nothing but wait I can't help but think —

What are we waiting for?

Time waits for no one.

Oh boy... I'm pretty sure that's something my mother told me.

“I knew it.” I didn’t notice Russ arrive since his shadow had been swallowed by the dim all around me. When I looked up I realized I was sitting in what might have been the last remnants of light in the room. “The notebook was a good idea?” he asked, taking a seat next to me.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve been meaning to thank you.” I remembered the key chain and started feeling around on the floor to find where I put it. I just wanted to give it to him and be done with it. The more I sat with Russ and talked with him, the more my feelings started running to the surface. “I got you something, too.”

“Me?” Russ said. “Natalie Turner got something for Russ Sandberg?”

Abh! Why is he saying our names together like that? I couldn’t find the key chain. My heart was beating so hard. Why was I freaking out about not finding this thing? I could go right back to the gift shop and grab another one — I had already become a criminal over this stupidity once! I stood up. “Where is it?” I hissed.

Russ, still sitting, grabbed my forearm. He was so damn tall he could reach me easily. “Don’t worry about it. It’s the thought that counts, right? And now I know you thought about me.”

Oh my God! It was turning into too much. *Now he knows I was thinking about him! That is a problem! What happens if Rainbow finds out I was thinking about him?*

My mental rant, transformed into an audible one that I was incapable of stopping. “It’s not that. It’s just that I wanted to thank you. For the notebook. Because, you know, that was a really big deal, and I am insanely grateful to you for it. I was sort of losing it, and writing

helps me. It's what I do, you know, so I was looking at Murph's stuff—
"

"Oh," Russ said. "Yeah. I get it."

"What?" I didn't understand what he got. Because it didn't sound like he understood that he saved me in my moment of need. It sounded like the opposite of that. Like I said something wrong. Again. *Abb!* "No. Listen. I was looking for something to write with, but then I didn't have to because you brought me this notebook."

"Yeah so I guess it was good that you didn't have to mess with Murph's stuff and all that. For when you see him again... I'm happy I could help, you know. I should—" He was starting to get up. "Ow! What the—" Russ grabbed something off the floor and handed it to me. "Is this what you were looking for?"

I grabbed the museum key chain. It was a tiny metallic replica of the bones we were currently beneath and a hatching egg at its feet. I couldn't read what it said, but I'm sure it had something to do with one of the museum's mottos about studying life from birth to death and beyond. I only kind of looked at it when I grabbed it. "Yeah," I said. "It's stupid, I know. I didn't know what you would like, but I wanted to thank you. And then I thought about how you drive Rog home all the time, so the key chain, and —"

He grabbed it back. "And the egg!" He laughed. "It's like our dragon egg!"

I hadn't thought of that.

I also didn't know we were calling it "our" dragon egg.

I blushed. Thank God it was too dark for him to notice.

"This is awesome!" he said. "I'm putting this on my keys right now!" He dug into his pocket, pulled out his key chain and sat back down to fiddle with it. "You can sit now," he said.

Could I?

I looked down at him and could not ignore all the familiar feelings welling up in me. I was crushing — hard — on this guy and I had no idea how Rainbow really felt about him. I felt like sitting down would be a really bad idea.

“But where’s everyone else?” I asked. “Maybe we should —”

“There you are!” Rainbow’s voice echoed from across the room. “Stella wants to give everyone the gift shop tour!”

“I guess I should check it out!” Russ said, bouncing to his feet. Rainbow led the way.

It was hard to ignore how fast Russ moved once Rainbow showed up.

I took my time getting all my and Murph’s stuff together.

“Nat, can we sit a minute?” Brenda asked, walking into the room. She looked defeated. “How late do you think it is?”

“Well, we’re kind of losing the light,” I said, pointing to the skylight above. “So that can’t be good.”

“When do you think we’ll be leaving?” She sat down next to me putting her legs out in front of her making a triangle with the floor and leaning her head on her knees.

“What’s the word with the downstairs group?” I asked. “I kind of left before anything was decided.”

Brenda laughed. “Don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything. Nothing was decided. When Rainbow left it kind of shook everyone up. Or maybe that wasn’t Rainbow. Maybe it was Rose.” She shook her head. “Whatever. It’s just that you left after that, then Stella, and then Russ. Everyone else just went back to eating. Quietly.”

“Yeah. Russ was just with me.” Then I remembered I was talking to one of Murph’s people. “I mean, he’s with Rainbow now, but I saw him. He was probably looking for her.”

Brenda turned her head toward me, still leaning on her knees. “I don’t know. I thought he left.”

“What do you mean?” I asked more excitedly than I intended. “Did he say he was leaving?”

Brenda sat up. “Whoa. No. He didn’t say anything, but neither did you, or Stella, or that fucking idiot Murph! It’s obviously not safe to assume anything, is it?”

“Oh Brenda...”

“Did he say something to you, Nat?” Brenda asked in a whisper. “I know we’re the same age and stuff, but I’ve begun to think of Matty as something like a little cousin, you know?”

I put everything on the ground next to me and reached over to hug her. Here I was asking about another boy when Brenda saw me as her only link to someone she was so close to, she had begun to think of him as family. I was so mad at Murph that I never even thought twice about how I should be worried about him. Here was Brenda, quietly carrying this worry saying nothing to anyone. I thought about how I would feel if Rog suddenly disappeared without saying anything to me after spending the day with some girl — I’d be on that little girl like white on rice! I’d have her in some sort of inquisition. I know Brenda and Murph didn’t have exactly the same relationship as Rog and I, but — man — I had to respect her composure now that I realized her worry. “Brenda, I’m so sorry. He didn’t say anything to me. You could’ve asked me right away.”

“I can’t decide if I’m worried or mad, you know?”

“I get it,” I said. “But, Brenda, can I be honest with you?”

“You’re mad,” Brenda said. “I get it. You guys didn’t even get the chance to know each other well. It’s kind of like the idiot decided to stand you up in the middle of a first date.” She rolled her eyes and laughed one of those “I can’t believe this guy” laughs. “Please

know that I can't wait to rip him a new one over that stupid move. I don't care what his stupid ass excuse is — leaving you like that was disrespectful, his and Tracie's mamas will be flamin' mad when they find out." Brenda's face was getting flushed. I worried she was about to cry.

"It's okay..." I was trying to save her from her emotions, but, when I said it out loud I realized it was true. It was okay.

"No. It's not okay," Brenda put a hand on mine in a move that did feel more mature than I would be capable of. I could understand easily view her as my own older cousin. "You're okay. I get that. But that doesn't make it okay."

"Okay," I said, which made us both laugh.

"So, listen, Nat," Brenda pulled her legs into a cross-legged position and turned to face me. "Can I do you a favor by you doing me a favor?"

And two points to Brenda for the weirdest question ever. "Wha-at?" I asked, completely befuddled.

"I want to help you, but I want you to know that the thing I'm offering is really for me too."

"Uh... alright?"

"Can I have Murph's bag?" Brenda looked straight in my eyes like she was asking for the most important thing in the world. It was an easy yes for me, but the way she asked it made me sit with that decision more deeply. What did it mean, really, to say yes? Was it just lightening my load, and adding a burden to Brenda, or was it more? What would everyone else think when they saw Brenda with Murph's bag? What would they think when they saw me without it?

I couldn't answer any of the questions my mind pummeled me with, which left me speechless. I nodded to Brenda and slid the bag over to her. She nodded and slid her arm under the strap. "Thanks, Nat," she said.

Brenda only sat for a minute more before we decided to get Stella, Rainbow, and Russ in an effort to get everyone back together to make a real decision. But Russ was gone and the girls were headed back down to the cafeteria.

“He left,” Rainbow said with a shrug.

I couldn’t stop my eyes from widening. “He left?” I felt sick. “Alone?” Why would he go out there? Why would he go without us? Whatever happened to us sticking together?

Stella laughed. “Not the museum, silly, he left the shop.”

“He said he wanted to clear his head or something,” Rainbow said.

“He’s probably taking a cigarette break,” Stella added, which was a valid point. “But it should not be overlooked that he felt the need to leave the moment he realized you hadn’t followed along.”

“Oh.” My eyes darted toward Brenda. What would she think? “Um. I guess I’ll try to find Russ?” I said unable to avoid the sense that I was asking permission.

“We could go all together,” Brenda offered, hiking the strap of Murph’s bag up higher on her shoulder. She was looking for that groove where it fit and sat comfortably. I think Murph had carved a groove out on his shoulder because I could never find a good spot that didn’t require shifting every couple of seconds.

“This would be faster, though,” I said, and I wondered why it felt so important to do this on my own.

“Would it?” Rainbow asked, and I realized she probably wanted to find him herself and I was acting really suspicious.

Brenda shrugged. The bag flowed with her, not moving. She found that groove. “If you’re okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

“Yeah. Whatever,” Stella said, eyeing Rainbow.

“Okay... meet back in the cafeteria?” I asked turning for the door not waiting to hear Rainbow’s response.

Brenda had started browsing the shop. “Yeah, I think so. No one else down there seemed ready to make a move.”

I walked toward the stairwell, with its view of the emergency exit at the back of the museum and I wondered if Russ would have snuck out that way. He couldn't have gone out the front entrance without me noticing, so that had to be it.

Unless...

I remembered how Russ was upstairs all by himself earlier and wondered if he went back. I dug into my backpack and cracked one of the glow sticks. I knew the path was only going to get darker as I went on.

On the top floor, Astronomy Alley was just as dark as it had been when I was there before, but this time, lighting my way with the green haze of the glow stick, it seemed as though the areas beyond the glow's reach were even darker than what I remembered. I could smell the windex that must have been used to clean all of the screens that should have been lighting my way. I could see Dr. Davies' office at the end of the hallway long before I reached it. The door was ajar revealing a streak of what little light was left from the waning sunlight.

When I pushed the door open I saw that it was much brighter than what I had expected. There was an entire wall of windows and, unlike the dark blue and black hallway and exhibits I had just passed, the walls were painted white and the floor was covered in a light gray tile. There were two computer desks at opposite ends of the room and, in the middle of the room, a large table with loads of paper strewn across the top. Hovering over the papers, with his back to me, was Russ.

“A little light reading before we head out of here?” I asked.

Russ flinched before turning around when he heard my voice. “Oh hey Natalie,” he said. “I had been looking at this stuff before. I was using it to calm down or something, but it was really interesting. I

thought I'd just try to clear my head again before we go back out there." He pointed toward the window and I couldn't decide whether or not I wanted to see what was going on down there.

"We were just going back downstairs to see what was going on with everyone," I said, suddenly feeling stupid that I took it upon myself to come find Russ.

"We?" he asked, looking over my shoulder.

"Well... yeah... me and the girls. Brenda said no one's making a decision. She came to talk to me about Murph, you know?" I don't know why I said that. I could see Russ's expression change, and I felt like an idiot. Why did I come to find Russ by myself? I started rambling then. "I was just — I mean, I just, you know, I thought someone should come get you too." I grabbed both straps of my backpack and stared at the floor. "But listen, you don't have to — if you don't feel like it — you don't have to come down, of course. I mean, I wasn't there — so I don't even know if everyone is still in the cafeteria, but I—"

"Nat?" Russ said with a smile, saving me from my rambling. "Thanks. I'll come down in a couple of minutes."

"Okay, sure," I said. I lingered in the doorway for a minute, wishing there was some way I could shake the quiet sadness that hung over Russ. He was so happy when I gave him that silly key chain, I wished I could bring him back to that moment. But then Rainbow came, and then Brenda. Brenda helped me more than I realized, handing her Murph's bag lifted an enormous weight off of my shoulders, both literally and emotionally. I wish there was something I could do for Russ to do the same, but I guess that was Rainbow's job.

I heard the debate before I was even present for it. Voices carried through the dark stairwell as if the secret to sound travel was wrapped up in how much light stood in its way.

“I don’t think it is safe out there,” Brenda said.

“And how sure are you that it’s safe in here?” Stella asked.

“I know my home is safe,” Rainbow said. “I just want to go home.”

“It’s getting dark pretty quick,” Terrell said. “I’m not sure we want to be out when the sun goes down.”

“I’m not afraid of sundown,” Dustin said.

“Neither am I,” Terrell said. “Not normally, but sundown without any normal street lights? If we can’t make it home before then, I think staying might be safer than going.”

“At this rate I don’t think we’re making it,” Daria said.

“Not with me,” Rose said as I finally made it into the cafeteria. She looked paler than before, and tired. In fact, looking around the room, I can’t say that anyone looked good. I had never seen any of my classmates in these states — tired, sick, rundown, disheveled. There wasn’t one person in that room that couldn’t benefit from some rest, me included. The question I was asking myself was whether or not I was willing to put off that need for just a couple more hours so that I could have that rest at home.

It was Russ who delivered the last convincing argument.

Well, it was Russ and the gunshots.

The thing is, we heard the gunshots, we just didn’t know we did until Russ came downstairs. The whole time we had been in the museum there had been small reminders of life outside, not much, but little things — some horns beeping, shouts, dogs barking — but nothing big enough to draw our attention away from our inside world. New York City, whether you are in Manhattan or Staten Island, is not

a quiet place, there is always a hum. So when we heard a barrage of muffled crackles and pops there was nothing alarming in it. Nothing.

I thought it was firecrackers — a typical diversion in the streets for those brave enough to be civilly disobedient. It was one of those laws everyone broke at some point — even my dad bought us a pack of fireworks for one fourth of July. Rog and I were the king and queen of the neighborhood that summer. So that background noise was filed in my brain as some local family simply trying to bring a little excitement on what had to be an incredibly boring day for anyone who was already in their home and just waiting for the world to crank back into normalcy.

Then Russ came running into the cafeteria looking even more upset than when I left him. “They’re shooting!” He pointed out the window to the park view where there was grass, trees and a setting sun. But Russ’s view from Dr. Davies’s office was of the opposite side of the building. He had a view of the street. “It was like a gang or something. They were breaking into all of the cars,” Russ said. Then looking around to each of us, with panic in his eyes, he continued, “No. I mean it. Every single car on the street, one by one, they’d smash, rob and move on. When they reached some cops up near us guns were drawn on both sides.” Russ shook his head. “It was fucking horrible. I don’t know why I watched the whole thing. It could have been some Tarantino movie for all the violence out there, but it wasn’t guys. That’s no movie. That’s our reality!” He finished shouting, now pointing out in the direction of the street, even though it wasn’t visible at all from where we were. As he did so, more gunshots could be heard. We all jumped.

“I think it’s time we make sure all the doors are locked,” Stella said. No one else said a thing.



Written in Natalie's Notebook

Sun is touching the trees 10/6

I am safe right now. Maybe if I knew, for certain, that my family was too, that could be enough. What if I could talk to them right now? What if mom could tell me, "We're fine, don't worry about us. We'll see you tomorrow!" Would that be enough for me to feel comfortable staying here? Stella's ready to go — I mean everyone is — even after everything we've been through tells us that leaving is dangerous. What drives us? Family, familiarity, community? I'll say this — I am so happy that I am here with the rest of my class. I think I would be terrified if I had to make these decisions on my own. I don't know if leaving is the right thing, but I will choose this group over the certain safety of this building if it means being all alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Secrets

The doors to the museum were all locked, but, since they were glass we figured a little reinforcement wouldn't hurt. After we helped push Val's desk up against the front lobby door, Rainbow grabbed my arm and dragged me back to the main room with the cots. "We need to talk." Her eyes were all aglow like we were in the middle of the most exciting, most fun event she had ever experienced. The gunshots had stopped and even the normal noises outside had slowed. It was starting to feel safe again, so some students went on a gift shop tour, while others milled around the room finding a place to settle in.

Stella was the self-appointed gift shop tour guide and regulator. She kept reminding everyone that we were not looters — there should be no taking things without rhyme, reason, or intent to pay back. "Check the prices!" she kept calling out over the mumbling "shoppers." I think Stella had started a tally of what everyone took while she stood behind the register. What she planned to do with that tally, I didn't know.

"Maybe we should help Stella," I offered. I wasn't sure what Rainbow had seen — or thought she had seen between Russ and I — and to be honest I was terrified about what we needed to talk about. She pulled me over to two cots on the end of the row of cots set up for the

night. Then she turned to the group and yelled, “Nat and I are taking these two.”

“We are?” I asked.

“We are,” she said with a nod. Then she folded one foot under her on the cot as she sat down with a bounce. “Now, sit down.”

If it weren’t for the giant dinosaur, and the weird pillows, and the exhibits, and the —wait, let me start that again — if it weren’t for everything else in my surroundings telling me so, I’d think Rainbow and I were having some kind of teen TV show sleepover. Part of me was expecting nail polish to come out and matching mani-pedis to ensue. I laughed nervously. I wanted this to be fun, but girls scared the hell out of me. They can be super sugar sweet one second, and then your worst nightmare the next. I didn’t know Rainbow well enough to know if our current status was edging closer to friends or frenemies. “Okay. I’ll sit.” I put my bags down next to the head of my cot and sat down facing Rainbow, “What’s up?” I tried to keep it light. Like everything was fine. Because everything was fine, right?

“No, no, no! You don’t ask me what’s up — I ask you what’s up?” She leaned forward and bit her bottom lip. I caught a whiff of some fading strawberry scent. Was it a body spray? A shampoo? I didn’t know, but it added to the cuteness of Rainbow. I didn’t know her well, but I wanted to. I wanted this all to be okay, and normal, and friendship stuff. I wanted Rainbow not to be mad at me, or suspicious of me. I wanted to be Rainbow’s friend. Oh. Wow. That was the kicker. I don’t think I ever wanted to be someone’s friend before. Amy and I had been friends since, well, forever. It was like we were friends before I even had conscious thought, so it just was. Always. But as I sat there looking at Rainbow’s eager smile, it occurred to me that all of my nervousness surrounding her and Russ wasn’t just about how I felt about him, but also how I felt about her. I wanted to be her friend.

I mean, here we were, in this terrible situation and she was having fun. I didn't know what motivated it yet, but if Rainbow held the tickets to the fun train, I wanted one. I decided to take a leap of faith.

I leaned in and matched her smile. "What's up with what?"

She rolled back and groaned playfully. "Oh my god, Nat. Really? Don't tell me you don't see it! Are you one of those girls who walks through this world clueless to the natures of the humans surrounding them?"

Ummm.... Yes? Rainbow was still full of a playful nature, but her question took me out of the mood like a slap to the face. I'm pretty sure she nailed it. I'm a bit clueless to it all. Was she laughing because I let my guard down? Was she telling me how clueless I was about how much she hated me?

She continued. "I mean how could the brilliant mind behind *Talia's Tales* —"

"I don't know about 'brilliant,'" I said. I wasn't about to fall into a trap.

She stopped, tilted her head and put her hands on her hips. "Don't interrupt my outburst." Then she stuck out her tongue. Like we were ten. Oh my god this girl was either psycho, or hilarious. "I was just wondering how the brilliant mind behind *Talia's Tales* — the girl who connects to us all with her fanfic, her poetry, her nuanced reflections upon her day to day — how that same girl could be so disconnected from what was going on right in front of her."

"Do you mean the fact that you are completely out of your mind?" I asked in jest trying to ramp myself back up into this play inside of our chaos. "Nope. I haven't missed that at all."

Rainbow leaned in and whispered, looking somewhere over my shoulder. "I mean Russ. What's up with Russ being so into you?"

I turned quickly to see if anyone was near enough to hear Rainbow. Everyone was in their own conversations, mostly across the room. I accidentally locked eyes with Russ for a moment who — even though he was talking with Colin — did one of those head bob things boys do when they are trying to say hello without saying a word. This, of course, led to Rainbow playfully punching me in the back of my arm and hissing, “You see?”

I saw. But what did I see? Russ said hi. Big deal. I bet if I looked all around the room any one of my other classmates would do the same. I tried it, but no one else was looking my way. It was just a coincidence — Russ happened to be looking my way at the time that I turned. He was probably just looking at Rainbow, anyway. I looked back at him and Colin and we met eyes again. Instead of the nod, he pantomimed either “What is it?” or “Do you need me?” or “Are you looking for me?” Something in that horrifying neighborhood of, “I will stop my conversation across the room with Colin and come over to you and Rainbow to join in the chat you gals are having because you keep looking at me giving me the clear signal that you would like me to do so.” I shook my head and waved my hand in order to send a very clear message of, “Stay the hell away from what’s happening over here because I don’t know what is happening over here.”

By the time I turned back to Rainbow, I know I was blushing. I just hope I turned in time so Russ didn’t see it. “Soooooo?” Rainbow asked. “Do you see what I’m talking about?”

I shrugged. “He knows my little brother,” I said.

“Do you like him?” Rainbow asked.

I stared at Rainbow. I never talked to anyone — I mean anyone — about this stuff except for Amy. Even with Amy it was often like pulling teeth. My thing with boys — mostly Murph, I guess if I’m being honest — is secret crushes. Did I like Russ? The fact was, I was

pretty sure I was still in the secret phase of my crushing. I barely even had the conversation with myself about it, and now Rainbow wants me to tell her how I feel! Just like that? Like it's no big deal to say these things out loud?

"He does have that messy-cute thing going for him. Kind of like boy-next door. I'm not sure he'd get a part in *Barista Boys*, but I think he might qualify for a *Wolf Nights* casting call. I'm still undecided on the whole smoking thing. Colin smokes too, and I always wonder if that's a deal breaker for me—"

"Wait. Do you like Colin?" Bingo. Distraction. Stella mentioned him earlier, and now this? I heard it, I leaped on it and we were off of me!

Rainbow blushed a little. With her pale, freckled skin I was expecting more redness, but maybe she had gotten all of that under control somehow. Her eyes darted back up over my shoulder and this time I imagined she was looking at Colin. Then she looked back down and hopped over to sit on my cot next to me. "Scooch over," she said. I did and we both leaned forward as if shielding our secrets with our bodies was a thing. "Okay, Nat. Here's the thing. I feel like I can talk to you, so I am going to confess something to you that I recently discovered. First of all, I don't even want to say this, but I think my mom is right. I think I might be a bit boy-crazy. Secondly, if I am being honest with you, yes, I think the one boy that can cure me of the disease is Colin." She dropped her head in her hands in some sort of shame and I could see the redness I expected before consuming her ears. Now I started legitimately laughing out loud, really maybe too loud, at Rainbow's reaction. Was she going to be embarrassed now? She started this! She turned to look at me, still leaning on her hands, looking up to me in disbelief. "Why is that so funny to you? I'm like baring my soul to you?"

I couldn't help myself, but that made me laugh even more! On that laugh the worries danced out of me. As I sat there and thought about Rainbow and Colin it hit me — Colin was always there when I saw Rainbow talking with Russ! It wasn't Russ, it was Colin all along. I started laughing at myself amid it all, which made it look like I was really losing it. That led to Rainbow laughing along with me. "Why are we laughing? Stop!" She playfully punched me in the arm. "What is wrong with you?"

I caught my breath and tried to whisper, "You are hilarious."

"Me?"

"Yes you! You are turning all shades of red the second I ask you about Colin, but you wanted me to just — I don't know what — explain Russ without a second thought?"

"I can explain myself, thank you very much." It was Russ, of course. Right behind me, of course. Why did we sit with our backs to everyone? "What, pray tell, needs explaining?" He playfully tugged on a lock of my hair like he was using it to ring a bell. I could not turn to look at him. I knew he was there. He knew I knew he was there. That was going to have to be enough. I wanted to vomit. I stared straight into Rainbow's soul attempting to burn it with my thoughts for putting me in this horrible situation. She looked back, at first a bit shocked, and then the laughter returned, this time she was the loud one. And I couldn't help but join her.

"I think you broke them, dude," Colin said, patting Rainbow gently on the head. I began to rock in even further hysterics.

"You don't have any sisters, do you? This is possibly the most normal state of girls I know. I don't know what I did — I never really do — but I might have fixed them!" He knelt down behind my cot between Rainbow and I and put a hand on each of our shoulders poking his head between us. "You're welcome, ladies. Enjoy!" Then he tapped

where his hand was, got up and said, “We should leave them to it, Col. Please lead the way to Stella’s stash.”

By the time they walked away Rainbow and I both had tears in our eyes and smiles that might’ve been bright enough to light our way home. I don’t know if it was the conversation, the good, warm feeling of laughter shaking my bones, or just an amplification of all little nice things in this environment of let downs all around, but my secret was starting to feel like good news that should be shared. I really liked Russ being around, and when he knelt down behind us with his arm around me, just like it must have been around Rainbow too, I wanted to sink into it. I leaned over to Rainbow, cupping my hands around my mouth and her ear and I whispered — the way secrets are supposed to be passed, “I think I do like Russ.”

“I knew it!” she sat back, smiling. “Have you written anything about him yet?”

Rainbow and I talked for some time after the boys left us. I explained to her that I don’t really write on demand like it seemed she wanted me to do. I told her all about how I’ve been obsessed with Murph forever and didn’t even notice Russ in any real way until all this happened. I told her all about how my writing got started, with Amy encouraging me and posting my stuff before I ever thought about going online.

“Amy was pretty awesome,” Rainbow remembered. “I had a bunch of classes with her and we joked around a lot.” I could totally buy that. Rainbow was cool people. Amy would have identified that right away. “I was sorry she had to leave.”

“Me too,” I said, trying to tamp down the sadness that welled up at the mention of it. Part of me forgot that Amy wasn’t going to be as easy to reconnect with as my family. I was starting to believe that getting back home would be the answer to all of my problems, but if the

power didn't come back, if the Internet, or wifi, or phone lines didn't return, how was I going to reconnect with Amy? We were having a hard enough time traveling just a couple of miles to get home, how would I ever manage to bridge the distance between Amy and I who were nearly 80 miles apart?

"Listen, Nat," Rainbow said, obviously reading my mood shift. "This thing won't last forever. I just know it. I'm sure you'll be able to see Amy long before you and Russ have your first kid."

And that's when I threw a plastic pillow at her. She ran away saying that she had to go pee.

I laughed, looked around and realized everyone in the group must have joined Russ and Colin back at the gift shop. I was about to get up myself, but realized I was alone and decided, instead, to take out my notebook.

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Sun is setting 10/6

Right in front of me

Under my nose

Someone I never looked twice at

Someone whose shoulder I want to lean on

Right in front of me

Always a smiling face

In good times and bad

Never fails to find the silver lining

Best friends are built of such stock

Opened my heart to possibility

When all I wanted to do was unplug.

Chapter Nineteen

Ribbons of Light

Written in Natalie's Notebook

The sun's behind the trees 10/6

Am I afraid of the dark? As the sun is ducking out for the day and I realize there are not going to be any amber street lights to come on to fill the void, I have to ask myself: have I ever even experienced the real dark? The nights following Hurricane Imelda are probably the closest I ever got, but — even then — I had the safety harness of working flashlights. Does that still apply here?

I wait for the stars. I wonder if they'll be bright enough to melt my fears.

As uncomfortable as I was on my cot, feet away from the dinosaur, I couldn't be more grateful for the decision to stay. I wanted to get home — that wasn't even a question — but I was emotionally and psychologically drained. I needed to replenish before facing a world where I had no choice but to interact, face to face, with people in order to function. I wanted to rest before having to face that reality, but I was restless. It couldn't have been later than nine

o'clock, but my restless body and legs made it feel like it was three in the morning. It had been a long day.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I got up to go to the bathroom. I announced it to the group, like we agreed we would do, "Turner, going to the bathroom." I focused on the dim light coming out of a doorway on the far end of the room. We had set up candles Russ found in Dr. Davies' office in each of the bathrooms by the mirrors so they would stay lit in the night. My mom always did that at home when there was a blackout, so I suggested it. It helped on many levels — we didn't have to activate a glow stick for the walk there and we didn't have to worry about putting our hands in gross places in the bathroom in an attempt to feel our way around.

"I'm coming with you," Rainbow whispered right before grabbing my hand. Thank goodness she said something, because I think I would have screamed loud enough to wake the Shadow-saurus if she hadn't.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep here," Rainbow said once we were in the bathroom.

"I know," I said, "it's really weird."

"Yeah, plus I can't remember the last time I went to bed without any music playing."

I laughed, "I know, right? It's like it's too quiet to sleep."

"Exactly!" she said, turning away from her dim reflection. "I bet you everyone else is going crazy out there, too."

"Let's go find out," I suggested, partially because I didn't want people thinking I was in the bathroom so long.

As we shuffled back to our spots, Rainbow started talking first, "Hey — is anyone else wide awake?" her normally volumed voice sounded like it was amplified by the silent darkness.

The monotone, almost universal, response would be comedic if it wasn't so pathetic.

“I don’t even think my mom’s done cooking dinner at this time normally,” Russ said. “What is it? Seven o’clock?”

“Gotta be almost nine,” Brenda said.

Princess added, “Should be watching *Barista Boys* reruns right now on TNT, right Turner?”

I was gingerly trying to make my way to the spot where I had my sweatshirt wrapped around my backpack without stepping on anyone when I heard my name, “What? Oh yeah! I think they were going to show ‘Columbian Roast’ tonight!”

“Is that the one with Diego Franco in it?” Rainbow said.

I nodded, then realized no one could see me and said, “Uh-huh!”

Colin, from across the room, let out a mocking squeal, “Oh—Em—Gee! Russ! It’s Diego’s episode! Isn’t he so dreamy?”

Russ laughed and added, “It’s his eyes — meaning his guy-liner and mascara. I swear the girls like him for all of the makeup advice he can give.”

I knew exactly where he was laying, so I took a chance, I took my sock off and threw it at him. It’s a classic move between me, Rog, and Amy from sleepovers at my house.

“What the --?” I hit him.

“What’s the matter?” I asked playfully.

“Is this yours, Natalie?” he called in the darkness, but from the echo of his voice I could tell he was talking in the wrong direction.

“What was it?” Rainbow whispered to me.

“And if it was?” I asked aloud to Russ, not wanting to end our conversation.

“My sock,” I whispered to Rainbow. She laughed and then I heard her shuffling around.

“What--?” Colin called, “Is this... a... sock?”

Rainbow and I started laughing hysterically. We almost couldn't hear Russ's, "Oh now this is WAR!" retort before I got hit in the head with something soft, warm and not the most pleasant smelling.

"Ew! Gross!" I said.

"Oh yeah, like your sock is all sunshine and roses over here!" I could hear his amusement in his voice.

"This is insane," I heard Colin say to Russ, "whose sock is this?!"

"You don't recognize my distinct aroma?" Rainbow said playfully.

"Rain?" Colin's surprise was tinted with pleasure. "Really?" He laughed. "Okay, here you go!"

"Bwleck!" Rainbow said, "Right in my mouth, you maniac!"

"I'm the maniac?" he said through his laughter. "Who started this?"

"Would you rather I throw my shoe?" Rainbow said.

From out of the ether came Rose's groggy voice, "My God! No shoes!"

Daria chimed in, "Looks like someone's feeling better."

"Not exactly. Still have major brain pain and I don't want to get hit with any random footwear while I'm imploding," she said with an edge of discontent.

"Okay. New plan," Russ announced. "You guys really think it's past nine?" Russ asked.

"It has to be," Terrell said. "It hasn't been getting this dark until about eight the last couple of weeks."

"Who else is as bored out of their minds as the sock posse?" Russ asked.

Shuffles were heard throughout the group as we all forgot about the darkness.

"Are you guys raising your hands right now?"

"Bored," Princess said.

"Double bored," Dustin said.

“Here here,” Terrell said.

And slowly, each and every one of us, agreed — we were wide awake and bored out of our minds.

“Well then,” Russ said, and it sounded like he was standing, “if I understood Dr. Davies’s notes this afternoon, I think I can show you something kind of cool.”

Then Russ and Colin crawled over to Rainbow and I for the sock exchange. Russ sat up against me as we put our socks and shoes back on. I felt his warmth all the way up my back and was happy to have an excuse to be next to him again.

Russ used one glow stick to lead the group through the museum. We held hands so we could stick together without using extra lights. He didn’t tell us where we were going, except to say it was “cool.” Daria stayed behind with Rose, but everyone else went along. After almost ten minutes of careful, slow walking Russ opened a door revealing the outside world.

I caught my breath and involuntarily squeezed both Russ and Rainbow’s hands. I hadn’t been outside since all of the horrors — multiple people getting injured, losing people, and being struck dumb by fear. Add to that, my last report on the outside world was a shootout and I wasn’t sure I was ready to breathe this fresh air. Our line staggered to a stop. Dustin called out, “Russ, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“We’re not going far, and we don’t have to stay long,” he said as he stepped out the door and became illuminated by the starlight.

Stella tried to whisper so only Dustin could hear, but in this night’s silence, there were no secrets, “He’s right, Dustin. Come on.” It was enough to move our line forward again.

Though the smell of the grass and the sounds of the swirling fallen leaves were all invigorating, we knew exactly where to look when we

got outside based upon the reactions in front of us. The view was up. While the museum was a dark, lightless tomb, right outside the door was a light show the likes of which I had never seen — not even during Hurricane Imelda or by Amy's new house where there were no streetlights. There was no moon, just a web of light flecks that I never knew existed. The stars above varied in size, brightness, color and twinkle. I didn't know where to look first, I didn't know how to focus, and yet I couldn't look away. I had seen stars described as "brilliant" before and while I always thought the word had something to do with intelligence, the scene before me described its meaning at once. That sky was brilliant. Each individual star reached across the universe and expressed itself in light across time for my eyes to capture. I couldn't stop the tears in my eyes as it occurred to me that I was standing in the middle of the brightest city on the east coast, and I had finally met its match.

I could now understand how the few stars above that I saw all year round were able to fight the good fight to be seen. They needed us to know that they were up there. They needed to tell the tale of the others they lived with. They constantly begged for us to see all of the brilliance they bore. I felt Russ's hand close tight around mine as I heard him whisper, "Amazing..." He was staring up, smiling, when he said, "Dr. Davies was trying to describe this to me. I had interrupted a conversation between him and Mrs. K. I could tell he loved this stuff, and you know her. But now I can see it!" Russ was so right. In this moment it was easy to see how this could turn into someone's life passion. How many questions arise in this moment — how can we be alone when there is so much up there? How many of those stars are still shining and how many are just a memory? We all stood silently for what felt like a long while.

When Russ continued speaking, he did so softly, as if we were in a library, “If Dr. Davies was right, this is just the beginning. This isn’t even what I was planning to show you,” he said, not looking away from the sky, “soon, I think, we are going to see something extremely badass.”

No one said anything, as if what he just said was enough in and of itself. I didn’t want to sound like a dumbass, but I also wanted to know what he was talking about. So, after checking the entire group to see if anyone else was going to ask a question I went for it, “Um... Russ? What are we going to see?”

“Dr. Davies was thinking that since the effects of the solar storm hit so early, the aurorae may arrive early, too. He was looking forward to it. He said he was wishing someone would convince the mayor to declare a “lights out hour” for the city so everyone could appreciate it!” Russ laughed. “Honestly, I think he was trying to impress Mrs. K with all this stuff. She gobbled it all up. They were cute. They were talking about it before we lost the power. It was just because of that news she was obsessing over all morning. He knew, of course, what she was talking about. They said this’ll be the first time in a little over two centuries that the aurorae will be as clear as they will tonight here in New York.”

“Wait. Are you talking about the aurora boreanz you can only see at the north pole, or something?” Colin asked.

Russ shook his head and laughed. “Dude. It’s aurora borealis, not boreanz,” he said. “But yes. Exactly like that. Dr. Davies said that when the solar flares are strong enough they can be seen here, but it’s always too bright. Tonight’s the perfect mixture: strongest solar flares he’s ever seen, and now — his wish was granted — no light anywhere to stand in their way!”

“Wait a second!” Stella waved to Russ. “The sun has done this before?”

“Oh yeah! He was telling me this kind of stuff happens on the sun all the time. It’s usually much smaller, but he said we’re in some sort of — crap, what the hell was it? I think he said a ‘solar maximum’ or something. Whatever it was called it’s basically when the solar storms become stronger.” Russ looked down, and then back at Stella. “I can’t believe how much of this stuff I actually remembered from that talk we had!” He shook his head. He looked back up at the sky and smiled. He said, “Guys, I know it’s been a shitty day, but this,” he extended his two arms above his head, “almost makes it all worth it, doesn’t it?”

I remembered thinking exactly the same thing sitting in my backyard with Amy and Rog during our Imelda blackout. I had no idea what would come next, that Amy would have to leave, I just knew that moment was awesome. Amy had agreed, too. We sat outside for hours, even as it got cold, and looked up. We joked around about how much Mrs. Krimble would gush over it, and we were right, when we finally got back to school, it was one of the first things she talked about. She started naming the stars we normally never get to see and danced around her pull down nighttime sky map as she pointed them out. She was so confused by our lackluster response to the lesson, but, inside, I knew what she was feeling. I could see it on Russ’ face now. Then it occurred to me. “I hope Mrs. Krimble is seeing this,” I said.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Rainbow said. “She loves this stuff. Daria interviewed her after the Hurricane for her vlog — did you guys see that one? It was supposed to be an episode about the storm and Mrs. Krimble couldn’t stop talking about the stars.”

“Oh god!” Russ said, “Remember when we came back — she was out of her mind!”

Dustin said, “She’s always out of her mind!” Resulting in Stella elbowing him in the gut.

“Come on, Stell, you know what I mean. She’s crazy in a good way.”

“Who’s crazy in a good way?” It was Daria, pushing Rose in her wheelchair through the door.

I jumped, I don’t know about anyone else.

“Mrs. K,” Rainbow said. “Remember your Imelda recap video?”

“Ha ha!” Daria said with a smile. “The stars!”

“Yeah well...” Rainbow pointed up.

Daria’s eyes were already on the sky. She was wide-eyed like a child on Christmas morning. “This is cool, Russ,” she whispered.

“Well, this isn’t exactly what I had planned. More should be coming,” Russ said.

“Can you imagine being at the top of the Empire State Building right now?” Brenda said quietly, bringing back the hushed library speak to the scene.

“Nope. All I can think of is the stairs,” said Rose.

“Ohmygod,” Princess said, “I bet some people got stuck in those elevators!”

“Ugh,” said Terrell, “I got stuck in my building during Imelda. I swore — never again — I take the stairs every single day, no matter what!”

We all broke down into separate conversations about where we were during the Hurricane, what kind of atrocities we had to deal with due to a lack of power and other harrowing stories we had heard from friends and family. Of course, I shared Amy’s tale, and while we had all been in school together for three years, I was surprised by how many people didn’t know how bad it got for Amy. She wasn’t alone, though, and neither was I. I found out Rose’s cousin — who she deemed her best friend for life — also had to leave Staten Island when her house

was trashed by the floods. “There was nothing we could do...” Rose trailed off, “she even lost Rocky,” and we all stayed quiet even though I am sure I’m not the only one who didn’t know who Rocky was. The silence was broken by Daria assuring Rose that her cousin was probably better off than we were at the moment. None of us could resist laughing at that.

In the middle of the conversation I glanced over to Princess and Terrell. The two of them looked so sweet. Terrell sat down on the grass next to Princess. He pointed to the sky, leaned his head in to say something, then she smiled and pointed up in another direction, leaned in and said something else, and back and forth, back and forth, they were in their own little world and it looked, well, romantic.

My eyes are romance magnets. I guess that’s because my body isn’t. My life has been, so far, so romantically bereft. I wanted to believe that was coming to an end on this trip, but I didn’t know what kind of twist the solar storm put on that. The guy I had dreamed of being with was gone, and the guy I was with was one I never dreamed of. I looked over at Princess and wondered how long she had known she liked Terrell. Then I wondered how much that mattered.

We waited about an hour outside wrapped in conversation and awe of the sky above before the real show began. There was no real warning, but once it happened, there was no mistaking it. I think, even if we were still inside the museum we would have known that the aurorae had arrived. The sky glowed so bright it was as if the sun was rising — which, for a moment, was exactly what I thought was happening. I had only seen the sun rise two times in my life, but I remembered the painted sky from both of the events. The aurora gave the same type of glow to the sky, but once you looked up to see the source, it became clear that something entirely different was happening.

The light danced in ribbons over our heads. There were green and blue, then they turned purple and orange.

I couldn't help but think of Murph. He would be mesmerized. I could imagine him measuring the color mixtures and blends in his mind. The sky was a thing of beauty for all of us, but to Murph it would have been a thing to be captured. None of us had cameras with us anymore, so there was no fiddling to get the best shot, it was simply time to stare and store in our mind's eye. To experience the color as it washed over us and pulled the New Yorkers from their apartments. I glanced over to Brenda, she hadn't left Murph's bag in the museum like the rest of us had. It was still strapped across her body and her hand sat on the flap of the satchel, as if she, too, was thinking about what Murph could do with what was within if he could just be reunited with it.

I took a deep breath and hoped Murph was safe and had a good view wherever he was. The city wasn't scary in those hours. I could believe that Murph was safe, that Mrs. Krimble was safe, that we were safe. It was as bright as the morning sun. Behind the museum, we were in Central Park, which many people started to flock to in order to get a better view. While I'm sure it would be my instinct to do so as well, when I caught the glimpse of a tall building nearby (not necessarily a skyscraper, but taller than the trees) I was struck by another beauty. The meeting of nature and man-made reflections. The ribbons in the sky danced along the side of the building — on its windows — bringing the aurora out of the sky and down to where people could touch it. I pointed it out to Russ and he gasped.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the front of the group, "Guys! Guys," the urgency in his voice was contagious. I reached out to grab Rainbow to pull along with us. Whatever Russ wanted, I wanted too... For all of us, we needed it. "We should go to the lake!"

“I don’t know about that,” called Daria from behind. I turned to see her shaking her head and pursing her lips.

Dustin and Stella decided to stay behind with Daria and Rose, but everyone else came along for the walk. There was no need for glow sticks, candles, or lights of any kind. It was so easy to forget that it was the middle of the night. In that moment the weight of the darkness, our loss, our fears had been lifted. Not only was the sky lit up, but the crowds in the park were equivalent to that of any normal spring afternoon.

People, who had been stuck in darkness since sundown, had finally found their release.

People, who didn’t have a Russ Sanders, educated by Dr. Davies and his abandoned notebooks, with them to explain the events, walked in wonder.

People, terrorized by the absence of their tech-filled lives, or the fears it brought to life, were suddenly energized by an act of nature.

When we reached the lake’s edge, it was easy to see why this was such a magnificent idea. The aurora above us now danced below. The duality of the scene was both breath-taking and invigorating. It was difficult to find a good place to view the scene because it was obvious we weren’t the only ones with the idea. Russ grabbed my hand and pulled me toward a giant rock a few feet back from the edge of the water, and somewhere along the way I lost Rainbow. Russ climbed up, then turned around to help me climb. It was a huge boulder and the last step to get to his height was a little more than my legs could handle. Russ caught me as I wobbled and pulled me close to him. We both stopped for a moment, steadying ourselves in both physical balance as well as emotional. I was sure he could feel my heart beating out of my chest as it was pressed up against him, but all he asked was, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, “thanks.” *Breathe, Natalie, breathe*, was all I could think.

He stepped back, grabbed my hand and said, “Good, come here,” and took me to the center of the rock where the view of the sky above and water below was unobstructed by trees and, on the horizon, was another reflective building. It was brilliant.

We sat down and watched. My hand in his and nothing more for a long while. The crickets gave up their song when the light came, but some confused bird had started to sing. Everything was a bit disjointed until music started playing from the water’s edge. I wasn’t sure, at first, how that was possible, until Russ pointed out a couple of musicians with their instruments. We saw Rainbow walking up to them. She was talking to them and, before you knew it, they changed songs and Rainbow started singing along.

Her voice was beautiful. I never realized it. I’m not really one for the school plays and such, so there really wasn’t any way I could know, but wow. It transformed the moment. There was something both haunting and uplifting about Rainbow’s song. She was singing about yesterday. I think it was a Rolling Stones or Beatles song — one of those groups from England that my dad loved. I had definitely heard the song before, but sung by Rainbow in this way, at this moment, brought a beauty to it that I had never noticed before. I wished it would never end. After a couple of verses, some people in the crowd started to sing along. It was hard to believe that this was the same place that offered up such violence only hours before.

One of the things I loved about the city was the yin and the yang of it. How one scary corner could turn into an artist’s greatest inspiration. How two buildings could come crashing down, changing the whole of our country, and in that same spot, millions could be inspired to help the helpless. You have to be ready to roll with it here; to be

ready for the good and the bad and when the bad comes, know that only better is around the corner.

I hummed along to the melody and found myself rocking back and forth to the tune. Russ could have thought I was nuts, but I couldn't help myself.

"Perfection," Russ said, looking up at the sky.

"What?" I said.

"This moment," he said, holding my hand up as if to make sure I understood that I was counted as a part of "this moment" as he continued on, "this moment is just perfect. Thank you."

"Me?" I said, wondering how on Earth he expected me to take credit for the sun's magical light show above and below us.

"Yep. You," he said with a crooked smile, "Thank you for being here. It makes it all just perfect."

"You're welcome," I said, not knowing how else to address this gratitude.

"You mean it?" he said quickly.

I stared blankly, not aware of what needed clarity.

"Am I welcome?" he raised his eyebrows as I mulled over the true meaning of the phrase.

I looked into his eyes, whose color was painted by the reflection of the aurorae, and thought, *If anyone is welcome, it is you, Russ Sandberg*, but all I said was, "Yeah, I mean it," and leaned my head on his shoulder as Rainbow began to sing another song.

I'd say we sat on that rock about fifteen minutes before others came to join us. They didn't ruin it at all. While I enjoyed the time with Russ alone, the party atmosphere in the park was not something I wanted to miss out on either. Everyone was having a good time just talking and admiring. It didn't take long, however, for the smoke to start billowing. The smell of pot engulfed us and I knew, from personal

experience with my cousin, that once you are in the smoke, you smell like it for the rest of the night.

It didn't surprise me that the sky opening up into nature's lava lamp would inspire the local potheads to gather, in fact, I was kind of surprised it took so long. They were generous enough to offer to share, but I declined. Russ said no, too, but I wasn't sure if that was because I said no first. If he had wanted to smoke I wouldn't have stopped him, but it wasn't something that I ever did. I just didn't get the whole "smoking" thing — not with cigarettes or weed— that was part of the reason I always kind of dismissed Russ.

After a little while, Russ suggested that we go back down and find the group. When I stood up, I realized that I didn't actually have to take a puff of anything to get the effects. I was feeling all kinds of mellow as we made our way down the boulder. And, on the last step down, when Russ put his hands on my waist to lift me over the complicated steps and down to the ground, I wasn't sure where all the tingly feels were coming from. Was it his touch? Was it second hand smoke? Was it both? I wanted to kiss him. No, I wanted him to kiss me. I stared at him. He stared back. His eyes were as glassy as mine felt. I put my hands on his arms and said, "Thank you," never taking my eyes off of him.

For a moment we both stood there. I'll never know how long that moment lasted, but I thought I could live in it an eternity. The feeling ethereal, even though nothing happened except for the dimming. The crowd started to murmur and when we looked up we could see why, the lights weren't as dense. We pulled ourselves out of our moment and got back to the museum.

When we were all walking back into the museum, Daria took the lead, rolling Rose's wheelchair ahead of the rest of the group. She started to yell out, "Dustin and Stella! We're back! Get dressed!"

With that I couldn't help but laugh. Stella? Dustin? There is no way I could imagine Stella going that far with anyone anywhere, but Dustin was especially curious. She was just too good. He was such a troublemaker. That's when I heard her squeal. She was caught and she knew it. I gasped at the sound. Everything I knew about Stella just unfurled in front of me. I thought of her goodie-goodie attitude in class, about her prim and proper outfits and her perfect attendance. I was already shocked to see her sidled up against Dustin on our way into the city this afternoon, but to be caught with her pants down — as they say — (maybe even literally) with him is something else entirely.

By the time we all reached the cots, Stella was standing up as if she were a paid museum greeter, while Dustin laid in his squeaking cot somewhere off in the darkened distance.

Whatever Stella and Dustin were up to, Stella believed it was no good. I'm normally not one for gossip, or any of the juicy details, but this was just too good to pass up.

It was nice to find out that I was not alone in my curiosity. As soon everyone settled back into their cots in the darkness, we lunged on Stella. The sleeping arrangements had worked their way out in a middle school dance sort of way — the girl cots were all in one bundle, and the boys on the other side of the room. I don't think anyone did this intentionally, but when it came time to find out what had just gone on with Stella, I was overjoyed we had a girl's section to gossip away in. Of course, Stella tried to play coy and not say anything, but Princess was having none of it.

“Gurrrl, you've got to be kiddin me right now,” she stage whispered so our little group could all hear, “we all know something went down, all we want to know is what it was. Your secret is out.”

Part of me felt bad for Stella. I imagined her face going scarlet in this inquisition, but seriously, she had made enough of us look like dolts

in class that she owed us something and, so far, this was the best we could ask for.

“Look, Stella,” I said, “I don’t want the nitty gritty details, but did you guys — uh, I don’t know — ‘go all the way?’” I didn’t know how to ask this question without offending someone.

“Oh my god NO!” Stella yelped, and then composed herself into a hush. “I’m not nuts, you know. We were just making out and stuff.”

“Stuff?” Daria pressed.

“This is awe-some,” Rainbow whispered in my ear. I had to stifle my laugh.

“Yeah...” Stella delayed, “stuff.”

“Mm-hmm,” Princess said in that knowing way. Setting the group of us into giggle fits.

I decided to let Stella off of the hook, in a manner of speaking and switch subjects for the moment. “How long have you guys been together, anyway? I had no idea until today.”

“Oh now I know you must be kidding me,” Princess said to me, “Those two have been inseparable ever since Imelda.

“What? The hurricane?” I said, wondering how the horror of my life could have set off a romantic tryst.

“You live in a bubble or something, Turner?” Rose said. “How do I know this before you?”

The rest of the girls groaned. “Here we go again. Go ahead, Stella. Tell us the romantic tale... again.”

I heard Stella take a deep breath and I imagined her adjusting her posture like she always does when she notices the attention has turned to her, “Okay, well, the hurricane was terrible, of course,” I could almost hear Stella’s smile trying to be suppressed by the magnitude of the horror of hurricane Imelda. She was obviously overjoyed by the

outcome of the event, but she didn't want to offend everyone in the telling.

"Oh gawd, Stella," Princess interrupted, "we all know that, no need to be Miss Perfect here, you can give that up forever after tonight. We know you're a bad girl." The other girls laughed.

"Shut up, Princess," Stella said, although I thought I could hear a hint of pride in her voice. "Anyway, Natalie, before we were so rudely interrupted... I was saying how terrible the hurricane was. I'm sure I don't have to tell you, since Amy's family lived on my block."

I gasped, "I didn't know that!" I don't know why I never realized that Stella and Amy lived on the same block. Which begged the question, why was Stella still here and Amy gone? How did Stella's family make it through the storm and find life on the other side?

"Well, yeah, we did. So I know Amy spent time at your house — which was incredibly nice of your family, by the way," everyone murmured consent, "but not all of us were so lucky. My mom and I ended up living at SI Prep for two weeks."

"Oh wow," I said, wishing I could go back somehow and help Stella too. Even though we weren't close, I felt guilty thinking that she had to stay in a shelter while Amy got to come to my house. My house, which, to add insult to injury, had been barely affected by the entire storm, "I'm sorry..."

"No no, don't be!" Stella's perky timbre was back. "If I wasn't there... well, then I don't know if Dusty and I would have ever gotten together! You see, after the second night of nearly losing my mind in the place, I asked my mother if I could go find Mr. Beans."

"The British comedian?" I asked.

"What?" Stella asked.

"That's Mr. Bean," Rainbow said.

"Not Mr. Bean. Mr. Beans — with an s — my cat."

“Oh my god!” I said thinking this story was getting darker by the moment.

“Yeah, well, I was pretty freaked out. He was out doing his cat-thing when the storm hit. He wasn’t in the house and never came back before we left. I had a feeling that he was okay, though. Somehow I knew it in my gut and I knew that no matter how messed up our house was, he would be coming back to us, you know?”

“I guess...” I said.

I could tell Stella was not impressed with my response, “Anyway, I just needed to go back for him and my mother was all types of freaked out. She was not about to let me go. And since I had nothing else to do in the shelter, I just bugged her about it all the time. She eventually got frustrated with me and told me to — and I quote — ‘Find something to do.’ In case you don’t know, that’s my mom’s ultimate brush off.”

“Sounds familiar,” I said. My mom wasn’t too different when she reached the end of her patience with me.

“The joke was, there wasn’t anything to do there. So I just walked away from her. I didn’t know where I was going, but then he found me --”

“Aaaaahhhh,” breathed Daria in a mocking sigh. Some of the other girls cooed as well.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, well, as I am sure you can imagine, I looked like crap. I was living in a high school, sleeping on a cot and hadn’t seen a shower in a couple of days, let alone a decent mirror. And then Dustin walks up to me and says, ‘Hey, Stella, I’ll go with you.’”

I heard Stella shift in her cot, maybe she was leaning in, or maybe she was just getting comfortable. I couldn’t tell you, with the aurorae gone, there wasn’t much to see.

“I’ve got to be honest with you, I didn’t trust him too much. I mean, it’s Dustin, you know? He’s always such a knucklehead, but he

was just so sweet. I think he was bored or something. So we snuck out of the shelter and took one of the shuttles back to my neighborhood. First of all, the sight of the devastation was terrifying. The last time I had seen it was at night, so I didn't really see it, you know? So, I couldn't help myself, I just started crying hysterically, and you know what he did?" She didn't wait for me to respond, "Natalie, he held me. Dustin just stayed quiet and held me until I stopped crying. We sat down on a curb and just sat quietly for a long time. Then Dustin saw him first — Mr. Beans, you know? He was across the street from us walking really slowly, confused. He asked me if that was him and I couldn't believe it. Dustin grabbed him for me and we brought him back to the shuttle."

"Wow," I said. I was really impressed. This was not, at all, the Dustin I knew. "That was really sweet of him, Stella."

"Wait for it, Natalie," Princess said.

"There's more?" I asked.

"The thing is, Nat — can I call you Nat?" I nodded. Stella continued, "Dustin is allergic to cats and Mr. Beans was a jerk. He kept squirming like crazy before we got to the shuttle and got a carrier. By the time we did, Dustin's eyes were a mess and he couldn't stop sneezing."

I wanted to laugh. It seemed ridiculous to me that Dustin put himself in that situation, but I suppose I could see how the act impressed Stella.

"Anyway, for the rest of the week we were stuck in the shelter I hung out with Dustin. We talked a lot, he went with me to check on Mr. Beans, and we sort of became inseparable. It's not like he ever officially asked me out, except when we went to find Mr. Beans, I guess, but, ever since, we've been together."

I heard Stella's entire story. I understood it was a story about her and Dustin and their blossoming love, but there was really only one thing I wanted to know when she finished, "So, are you back in your house now?" I asked.

Stella's long pause was a clear enough sign to me that this wasn't the question she was expecting, but I didn't try to fill the silence.

"My house?" she said, "Yeah... we moved back in by June. My dad is in construction, so he knows a lot of people that could help us out. Not for free, of course, but at least he had the connections."

"That's great. Congratulations," I said, but I clung to the last word she said — connections. That was so much of everything in life. Amy had to leave Staten Island and go live in the country where I would never see her again because her dad didn't have the right connections. We were sitting here in the museum in the dark because the world had lost all its connections and all I wanted to do while I sat here was reestablish the connection I had with Russ in the park.

Stella and I weren't all that different. Our lives just took us down two different paths. What if it were my house that got destroyed and I ended up in the shelter with Russ there? Or Murph? Would I be sneaking away into a wide open private museum to go make out in? I thought Russ and I were merely breaths away from trying that in the park, weren't we?

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Dark Night, after the show 10/6

Ribbons of light danced over my head tonight. Colors danced in places I never knew they could live. I don't know that I'll ever find the right words to describe what I saw tonight and for that I am immensely jealous of Murph's skill. He'll take his pastels, his paints, and all of his skill and pour them out into his sketchbook

pulling together a magnificent representation of the beauty that remains trapped in my memory. Maybe one day I'll ask him to make one for me. Maybe one day soon, questions like that will be easy for me.

Chapter Twenty

A New Day

Written in Natalie's Notebook

So Dark, So Late 10/6...maybe 10/7

I snuck off to the bathroom to write by the candlelight. I'm tired, and I know sleep's coming, but I needed to spill some more words in this quiet space of night.

I'm thinking of my late-night escapes to my backyard, my desperate attempts to find the quiet and the stars. I know they are out there now, but I'm afraid to go outside alone. I'm afraid to be alone.

I thought I loved my "me" time, but I'm realizing now that I always carried a connection to the nearly infinite options of humans to commune with wherever I was. With the Internet in my palm, was I ever, truly, alone? Do I know how to be alone? How about this: do I really even want to be alone, ever?

I don't think so. This notebook only makes sense because I believe you are going to read it... and I don't even care who "you" are anymore — just someone who is not me.

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Dark. How do I know when 10/7 begins?

I don't even know how I slept on that cot. It feels like I slept for days, but it is still dark. I guess I'm just waiting for the sun to rise now. No one else is awake. This is boring.

I miss my room, my home, my family.

I'm going to try to sleep a little more...

“Natalie? You okay?” It was Russ’s whispered voice coming through the bathroom door as I closed my notebook getting ready to go back and sleep some more.

“Russ?” I asked, wiping my not entirely awake eyes as I emerged from the candlelit room. He was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom and, in the dim flickering light from the opened door, I could see that he looked as tired as I felt.

“I saw you get up again and I got worried,” he said. “Do you need anything?”

I smiled. Russ was sweet. It was like he always wanted to take care of someone. Looking out for his little sister and, by extension, my little brother, trying to help nearly everyone in our class free themselves from boredom tonight, and me — I genuinely felt like Russ wanted to take care of me.

“I’m alright. I just can’t sleep. I’m sort of used to sneaking out into my backyard late at night to just hang out a bit — by myself.” I stuffed my hands and my journal in the front pocket of my sweatshirt that I put on when the night started to chill. I shrugged. “I guess I’m more used to that than I thought.”

“You can go out back if you want,” he said pointing in the direction he had taken us before.

“Yeah. I guess,” I said. “Seems a bit scarier than my backyard, though.”

He pushed off the wall using his shoulder. The distance between us shrunk immediately. “I can go with you. If you want company. I can’t sleep either.”

“That’s really nice of you, Russ,” I said. “Maybe just a little while. It’ll be nice to be in the quiet.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Russ said, then he cracked a glow stick and led the way out the back door again.

When we exited the museum I was relieved. I could breathe again. I heard the crickets so clearly and I realized that the quiet I craved was nowhere near the silence one usually associates with the word. I didn’t want quiet, I wanted to be outside.

There was a bench by the back of the museum that Russ led me to. I was so happy I packed my sweatshirt for the trip. The night air was a stark reminder that autumn was upon us and winter was coming. But even with the extra layer, I found myself leaning up against Russ, who had buttoned his own jacket all the way up, just to get some more body warmth. “Do you ever think of leaving here?” Russ asked after what felt like a long time.

“It’s all I’ve thought about,” I said. “I want to get home!”

Russ laughed. “I mean the city. I mean away from all of this. Do you ever think you want to live anywhere else?”

“I never really thought about it,” I admitted.

“Me neither,” he said. “Not until tonight. Natalie, look at that,” he said pointing up to the sky. “Look at what we’ve been missing! What the hell are we doing here?”

I looked up. It was hard to believe that the vision before me was something that was always out there. *How could something so magnificent be hidden by streetlights, by advertisements, by cars, by us?* I felt honored that I had been granted this sight, but what Russ was saying was true — this was always out there. By staying in this city of electric

extravagance I was willingly denying myself this view on a nightly basis. What was I thinking?

“Well — at least for right now — we are here and we are still seeing it all,” I said, unable to imagine myself moving so far from the lights that marked the home of my mother, my father, and mostly, Rog. As I thought about my family I felt warm inside, happy that I was getting closer to tomorrow, closer to when I would see them again, and be back in my home — with or without the star-stealing lights. As my mind drifted, so did my consciousness, without meaning to I fell asleep on Russ’s shoulder.

My cheeks grew warm and, behind my eyelids, my eyes sensed the day lightening. As my mind crawled back from whatever distant dreamland it had escaped to I began to hear songbirds, distant voices of people in an argument, a voice over what was either a megaphone or a loudspeaker, and car horns. I blinked rapidly and slowly processed the clues to reassemble the memory of how I ended up on a bench outside the museum leaning up against Russ Sandberg.

I sat up straight. “Russ!” I said, in alarm, even though he was already showing evidence of waking up himself. “We fell asleep outside!” I said, wondering if I had ever done that before. Knowing, full well that I had never done that in Central Park before.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” he said with a scratchy, untested morning voice. He cleared his throat. “You fell asleep so quickly, and you said you were having problems sleeping so—“

From inside the museum there were murmurs of people calling out. I guessed they were looking for us. I stood up. “We have to get back inside.” I couldn’t even figure out what I was thinking! I didn’t wait for Russ to get up. I did my best speed-walk back to the door to the museum.

When I opened it, I heard a groggy voice shout, “Guys! It’s police! Help me open this up,” I think it was Terrell. I walked slower hoping I could mix into the hubbub without anyone (except maybe Rainbow) noticing I was out of my cot.

Russ caught up to me. “Natalie?” He grabbed my hand gently. I turned and squeezed it gently back.

“Wait,” I said. “Something’s going on.” I pulled him with me to the front room, holding hands and sinking into the feeling of being leaned up against him in the night. What was I running for? I was with Russ, what was the big deal? The fears that brought me running into the museum slowly evaporated as we walked, together, back to the group. As we entered the main room and caught a view of the group at the front door making way for whoever they were letting in, Dustin called out, “Ho-ly shit! Look what the cat dragged in!” Dustin stepped aside, throwing his arm around a very tired-looking Matthew Murphy. He instantly locked eyes with me, before dropping his gaze to my hand. My hand... which could not let go of Russ’s fast enough.

Chapter Twenty-One

Happily Never After

Once upon a time there was a girl who had a crush on a boy. Let's call him Em. The girl adored this boy from afar for years — studied his movements, his likes and dislikes, his art, and his school schedule. One day Em noticed the girl, and the girl was sure, if she didn't screw things up, they would live happily ever after.

On their first date, their pairing was challenged by an external force completely out of their control and Em left the girl all alone with no explanation or good-bye. The girl was heartbroken, confused, and, ultimately, angry. As she struggled with her emotions a second boy, whom we shall call Ar, found the girl and made her smile. She wasn't sure what to think of him at first, she had never been noticed before she had spent years crushing on a boy. Everything was moving so fast, but it felt right. She began to see Ar the way he saw her. She began to open her heart to the possibility of someone other than Em.

That is when Em returned.

It's at this point in all stories, the audience will diverge into teams. Hashtags will be developed — #TeamEm versus #TeamAr. Internet wars will ensue. Each team will describe the virtues of the boy they have sided with and they will write long blog posts, comments, and create videos describing which boy is “best” for our girl.

I knew how these stories went.

I had been writing fanfic for a very long time. I had so often created fictional scenarios that started exactly this way just so I could create this kind of drama and audience excitement, but *being* this girl, *living* this story, truly and completely sucked.

Also, the reality went absolutely nothing like I would have written it. If *Talia's Tales* were accessible in that moment, I could use it as a reference point on what could possibly happen next because I had written a number of outcomes for this type of scenario for various fanfics.

There's the typical high-drama: Em versus Ar fight over the girl. One finding a serious character flaw in the other and — amidst the fight — shouting these findings out to the girl. The girl, stands aside feeling so conflicted about what the boy is saying and what she knows to be true about his opponent. There is an internal struggle of mind versus heart — which should she follow? Audiences all have their preferences and this turns the web chatter about the tale to a fever pitch. Memes would be created. Sometimes I'd check in on the audience before drafting my conclusion, sometimes I'd screw the pooch and just write whatever felt right for me.

There's the scenario where our girl takes a stand, clutching tight to the new boy — the one who didn't abandon her, the one who appreciates loyalty. She stands tall in front of the boy who left her with no word and she says something smart, strong, and complimentary to her boy of choice. Her soliloquy borders on preachy to any audience

members who may not see the errors in Em's ways. Our girl has grown since being the eager puppy at his feet, she now knows what she wants and goes after it. Stories like this result in another kind of audience fever pitch — there is a roll out of fanfic that writes the alternate ending.

Then there is the tale dripping with betrayal all around. When the first boy returns, our girl runs back into his waiting arms — betraying the new boy by rewarding the first boy's betrayal of her. This often leads to a lot of online chatter in the form of "what was she thinking" from everyone except #TeamEm who inevitably trolls around the net feeling smug, because they "knew it all along."

None of these scenarios describe what happened when my Em returned while I was holding the hand of my Ar. Because what happened when Murph returned was so subtly heartbreaking that I don't think I ever would have written it into one of my stories. It lacked an external impact. I don't know how it would play on a screen. No one would have noticed the drama. There were only three people — actors and audience — involved: Murph, Russ, and me. So much happened in such small movements.

Here is what happened:

Murph returned, saw me holding hands with Russ. I let go of Russ immediately. Murph looked away to start a conversation with someone else, and so did Russ.

#TeamNoOneLeftToChoose

I stood, unnoticed and alone. If my phone worked, I could pull it out of my pocket, start scrolling around and no one would think anything at all was wrong with me. It would look like I was doing something.

But my phone didn't work.

Nothing did.

Not even me.

I didn't move. I looked down at my feet and tried to freeze time — not that I wanted to live in that moment forever — but because I was terrified of what came next. I had no idea what to do. Would anyone care if I just decided to not talk to anyone for the remainder of the trip?

It occurred to me that my next choice might be scrutinized, reenacted whenever the world settled down and was ready for gossip, or maybe even before then. No eyes were on me, but I knew better than that. Everyone knew Murph was back. Everyone knew that Russ and I had... something... and now... what? What was I supposed to do?

What — if presented to a larger audience for scrutiny — would receive the most likes? What — if written in a story of mine — would make the most sense?

What — I finally realized the question I wanted to ask — would Talia do?

I made my move.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Fading Lights

I won't ever claim that the move I made was a smart one. It was an action born of panic and played out exactly like such an action would. I saw Rainbow making her way over to me, and Daria giving me a sort of side eye, but I worked hard not to make any kind of eye contact as I walked over to my cot, grabbed my things, and left.

Oh yes, you read that correctly. My brilliant plan was to go it alone.

Here's the thing. That's not quite as crazy as it sounds on a typical day. We're only talking about me walking a couple of miles on my own to a ferry terminal, to jump on a boat — which is free — to get home. The sun had risen. If it hadn't, I'd probably still be sleeping on Russ's shoulder. The thought sent a pang through my body.

Is it possible to like two boys at once?

Seeing Murph had sent a similar pang through my body, resulting in me letting go of Russ in an instant, but what did it mean?

It meant I was a terrible person. I was sure of it. I thought of all kinds of names I could be called and wanted to call myself. I thought about all of the judgements I cast on girls I barely knew in my classes when they broke up with one boy only to start dating another within

a week. I always knew with such certainty that I would never, ever be one of those girls.

Never.

“Never say never!” I heard the singsong of my mother’s preachy voice in my mind as if she were walking right beside me on my mad dash to get away from the museum. I hadn’t gotten far. I stood feet away from the bench I woke up on that morning.

The heaves of breath came before the tears. My body committed to the emotion before I had any chance to squash it down. I sat down and laid into it. I missed everyone — my mom, my dad, Rog, Amy, now Murph, and Russ. I missed my peeps and the comfort of that outlet that had been serving me for so many years. What were they doing now? Were any of those avatars thinking about me? Were they missing our connection the way I was?

It hurt so much.

Written in Natalie’s Notebook

Morning 10/7, on a bench

Hey pages,

How you doing this morning? I know you are nothing but blank pieces of paper that are here to sop up my ink, my words, these little symbols I scratch on you, even my falling tears, but can you be more? For me? For today? For right now?

Here’s what we are going to do: we are going to pretend that you are a separate entity that has a consciousness that understands all I put here. Maybe you are too shy to respond, and I get that. I won’t expect anything from you, but as long as I know you are reading I can live with that.

Am I going crazy?

I feel like I am going crazy now. I don't think anyone else in my class is losing it quite like this.

“We don’t really have time for this, Nat,” Murph said as he walked up to me at the bench.

Pang as I heard his voice. Of course it was Murph.

“That’s what I was trying to say to everyone in there.”

Pang as I looked at his face. Dammit, I was going to kick Rainbow’s butt for letting this guy out here.

“The police are coming.”

Pang as he sat down on the bench next to me, in the same spot Russ sat only moments before. Was the seat still warm?

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I asked, trying to keep the conversation as trigger-free as possible. “Won’t they have a way to help everyone get home?”

Murph shook his head and said, “They think so. They have some sort of ride system they are using for helping people traveling longer distances. But it’s not enough and they will just slow us all down.”

I looked right at him and noticed his eyes looked tired and sad. He was looking at me like a lost child trying to find his parents. There was little hope in his look, but what did live there felt like it was all faith in me helping him to find his way back. “If it’s faster than feet and a wheelchair, Murph, then I can’t see how they will slow everyone down.”

“Well, they had me set up for some kind of ride since yesterday — yesterday — but in the meantime they just had me waiting. All this time. I could’ve walked home four different times by now.” Now he looked at me, pleading with me to understand the suffering he had been through.

Really?

Like the terrible waiting in the protection of police, with people who had answers, surrounded by others who could safely make decisions with you in mind and find a way home for you was the worst thing in the world.

He's joking right?

Like he was the one who was swept up into that scenario without any warning. Like he completely forgot that he just walked away from all of us — from me.

I was furious.

I stood up. “Why didn’t you go, then? If you’re worried about your bag, Brenda has it. Not me. No need to chase me out here so you can go. Why don’t you find Brenda and get walking... again!”

There were tears. I wish there was some sort of internal water vac that could be installed behind my eyes to suck back all the betrayers. I didn’t want Murph to think I was sad — I was next-level mad. My body was confused about it, that was all.

“Again?” Murph asked. “What are you talking about?”

I turned around, looked back over Murph’s shoulder and I could see that the museum door was wedged open with basically my whole class trying to squeeze their heads through the doorway to catch a view of our unveiling drama. I prayed the wind did not carry our voices their way. I saw a couple of hands waving us back in, but not one person took a single step out of the museum door themselves. It was like the doorway was the physical representation of their inner turmoil — get front row seats to the Murph and Nat show, or give them the privacy they needed?

I saw Brenda’s head in the crowd and I remembered how worried she was about Murph and became even more angry. Then I thought about Daria’s incessant, repeated question, “Why did he leave, Nat?”

Why?” I didn’t know. Now was my chance. If I dared to utter it out loud.

What would Talia do?

The Natalie in me wanted to grab my bag and keep walking. If Murph didn’t know what I meant by “Again,” then maybe it was pointless to educate him. I didn’t need to know why he left... right? Daria could ask him. She was the one who really wanted to know.

But, no.

That was not true.

I sat down. And, in case my words did carry on the wind, I spoke my next words in a near whisper. I imagined I was typing them on a screen in an emotion-free font, simple sentences, short, with periods, clear, small, but easy to understand. “Murph. You left me. Alone.”

He was immediately defensive, and did not seem to care if all of Central Park heard him. “I did not leave you alone! I went with Mrs. Krimble, and I —“

His huge reaction nearly scared me back into silence, but I tried to think of his words as just that, words being sprung up before me to be absorbed. What were the facts? What was he saying?

“You haven’t even mentioned Mrs. Krimble once,” I said as immediately as I realized it. He stammered, so I continued. “You’ve only told me about what happened to you.”

“What am I supposed to tell you?” Murph said. His voice was lowered, but his eyes still held the defensive fury.

“Why did you leave me?” I asked.

“Nat, come on,” he said with a laugh. “It wasn’t like that. I mean, damn. I didn’t leave you. I just left. I wasn’t even thinking about you then.”

Forget the pang, that was a hard-hitting, bone-rattling punch.

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

I guess the punch knocked out Talia.

“Are we good now?” Murph said with a soft smile. “Can we go rally the troops to get back home now?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. Not because I wanted to go anywhere with Murph, but because I suddenly couldn’t imagine doing anything alone.

Rainbow caught my arm the moment I entered the museum. “You okay?” she whispered in my ear. I gave her a small smirk, but couldn’t commit to anything happier. Before she could question me any further, Dustin was rubbing my head like I was a little puppy. “No one’s saying you didn’t have the right idea, Turner. It’s just that we should try to eat or something before we all go, right Stella?”

Stella reached up to place a light kiss on Dustin’s cheek before responding. “This one’s always thinking of food.” She was tucked in under Dustin’s arm. Since their secret was out, it appeared Stella no longer minded public displays of affection.

“I thought about that,” Murph said. “I couldn’t grab much.” He started reaching into his pockets pulling out various snack packs of cookies. “It’s not exactly the breakfast of champions, but—”

“Put that nonsense away,” Princess said. “We didn’t clear out that cafeteria yesterday. And Turner found more than enough portable snacks for all of us.”

“Oh crap! The cafeteria!” Murph said. “That is amazing. I’m starving!”

“What’s amazing,” Russ started as he clapped Murph hard on the back, grabbing his shoulder, “is what we can accomplish when we all stick together.”

They led the way back down the stairs to the cafeteria where I spotted the glow sticks from the day before still offering tiny halos of

fluorescent colors. They were so weak and basically useless today. It was hard to believe they were the same sticks I had placed there.

I had no interest in eating, but I thought better of it remembering how hungry I was the day before after my silly flirtatious pretzel lunch. Rainbow sat with me and wanted to know everything that happened with Murph and me. I told her he apologized for leaving.

I didn't really want to talk about it. I didn't want to say out loud that he admitted to not even thinking about me, as if saying the words would bring the hurt back again. She tried to keep talking to me about Murph and telling me how she thought Russ had my back and how he was staring at me from across the room and all the typical stuff that a self-admitted boy-crazy girl wants to talk about. I needed to shut her down, so I did the only thing I could think of — I asked her about her dad's stent.

It worked, and I immediately regretted it. The mere mention of Rainbow's dad sucked all of the color from her face and her personality. I felt so bad that I needed to find a way to fix it. "Maybe the stent will be fine," I said desperately. "How does it work, anyway?"

"I don't know," Rainbow said. "It was supposed to unclog his arteries somehow."

"I'm sure he's fine, Rainbow," I said, imagining that was all I needed to do to make her feel better. We ate in silence for the rest of the time we were there. I found myself thinking back to the glowsticks fading in the stairwell, and realized there wasn't anything quite so hard to believe about them, I knew exactly how quickly bright things could fade.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Go Time

While everyone ate, Murph gave us the rundown of what he knew about getting around the city. “Everything is still on foot, or bike, obviously,” he said. “I walked here, but I had to wait until sun up, which is why I wasn’t here sooner. I couldn’t find any bike anywhere — not a Citibike, manual or electric — but, honestly, I don’t know how we’d get any to activate now anyway. Never mind getting enough for everyone.”

“I’d be happy to ride on the handlebars, if anyone’s offering,” Colin said. Rainbow smiled softly, but everyone else seemed unable to tear their attention from Murph.

“The police are everywhere, but their communication is craptastic. So, if you only see one officer, it is likely they’re on their own. They’re at almost the same disadvantage as the rest of us. As far as I saw this morning, though, it looks like most of them are in pairs.”

“And with megaphones?” Russ asked.

“Yeah,” Murph said. “How’d you know?”

“I thought I heard them when we woke up this morning,” Russ said, turning his eyes my way.

Pang.

He was right. I remembered hearing the same thing. I smiled at him, to let him know he wasn't the only one who remembered that morning.

"It's seems to be the only way word is getting around the city," Murph said. "Which is actually how I heard that there is no ferry service —"

Our entire group moaned.

"Yeah. I know. That's what got me here. I figured you guys should know, you know?"

"Thanks," Brenda said, rolling her eyes. "You're like our god-damned knight in shining armor now with all your doom and gloom news."

"Relax, Bren, the Brooklyn Bridge is open." Murph looked unfazed by her disgust. I hated that he was so untouchable, or clueless, or insensitive, or whatever the hell it was that made him the absolute worst right now. Why couldn't Murph understand his multiple offenses? Where was the Murph I thought I knew? The guy who really could have been a knight in shining armor? I followed this guy's every move, how did I miss this side of him? I wondered how much of the Murph I crushed on was actually a figment of my own imagination.

"That's a lot of walking," Rose said quietly. Daria put a hand over hers. I felt as though I could see the weight upon her shoulders. We knew that it would take us about two to three hours to walk down to the ferry and then, if we were lucky, the ferry would have taken us home in a half hour. Our school is a ten minute walk from the Staten Island side of the ferry, so we would have been back in about the same time it took one more school day to pass, but that was with the ferry. Without it, what would we do? Walk through New York City's largest borough?

Murph looked annoyed that he wasn't getting a hero's response to his news.

"Whatever it is, you can't stay here. Your families don't know where you are. At the hospitals they are building lists of people they've seen, just so people might have a shot at finding each other. And the schools are turning into shelters just like they did with Imelda for people stranded on Manhattan. And the ferry also has a check-in."

"So we check-in there. At the ferry," Stella said. "Anyone else have family that works here in the city? I'm thinking I can find my dad there."

A couple of people raised their hands, including Russ.

"So that's it," Stella said. "Check in at the ferry and see where we can go from there."

"Stuyvesant is down there," I said quietly, but everyone turned to look at me. The quick attention scared me into a stutter. "I-I mean, it's not on top of the ferry, but, you know, it's close. It's a high school. And it's big. If we need a shelter, is what I am saying." Except I was saying it backwards, like I no longer knew how to speak.

It was a scary plan. I went to sleep the night before thinking I would be getting home somehow potentially before sunset. I didn't know how. I didn't worry about it, things usually work out for me. Why should this be any different? I began to think of my mom and dad and how worried they had to be. I wondered how Rog got home from school the day before. How dad got home from work. I even laughed when I thought about how freaked out Mom must have been without her blow dryer.

My mind wandered even further. Thinking of Mom's blow dryer made me think of one of her other morning routines, religiously watching *The Today Show*. It got me thinking, there was no way to

share the news. There was no way to receive it, except by megaphones. As I sat there, the reality of the shift in our life became clear.

“Matthew,” I asked, “did you hear anyone talking about how long it will take to get the power grid back?”

He crinkled his eyebrows at my mention of his full first name and it gave me the slightest satisfaction. “Well, Natalie—”

I smirked at his attempt to slay me with his pathetic rebuttal. *Touché, Matthew, touché.*

“That museum guy was with me, so he had a lot to say to anyone that would listen. In fact, he wouldn’t shut up about it. ‘If this storm was the magnitude that Dr. Smithe and I measured, then it could take months to restore our nation’s power grid.’” Murph had put on a nasal voice to imitate Dr. Davies that was completely inaccurate. I think he was going for a laugh, but none of us were in a laughing mood. He looked around at everyone as that news settled in, and I guess he thought he had nothing to lose, so he continued, “But it’s actually worse than that. He said that just before the CME hit, they saw another solar storm beginning. It looked even larger. He had a name for it. He kept trying to tell anyone who would listen, as if any of us knew what it meant. He said we’re in a solar maximum.” Murph shrugged and looked down at his feet as if he didn’t want to look any of us in the eyes as he continued. “I remember him telling one nurse that if these storms keep happening, the clock will keep resetting over and over again until it stops.”

Quiet.

Hopelessness.

We were powerless. In so many senses of the word.

After we finished eating, we set out through the park and went along unbothered until we hit Broadway. Our plan was to take the direct, midtown route, all the way downtown until we reached the

ferry. Murph hated the plan. He wanted to treat this trip like some sort of top secret super heist where we used stealth to avoid any law enforcement until we absolutely needed them. I was so happy he was overruled, even though the direct route did end up being a little more difficult than we originally expected.

The police were out in force and Murph was right — they all seemed to love those damn megaphones. Broadway was barricaded off with two mounted police guarding the helm. As we approached, one of the officers on horseback called out to an officer on foot, “McRooney! Deal with this group, please.”

McRooney was on us in a moment. He couldn’t have been much older than us, maybe early twenties. He had his book of tickets ready as if he were about to give a summons to each and every one of us. “What’s your plan here, guys?” he asked no one in particular. Then his eyes landed on me. I cursed myself for not looking off into the distance, or staring at my feet like I normally did.

“Uh — We’re trying to get to the ferry?” I said, though it sounded more like a question.

He shook his head and then clipped his book of tickets back onto his belt. “Miss, we are requesting that all residents stay in their homes at this time,” he said in his automaton voice. I got the impression he must’ve said these exact words at least a hundred times in the last 24 hours. “There are no stores, no theaters, no subways. You got no phones or cameras, so there’s nothing for you to TikTok or stream — basically, there’s no reason to walk the streets at this time. Curfew is

at 7pm. Without your tech or a watch, how will you know when to return?”

He had a point about the watch. I gave him that, but the rest of his statement was ridiculous. I felt a shuffle in the group, like someone else was about to try to save me from this gross misunderstanding. I was about to step back and let whoever it was handle it from there when I heard Murph mutter, “Told you they wouldn’t help.” He was right next to me and his need to come tell me this personally infuriated me.

“No,” I said, more forcefully than I intended to speak to the police officer. I took a quick breath and continued more calmly, “I’m sorry, Officer, I don’t think you understand. We are trying to get home. We were on a class trip from Staten Island Prep yesterday when all this happened.” I emphasized the “Staten Island” part of the name and raised my eyebrows so he would really pay attention. “Our teacher got hurt yesterday. She got taken away. We slept in the New School Museum last night waiting to see if she might come back or something — and to obey that curfew!” I was getting louder as I went on, and more animated. The police officer was hanging on my every word and, unlike the people in the street the day before, I didn’t feel like he was misunderstanding me. It was so freeing. “If you think we should now claim that as ‘our home’ then someone’s going to need to tell our parents where we are, ‘cause we’ve been missing for nearly 24 hours now.”

With each word the officer’s jaw sank lower and lower. “Um... hold on second.”

When I turned to give Murph the smug look that he deserved, he had moved away from me again. That was just as satisfying. I can’t believe I thought I knew that guy. I mean, I surveyed his every move and all that, but I never knew him. I never connected with him in a real way, not even as a friend.

The officer walked over to the mounted officer and relayed our tale. Instead of getting off of the horse, the officer spoke through the megaphone to us, “What’s your plan here, class?”

We all looked back and forth to see who would speak up. I turned to Stella, who turned to me, and then I turned to Rainbow who turned toward me, and I locked eyes with Russ, and, *Oh*, I thought, *We aren’t all turning to look at each other, everyone is looking at me!*

I cleared my throat and a small, nervous laugh escaped before I began trying to speak loud enough to engage in a conversation with someone on a megaphone, as if the officer’s use of the tool was a sign that he must be hard of hearing. “It’s funny you should ask that, Officer—” I cleared my throat again— “because we actually do have a plan. It’s pretty simple: get to the ferry terminal, check-in to see if any of our family’s there, and then, head to Stuyvesant for the night before we figure out what to do tomorrow!” My heart was beating fast. I didn’t know if it was out of excitement, or fear. I smiled, looked around at our group and gasped. “And we need a doctor!”

The officer cantered the horse closer to our group. He didn’t use the megaphone when he said, “And why is that, young lady?”

“That’ll be my fault, Officer,” Rose said. As she was sitting in the wheelchair for the beginning of our trip, she was hidden behind our small group until she raised her hand. We all stepped aside so the officer could see Rose as Daria pushed her through. “I’ve had a bit of a malfunction in some medical equipment inside me, so anyone who can help would be great, but a neurologist, or — even better, a neurophthalmologist would be a real win. It’s rare disease stuff — the more specialized the doc, the better the chance they’ll know what’s going on with me.”

The officer nodded toward officer McRooney, who pulled back the barricade for us to get through. “For your doctor, head straight to

Times Square. There's a medical checkpoint there — they should be able to guide you in the right direction." As we walked through the barricade, he asked each of our names and where we were from. He wrote it down on the summons paper. When he had all of our names he separated the top sheet from the carbon copy and handed it to me, "You must all stay together. Show this paper at each checkpoint so we know that you passed. If any of you come up as a missing person, we will have documentation. Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks," I said. There were two things on my mind there. One was: those horses were big, at least four of us could fit on each. If they really cared, they could give us a ride back to Staten Island in no time. The second thing was that piece of paper in my hand. Why did he give it to me? Was I in charge all of a sudden?

About a block after passing the officers everything became quiet. I figured everyone was as confused as I was about the officer electing me the person in charge of our paper. That was a Stella job, for sure. I thought about handing it to her, but she was just holding Dustin's hand, with her head down, so I shared the group silence and walked on.

The shadows grew long and the wind picked up a chill as we walked down the abandoned street. I pulled my hoodie out of my backpack, and I was grateful I dragged it along. Broadway was eerie. It was as if someone pressed "pause" on life. The street was filled with cars exactly as they must have been the day before, the only thing missing were the people who must have been inside them. My mom used to say she thought there was a ghost-hour in some neighborhoods of New York City. It was at around 7pm, after the workforce left, but before the nightlife began. She said it felt like the city was out of tune at that hour, off-beat, almost creepy in its lack of purpose. I was betting that this walk took that creepy feeling and amped it up by about a thousand.

We walked in silence as if in respect to the slumber our city found itself in. Personally, I didn't know what to talk about. I wanted to take everyone's mind off of what we were going through. Almost every topic I thought of became instantly tainted by our present. I thought about talking about *Barista Boys* with the girls, but before I could begin I was struck with the question of whether or not I would ever see it again. I thought about talking to Daria, but the only two topics of conversation I could think of with her were Rose and her vlogging. I knew she was stressed about Rose, but I wondered how she was coping with the sudden loss of *Daria's Days*. What would she do now? Rainbow looked like she was trying to capture a music memory while she walked, so I didn't want to disturb her.

And then I was saved from my frantic search for sanity.

Russ.

He grabbed my hand and I was calm. I worried no more about what to say. I worried no more that he was mad at me for how I acted that morning. I worried no more about who would see me holding his hand. I simply walked, knowing that no one knew what to say, but we were together.

We didn't see another person for something like ten blocks. I found that particularly strange because every other time I had ever experienced a blackout, one of the first things everyone did was go outside and hang out together. There really wasn't anything to do in our houses except for read by candlelight, anyway. So here we were on Broadway, in one of the busiest parts of the busiest city in our country and there was no one to be found? I couldn't believe it.

And I wasn't alone.

"Where is everyone?" Rose finally broke the silence.

"Home?" Colin said. "If they don't have a ticket from Officer—"

“Really, Colin?” Rose cut him off, “You really think that barricade was enough for *everybody* to stay inside?”

“She’s right, Col,” Dustin said, “where are the curious people? Where are the people who don’t care about what the cops say?”

“What would they do?” Daria said sullenly. “I mean, normally, I’m all over stuff like this, but I’m with my camera, you know? What’s the point of seeing this if you can’t share it? Most people are taking pics and videos and sharing them with everyone, or at least saving them until they can; there’s no way to do that right now. It’s all lost.”

I felt so bad for Daria. She defined herself with her online presence. I did, too, in a way. But without power, Russ reminded me, I could still write. Without power, Rainbow could still sing. Murph could still draw. Daria was left without any means of expression in the way she was used to. However, as my pity grew for her, I heard a groan from behind me. Just when I was about to turn to see who it came from, Murph burst, “Bull *shit*, Daria. This is what gets me crazy with all of you guys. No offense,” he turned to me, “but it is like none of you know any other way to express yourselves beyond the screen.”

He could say “no offense” all he wanted, but I knew this little outburst was meant to send daggers in my heart. I wasn’t about to let him hurt me. Again. “Not all of us. I’ve got a notebook now. And Rainbow, well,” I turned to Rainbow. “Rainbow, what you did last night was other-worldly.”

“It’s true, Rain,” Brenda said, “You were amazing last night.” Others agreed.

Rainbow blushed and said, “It just felt like it was amazing because of the whole moment, ya know? I mean the auroras, the water, everyone together, and then the acoustics were perfect.”

Colin, who had leaned over to Terrell for clarification, said, “Rain, that was you?”

She laughed and nodded.

“Wow, that was beautiful. You sounded like an angel.”

“Uh-huh,” Russ gave Colin a suspicious glance, “I bet she did,” he said.

Daria turned to Murph, “Singing and drawing are different than what I do, though. I’m sort of out of luck without power.”

“You can’t vlog for a while, sure, but that doesn’t mean you’re done.” Murph rolled his eyes. “Find another outlet.”

Stella piped up, “I know you guys are about to enter into some sort of existential conversation about creativity and the meaning of your lives without the almighty Internet, but Rose has a point, we should have seen someone by now.”

And, as if he heard us, a man came running out from 54th Street toward us. He was yelling, “The End is here. The food is gone. The darkness is here!” Since I was now at the end of the group, I guess I was his first target (lucky me). He grabbed my arm and screamed in my face, “Do you have food? Is there enough? You are running out of time!” then he let go as he seemed to confuse himself, “Time? What time?” He swung his arm out cartoonishly waving his bare wrist pointing to where a watch would normally sit. “There is no time!”

We kept walking, like all well trained New Yorkers do. There was nothing we could do to help the man, and he was in his own mind space. However, without the typical crowds to distract him, he was back upon us in a moment. He grabbed my backpack and spun me around. He was sweaty and his breath stank. All I could think was that he didn’t have a tiny travel size toothpaste this morning like I had found in the supply closet for everyone. In my face he spat, “Do you have the time?” His eyes were desperate, he was pleading with me to give him the time, but before I could respond, Murph had turned on him, followed by Dustin, Colin and Brenda.

Brenda pried his hand off of mine and pulled me into the safety of our crowd as Terrell circled around us to get to the confrontation, “Buddy, we have nothing for you. I think you should get home before any police officers see you out on the street. Let’s go guys,” he said as he placed an arm between the stranger and everyone else that came to my defense. “Keep walking. Let’s get home, too.”

Dustin and Colin lingered for a breath before listening to Terrell. Stella scooped them in with the rest of us and said, “Let’s go,” looking over her shoulder at the stranger we left Terrell with. We walked at least three blocks without Terrell. I don’t know what he said to the man, or how he calmed him down, but it looked like he was pointing him in the way we came. Maybe he was sending him to the police, maybe he was telling him what we learned at the museum about what was really going on. I don’t know. All I know is that the man walked away from Terrell of his own volition, in the opposite direction than we were going. Terrell watched him go before running back toward us and up to the anxious Princess. “So... that was pretty brave,” she said grasping his hand as she walked. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to keep you by my side for the rest of this. Call me greedy.”

He smiled, and said with a playful bow, “It’s my honor to walk with royalty, Princess.”

I should’ve known that the real action would come in Times Square. There were more and more people as we approached 49th Street. There was a barricade there. The people didn’t bother with us since we were such a large group. They were too busy shouting at the police officers who paced their horses back and forth behind the barricade reciting the same announcement over and over again, “By order of the Mayor of New York City, the Governor of New York State and the President of the United States, the City of New York is on lockdown. We do not know when power will be restored. Return to

your homes and hotels. Ration your food and stay safe. There is no reason to be here.” I felt bad for the officer who kept repeating himself. We heard him before we even saw the crowd.

We stopped ten feet behind the crowd. I couldn’t see beyond the crowd at all, so I didn’t know what people wanted to get to so badly. Whatever it was, we didn’t want it. We just wanted *to get past* it. Daria, growing more impatient by the moment, clicked her tongue and said, “Just show the cop the ticket, already! We don’t have to stand here like this! Rose needs to get in!”

A couple at the back of the crowd heard her and turned toward her. The woman, disheveled, in her forties wearing an oversized wrinkled t-shirt, closed the space between herself and Brenda in seconds, “What ticket you got to get through?”

“Wo-man,” Brenda said waving her arm, “you had bet-ter give me some space with that stank breath!”

Murph’s eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head. He lunged on Brenda and pushed her back away from the woman before anyone else could speak. Then in an even tone he said to the woman, “I’m sorry. She’s tired. We couldn’t sleep last night with those lights. We got tickets for Penn Station. Our tour group heads home today.” He pointed to the group of us who were silently dumbfounded.

The woman looked at the group, then at Rose, Murph and finally back at Brenda, “Little girl, I’m sorry to be the one to tell ya this, but there ain’t no buses workin.”

The man stepped forward, “Your hotel shoulda told ya that. That’s where these guy’s’ll send you anyways.” He thumbed up to the police.

“Really?” Murph said feigning disappointment, “Wow. We had no idea. Thanks so much.” He turned to Brenda giving her a knowing look, and a light punch in the arm.

Brenda perked up and said, “Sorry. I’m tired from so much walking, you know?”

The woman smiled and nodded, “Well, good luck,” and the couple turned back to the crowd.

Murph grabbed Brenda and huddled us all together, whispering, “That was just a tiny taste of what can happen here. This is part of why I didn’t want to come at this direct route thing. I saw a bit of this yesterday, but I’m pretty sure getting through here is going to be rough. But I might have an idea, just bear with me.”

Murph had everyone line up in a single-file, still maintaining a distance behind the crowd. He asked me to come to the front. “I need to borrow her for a second,” he said to Russ, holding my wrist above the hand Russ held.

Russ looked through him and didn’t let go right away.

“Borrow me for what?” I asked, shaking my hand free of both of them in the weird millisecond tug of war.

He whispered, “You need to stand in front and hold that ticket up. All the way back here.” He looked back at the crowd. “Say nothing, Nat, not until one of the officers notices you. We do not want to draw any attention from anyone in that mob. I think they are so focused on getting in that they won’t bother to turn around to see what we’re up to until after the officers see us.”

At the front of the line I stood up tall and held our ticket high above my head and suddenly thought one of the taller boys should have that job. I stared down the mounted officer. It took two full paces before he acknowledged me, but it was clear when he did. He nodded to me, so I pulled my hand down and shoved the ticket into my hoodie pocket almost immediately. After about thirty seconds, two officers, on foot, dressed in SWAT gear, broke through the crowd and came up to me. It was so intense. I fumbled through my pocket to pull the ticket out.

I whispered, “They gave us this uptown. We were on a class trip from Staten Island. We need to check-in at the ferry, but we also need to get a doctor for my friend Rose.” We were the center of everyone’s focus, particularly the t-shirt clad woman. I was doing my best to try to stick to the facts — no emotions, no panic, no noticing the brimming chaos right ahead of me. The officer who was not talking to me had to hold that lady back from lunging on me.

After a quick rearrangement Rose and Daria were brought to the front of the line and Russ and I found our way to the back. Then the crowd opened up again, lined by more officers on foot, creating a path for us to walk through. It was terrifying. If the crowd was discontent when we arrived, now they turned down right vicious. I tried not to look at the faces of anyone as we passed, but I did look up once seeing the t-shirt woman’s face red, contorted and furious. “You’re a bunch a liars!” she screamed, “Liars!” I flinched as I saw her arm flail over one of the officer’s shoulders. Russ put his hand on my shoulder. “Just look down, Natalie. Just look down.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Times Square

On the other side of the barrier was a world running on a different rhythm. Times Square was transformed. I looked up and saw enormous slate-gray rectangles of useless electronics attached to the sides of buildings. Of course, there were still billboards plastered in between, but the difference was un-ignorable; there was no animation, no movement. That was, of course, until I looked around me. While there were still cars, cabs and even two city buses stuck in the middle of the streets, another wave of movement and life bustled in between them that I hadn't seen before because of the crowd at the barrier. You could *almost* believe it was a normal day in Times Square. You had to look closer at the people moving in and out of the cars to notice the difference. The movement wasn't made up of slow-moving, ogling, distracted tourists stopping to take pictures, gawking up at all of the building sides and signs, or trying to find their way to the Broadway show that wasn't actually *on Broadway* and the strange opportunists dressed in costumes trying to gain their attention and money, these people were orderly, uniformed, and purposeful. These streets were filled with emergency personnel who were all busy working. There were tents set up with handwritten signs stuck to the front of them

all along the sidewalks and throughout pedestrian walkways. Some labels were different neighborhood names like Chelsea, SoHo, and Battery Park. Other tents had hospital names on them. I recognized Langone and Sloan Kettering from the commercials on TV. The last category of names I recognized was school names like Stuyvesant and Martin Luther King, Jr. High School. Regardless of the type of tent we passed, inside each was the same. Every tent contained a table with a number of people sitting on folding chairs behind it. Each person had notebooks or index cards in front of them. The routine in front of each tent followed the same rhythm as well. People walked up to the tents, pulled out a pocket pad and read it off to somebody at the tables, or, in some cases, handed over whatever they had. “We got ‘em!” an officer shouted as he pushed a wheelbarrow full of phone books up to a tent in front of the Marriott Marquis. “Use these as a starting point for now. We’ll need to be organized by location and alphabet, so let’s get moving.” A group of officers moved quickly to the piles and began sorting through them.

We walked through quietly. I was in awe of what looked like our city trying to rebuild itself. It was becoming increasingly obvious, simply by the way the police were responding to this particular power outage, that there was little hope it would be fixed quickly. This group wasn’t waiting for power to be restored, they were rebuilding the system. A policewoman approached Stella. “Thank God you’re finally here! You’re the volunteers, right?”

“No, I’m sorry,” Stella said cautiously. She looked over to me.

“We’re trying to get downtown, to the ferry,” I said, feeling a little bit like a TikTok video stuck in a loop.

The officer looked at me skeptically. “The ferry’s not running, Ma’am.”

Ma'am? That was way too official for me. I nodded, “We know, we’re trying to connect with some family on our way home to Staten Island.”

“Ma’am?” the officer said, looking utterly confused. I took a deep breath, readying myself to start our story all over again, but Colin saved me.

“We were on a class trip to the New York City New School Museum.” He sounded like he was tired of the story, too.

The officer’s face grew grim.

Rainbow continued the story, “We slept there last night, because we didn’t know what else to do.”

Dustin explained the plan for our walk downtown and the more he continued, the more upset the officer looked. She started shaking her head. When he was done she said, “Hold on one second.” She held up her hand and added, “Don’t move, please.” And then she ran off to a tent with a sign I could not read and spoke to an older man who kept shaking his head. She got more animated, pointing over at us. I looked down immediately. For some reason I felt like I shouldn’t be caught watching.

“What is she doing?” I whispered to Russ.

“I’m not sure, but it looks like she wants to help us.”

“How the hell is she going to do that?” Brenda asked, stealing the words right out of my mind.

“We’re about to find out,” Rainbow whispered. I looked up in time to see that the officer was approaching us with the older man.

He was a scruffy guy in his fifties who didn’t look comfortable in the jeans he was wearing. I got the impression that he was used to a uniform, or a suit. When he reached us he was scratching his head. “So eh, hey. You guys the -uh- class trip?”

We all mumbled our affirmation.

“A-ight, I’m Chief Grady. Officer Avery has a ridiculous idea that might work, if you are willing to help us out,” he said.

I saw Brenda’s reaction before I heard it. Her eyes grew wide and her head shook back and forth like some hinge had come loose. The second the chief stopped to take a breath, she was on him. She stepped forward as she blurted, “Ha! Help you guys out?” She swung her head to flip her loosening ponytail back over her shoulder, but I think it was her way of deflecting the chief’s comment. “We don’t have time for this!”

Chief Grady flinched. It appeared he was not the type to deal in petty nonsense the likes of which Brenda was dealing. “Eh, Miss?” He raised his large hand up as if he was stopping traffic. “Why don’t you just keep your head still and hear me out before you go all drama queen on me a’ight? This ain’t a perfect situation we’re finding ourselves in right now, so the solution’s gonna be far from perfect. You don’t like it, you go.”

Brenda folded her arms over her chest and looked around for support that couldn’t be found.

“Avery, go ahead,” Grady said, “this is your show.”

Officer Avery stepped forward, nodding to the chief before addressing our group. “Here’s how I see it. No offense, guys, but you don’t look great. You’ve already asked for medical help, so I can’t see you all walking all the way downtown today without at least some of you getting really sick.” She cut a quick glance over at Rose, setting a fire of worry to my insides. It had happened gradually, but Rose’s invisible, mysterious disease was starting to show. It wasn’t just the wheelchair that was making her look like the sick one. It had become present in her eyes, expression, and her skin color. She was not doing well. Avery looked back at us and continued, “On the other side of things, we need help. Half of our guys need to hit the streets pretty

soon. We need people to man the help stations, collect supplies and food, continue the inventories — in other words, a ton of stuff needs to get done.” I looked around and saw, at each cross street, tents with tables facing outside Times Square. Behind them were coolers filled with smaller boxes that were being handed out by people in bright yellow vests. The crowds were even thicker at each of those barricades than where we had just come from. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be at a help station after seeing how agitated the crowds had already become.

Daria leaned on the side of the wheelchair and sighed, “But if we stop to help you, where will we sleep tonight?” From the look on her face, I think sleep was the only thing on Daria’s mind. Officer Avery gave Daria, who wasn’t even looking at her anymore, a worried look. “Well, the thing is, we can get you out of here a lot quicker than you can get yourselves.”

As she spoke, the crowd behind us grew even louder and the mounted officer on the megaphone bellowed, “Step out of the way! Move to the side!” I had to look to see what was going on. The crowd hesitantly parted to make way for one of those old-fashioned horse pulled carriages that my mom and dad took me and Roger on a couple of Christmases ago through Central Park. It was an odd sight to see. I was used to seeing those carriages filled with tourists, or couples looking for a romantic interlude, not police officers.

Officer Avery pointed at the carriage. “They’ve been taking sidewalks and bike paths where streets aren’t cleared and have managed their way through the city quite well. As you can imagine, they’re the fastest mode of transportation we can manage right now. We can put you in the carriages and take you downtown.”

It was an odd offer, but between how exhausted Daria and Rose looked and how my feet already felt from our short walk, I was really hoping we could get the group to agree. Officer Avery looked Daria up

and down again, “And I’m not thinking everyone’s getting to work. We’ve got that medical tent, so we would treat anyone who needs it.”

Brenda looked over at Rose and nodded. “What time would we leave?” she asked.

“Probably when the sun reaches about there,” Chief Grady said, pointing to the edge of the skyscraper on the right. We all looked up. Some people put their hands in the air to see how much space there was in between where the sun was now and where it would be. Grady chuckled, “What? No one has a sense of humor in this group?”

He got a couple of smirks from the group, but no laughs. “Yeah, well, we’ll get you someplace safe before it’s dark. Avery, here, will make sure of it.”

“Absolutely,” Avery responded. “That’s my guarantee to you. Safe by dark. So, what do you say?”

It was one of those silly silences that seemed to fall over the group whenever a decision needed to be made. I looked around and found everyone else also looking around. No one said anything. But, what was important to me was that no one was saying no, so I stepped closer to Daria and Rose and asked, “So, where is that medical tent?”

Officer Avery wanted to make sure we were all okay before putting us to work, so our entire group ended up at a medical tent in front of the enormous Express clothing store on 46th Street — a sad replacement to the epic Toys R Us that used to be there, if you ask me! I was given a clean bill of health, like almost all of us, but we were each forced to drink two bottles of water once we told them our story. And then there were the sandwiches. Tons of sandwiches. Not only did we have to eat them, we had to make them to hand out. That was my first job. Making sandwiches out of the donated cold cuts and bread from the local stores. I thought it was ridiculous, I mean what the heck would anyone do with a bologna sandwich in a blackout?

But Janice, a volunteer from the Food Bank who reminded me of a casual jeans-wearing version of my mom, said that hunger made people unstable. “Plus,” she said, “spoiled food makes me nuts.”

I didn’t understand why all these stores gave up all of their inventory for free. Janice shrugged. Her expensively highlighted hair slipped from her messy ponytail. “I know it seems crazy, like everyone in New York City has suddenly lost their minds, but there are still loads of generous people out there. When the news came out that this was going to be long term, most of the restaurant owners wanted to get home to their families any way they could. They knew it would mean leaving their businesses behind. Food can’t stay forever without power or refrigeration of some sort, so they came out — in droves — opening their kitchens to us. It has been a wonderful morning.”

A wonderful morning?

I looked around at the chaos beyond the barricades. I thought of how I tried to run away from my group. I thought of Murph’s panic about taking any route home that would bring us near large groups of people. I thought of the hungry man who spat in my face, the woman in the T-shirt, Daria and Rose still in the medical tent... “Wonderful” was not the word I would have used.

The thing is, I knew my city was generous. That’s why I didn’t think twice about trying to share what I knew about this storm with the confused people on the street the day before. But ever since then — ever since I got slapped in the face and Mrs. Krimble had her head cracked open — I was slowly losing my confidence in humanity and, more importantly, my ability to help. Evidently, Janice had not had any of those types of experiences. Rather than looking downtrodden like our group, she was beaming just about as bright as her orange Food Bank T-shirt. She was pretty calm and optimistic, considering the madness around us. I sat watching her help the police, the nurses,

and my classmates and I felt like it was all going to be okay. Not because I was with Russ and I thought he might be as attracted to me as I was to him, not because we made a deal with the police to hitch a ride for the epic journey in front of us, and not because I finally had some real food in my belly. I thought it was going to be okay because now I could see that for every one of those crazy people screaming at the barricades, there was a Janice. She wasn't alone. There were lots of people in Times Square that were helping, looking optimistic, and I was about to be one of them... I hoped. I looked around at my classmates and saw their despair. I knew where it was coming from — I could feel it right below my epiphany of hope — I wasn't going to give into it. I was going to be like Janice. She looked at our group and said, "I know we are going to have to split you up around here, but I'm going to call first dibs — anyone want to help us collect more food?"

I shot my hand in the air while everyone else still hungrily munched away.

"Cool," Janice said. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, just like my dad's. "First come, first served. You know this isn't going to be easy, right?"

A flicker of doubt danced over me, but I wouldn't let it capture me. "That's okay," I said. "I'm ready to help."

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Times Square 10/7

So I've been thinking... I feel more comfortable in my skin when I'm writing — specifically when I'm writing for someone, like I do on Talia's Tales. Why is that?

I mention it now because in this moment I sense lingering tastes of the same feeling being here in Times Square. And the last time I felt it when I was not writing was when I was on the street yesterday

trying to make everyone understand what was going on. Or when I was given the ticket to take our group through these checkpoints. I never saw a connection before, but I think I see it now.

I was helping. Or at least I thought I was helping each time. I think when I ask the question, "What would Talia do?" I think the answer is that Talia would try to help. It seems strange because my posts — my writing, my fanfic, my memes — are not what my parents would categorize as helpful, I'm sure, but to my peeps? Yeah. I think so. I'm helping them laugh, smile, swoon, and — probably most of all — connect to each other in the comments. I look forward to what's coming next here. And that is just plain nuts. But I'll take it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Unseen Rat

As Janice promised, our group was split up. There were even more tents than I imagined needing our help. I was happy I was working with Janice because some of the other tent people looked miserable, at least from afar. Rose and Daria were kept in the medical area longer than the rest of us, as was expected. They were brought inside the store where there were cots set up inside the front window. It looked like they gave Rose ice packs for her head, but I also heard someone was on a quest to find some medication that might be able to help her.

“She should be in the hospital,” Janice said to me when she saw me looking at Rose. We were setting up a barbecue someone had just rolled in.

“She wasn’t that bad this morning,” I told her.

“You’d be surprised what kind of pain people can hide in stressful situations,” she said shaking her head. “You kids didn’t have a chap-erone with you?”

“We did, but our teacher got hurt yesterday,” I told her. “The police took her somewhere to get help.”

“And they didn’t take you all?” she asked with a sideways glance.

“There was a lot going on,” I said, thinking about how not only the police left us, but Murph did too. “I’m not sure they realized we were all together, you know?”

“Well, I’m happy you guys found your way here.” Then she smiled, “I think Chief Grady has a soft spot for lost causes.”

An officer walked over, “Excuse me, Ma’am, we got some keys, are you Janice?”

“That’s awesome. Yeah, I’m Janice. Who’d we get?” she asked.

“Juniors, Red Lobster and the deli on the corner of 45th and 8th,” the officer said.

“A deli?” Janice said, “You’re not shitting me?”

The officer smiled, “That’s what they told me!”

Janice grabbed the keys, hugged the officer and told me to go with her. We walked right past the tents and barricades on 45th and Seventh. No one seemed to have a problem with us *leaving* the blocked off area. People at that barricade were more orderly and calm than the one my group had come through. The tent they were on line for was taking and giving names and addresses. I guessed it was so people could see where their families and friends were. The crowd was only about five people deep. None of them seemed interested in getting into Times Square, just getting information and moving along. We walked right through and down to Eighth Avenue. When we got there I was once again struck by the new silence of the city. I began to notice things, not because they were there, but because they were not whole, they were missing the natural sounds that defined them. As we passed a subway station I glanced down into the shadows and yearned for the roar of a passing train. When we walked over the grates in the street, I missed the rumble that usually struck a tiny spark of fear in my heart as the subways passed. The structures of the city looked the same, but

they were hollow, missing the sounds that filled them up. As I thought about what “filled up” the subway, a new question terrorized me.

“Are they all out?” I asked Janice as we passed.

“Who?”

“The people in the subways.”

“Jesus,” she said, “I hope so. This place was cleared and set by the time I got here this morning, so I’m gonna guess the chief made sure of that, at least.”

At the door to the deli, Janice fumbled with the three sets of keys she was given. There was a large padlock holding down the metal gate covering all of the windows. I looked down Eighth Avenue — it was like some sort of freeze-frame — I couldn’t get used to all the cars stopped mid-trip, without any drivers. However, for the first time I also noticed broken glass in the street. Cars had been broken into. It reminded me of the gunshots, the chaos, the fear we heard the day before. Everything was quiet now, but maybe before the cops took over Times Square this was a different scene. I took a deep breath, thought of Chief Grady, Officer Avery, and all the police officers a mere block away and what it might have taken for them to “clear the area” the way Janice said. I looked at Janice as she shuffled through her new keys without a glance in the direction of the evidence of previous horrors. My fear dissolved. Even with all this evidence of horror, I recognized that I felt much safer than I had at the museum, or at least more confident in my safety.

I saw two men — one older and one younger, maybe a father and son — down the block at another store, pulling large boxes out on a hand truck. I imagined it was their family store, because it looked like they were trying to bring their inventory home where they could store it, or maybe even use it, before it went to waste or was taken. They looked as calm and at ease with the scene around us as Janice. The

younger guy, probably about eighteen or nineteen, saw me looking at him. I waved so he wouldn't think I was suspicious. I can only imagine what Janice and I looked like as she still wrestled with the lock. He smiled back and gave me a thumbs up.

He understood.

Janice found the right key for the lock and needed help getting the gate up all the way. I never realized how heavy those things are. The other key on that same ring opened the door, thankfully. While there was an alarm system with a code to deactivate, those were among the things in this new freeze-framed world that were no longer reliable. We walked right in.

The store was your typical bodega with a deli. Janice was thrilled with all of the refrigerators. "Do not open these yet," she said, "They may still be cool. We don't want to let any of that out yet, but man don't those all look good!"

She was right. Even though it was Fall and the weather was pleasant, the sun was hanging on to its warm shine — the longer you stood out in it, or walked in it, the more it pressed upon you. I could really go for an ice cold bottle of Sprite.

When Janice got to the back of the store she screamed, "Yee-Ha!"

"Yee-ha?" I mean did she think we were in the rodeo or something?

"Natalie, we've got ice!"

The back wall of the store was devoted to a long freezer that was split in two between ice bags and ice cream.

"It's funny Janice, you scream for ice, and I would have screamed for ice cream." The ice cream sandwiches were screaming my name.

"You can have all you want." Apparently Janice could care less if I ate everything in the store at that point. "But we *need* this ice. In fact, if we are *really* lucky..." she said as she made her way into the storage room, "Oh Natalie you are my lucky charm!"

I followed her back to find another freezer in the back packed with even more ice. I can't even begin to think why *so much* ice was necessary, but if it made Janice happy, it made me happy.

Janice looked around wide-eyed. It was as if she didn't know where to begin. Then all of a sudden like a switch was flicked in her head, she snapped back into action saying, "Okay, we need food, but we need ice more to keep the food longer. People will need ice so they don't lose the food they already have..." she was talking as if I wasn't even there, like she was going through a mental list she had prepared for this exact situation. "We need to secure this location before it gets looted," she looked up at me and nodded.

I flinched. Looting couldn't happen here. Not so close to all the officers. Right? Looting was par for the course when the city went unplugged for too long, but this place was protected. I had just finished convincing myself that looting could not happen here, in this store that we needed keys to get to, through a huge, heavy gate. Why was Janice suddenly worried?

In Staten Island, during Hurricane Imelda looting was something that happened to people's homes, not to stores. As I stood there I wondered how ignorant I had been. Those guys down the street were probably worried about their place too. They weren't calm, they were being cautious.

Janice said, "Why don't you start bringing all these bags of chips to the front of the store? Then see if you can start bagging up the other stuff in the store — not the drinks — don't open the fridges! I should be back long before you are done with that. It's my fault I didn't think to steal another one of your classmates for help right from the get-go."

"Wait. You'll be *back*? Where are you going?" I asked. With this reminder of doom, my security felt tenuous at best.

“I’m going to get us some help. We could do this. I don’t doubt that. Girl power,” she said with a punch into the air and a smile. “But with the ice I want to move fast, so the more hands, the better. Just keep the door locked and stay out of the window as much as you can,” she said as she walked out.

Staying out of the front window became my primary goal. No one needed to know I was in this store, until I had a bunch of other people with me. I’m okay on my own most of the time, but this felt weird. I went back to the ice cream freezer, reached in and grabbed my ice cream sandwich.

That was an epic fail. It was more like two chocolate cookies soaked in ice cream soup. After further investigation, I discovered that the various ices held up better. I found a chocolate ice cup, grabbed one of the wooden spoon-sticks, sat on the floor and enjoyed.

That was until the rat showed up.

I nearly lost my mind when a rat, the size of my forearm, came bursting out from under the freezer. I threw my ice in the air, screamed bloody murder and climbed on top of the freezer. I had no idea where the rat went, but I wasn’t too keen on finding out. I sat atop the freezer until I heard a knock at the door.



Chapter Twenty-Six

No Turning Back

Through the window I could see the two men from down the block. I waved and opened the door, “You guys finished your store already?” I asked.

“We took everything we needed,” the younger one said, “What do we have here?”

“Well Janice went basically ape-shit over all of the ice,” I said.

“There’s ice?” the older man, who looked previously unenthused about being at the store, lit up.

“So how do you want to do this?” the younger man said, looking at me very seriously, as if I were running the show.

“I don’t know if Janice has a method to her madness,” I shrugged, “but since you guys have already done this, I say it’s up to you until she tells you different.”

“Really?” he seemed overjoyed by the newly instilled freedom I bestowed upon him. He looked me up and down and said, “Nice.” I began to wonder how much of a hard ass Janice actually was when it came to this stuff. And then another thought crossed my mind — *Where is Janice?*

This guy made me feel incredibly uncomfortable with just a look. I needed a distraction and I needed space between us. I got to work on my half of the job. “Yeah so, I’m supposed to bag up the chips and stuff...” I looked desperately behind the counter for the bags.

When the men walked to the back of the store I found myself wishing for a herd of rats to emerge to distract them — or make them leave — until Janice arrived. I felt queasy, like I was on a rocky boat and starting to get sea sick. Something wasn’t right about the way the guy looked at me, the way he spoke to me, and the way he never even bothered to introduce himself. I told myself I was overreacting. I told myself it was all in my head. With the distance of a city block between us, the two men looked like innocent store owners hard at work in trying to put the puzzle pieces of life back together after the storm. When they arrived at the door, I imagined they were actually volunteers Janice sent my way to help out with this transfer, but really up close, my imagination ran wild, feeling there was an invisible, malodorous and sinister slime that washed over them. I positioned myself in between the counter and the deli case. I wanted to be able to add some furniture in between us if the younger guy made his way back up to the front of the store.

I packed the snack foods around the counter to distract myself. I was up to the nuts and trail mix when Janice walked in. “Why is the door open?” she asked, as Russ and Colin walked in passing her, going straight to the back, with coolers piled on a hand truck.

Russ gave me a wink and a smile before mouthing, “I found you!”

He seemed so cheery and the men in the back seemed so — I don’t know — dark. I didn’t want the two to meet.

“I opened it to let in those other guys,” I said pointing to the back of the store, “they already got started on the ice.”

Janice’s eyes widened, “What other guys, Natalie?”

Before I could answer, there were sounds of a struggle in the back of the store. Every hair on my body stood on end as my fears came to life. The two men walked to the front of the store, each with a gun held to one of my friend's heads. Colin's face was red and his hair was messed up. It appeared he was the reason for most of the noise. Russ's eyes were on me, screaming *Why?* They wanted to know why I let these men in the store, why I hadn't warned them, why I put us in this position.

I had no answer. I trusted these men. I was a fool. I thought they were helpers like us and like Janice. I was never good with people. I forgot about the people who take advantage of disasters. I believed we were past the violence, the horror, the *fight*. I believed everything was going to be okay for me like it always had been.

The younger one spoke first. "I take it you're Janice," he said using his gun to point at her while he sneered.

Janice looked at me and then nodded to them, "Leave the boys alone."

"Oh we will," he said, pointing his gun down, but still clutching Russ's arm tightly. "We don't want anything to do with any of you." He moved his gun like any normal person would move their hands when they spoke. I couldn't take my eyes off of it. "As long as you all leave, we won't have any kind of messy problems."

"Fine," Janice said, "you let all the kids go, but I want to talk to you about what you are doing. This isn't necessary."

The man looked Janice up and down the same way he looked at me, then he looked over to his partner. They both looked amused by Janice's proposition.

I screamed, *Janice NO! They can't be trusted! They won't be interested in what is "necessary"! COME WITH US!* But none of the words

left my mouth. I was too terrified to utter anything. I was mute. I was frozen.

I was a coward.

The older man smiled revealing yellowing teeth which made my stomach turn. The younger man threw Russ's arm in the direction of Janice as he said, "You got a deal, Lady." Then he turned his gun on me and said, "You can stay to talk too, if you want to, sweet thing." As obsessed as I was with the gun while it was on Russ, now I couldn't look away from the guy's eyes. They had darkened. It felt surreal or supernatural. I understood, instantly, why so many horror movies had used the special effects tools at their disposal to turn an evil creature's eye completely black, because that's what evil really looks like, like a shark. In that moment he stepped a little bit further from humanity and became more animal.

Russ grabbed my arm and yelled, "Let's go!" Then he pushed me through the front door. Colin was right behind Russ. This time I really screamed as I watched the young man grab Janice and drag her to the back of the store while the yellow-toothed monster locked the door behind us. I pulled away from Russ and slammed on the glass door, banging for Janice to at least know I was still there. The monster kissed the glass door right where my mouth was and then licked it. I heard a roar behind me as an arm was thrust around my waist and I was carried away kicking and screaming.

It was Russ. He was crushing me because he was holding me so tight. I punched him in the back screaming and crying that we needed to go back, but he wasn't listening. He just kept walking with wide angry strides back down 45th Street back in the direction of the barricade. When we passed the subway station I had started kicking Russ too. He finally stopped and put me down. It was the first time I saw his face. His eyes were full of rage and tears, his jaw was clenched and,

if his skin wasn't so dark, I think he would have been as red as Colin was. He scared me silent.

"You are not going back there," he growled.

"We can't leave her," I said.

"*YOU ARE NOT GOING BACK THERE!*" he yelled as he turned me pushing me back down the block where I saw Colin, up ahead running toward the barricade swinging his arms and screaming. I started running too.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blood at the Barricade

“**W**e need help!” Colin screamed through the crowd. He pushed past the tired pedestrians waiting to put their names on lists. It jostled them awake. I saw a man turn and push Colin back, but Colin kept going without looking back. I tried to make my way around the crowd instead of through it. Colin and I made it to the barricade at the same time.

“Hey kid,” one of the men at the table behind the barricade said to Colin, “you need to wait in line just like everyone else.”

“You don’t understand,” Colin started, but the man just held his hand up.

“Buddy, I understand all too well. Someone’s life is in danger, right?” he stared right at the dumbfounded Colin. “Well then, like I said: get in line.” Then he looked right over Colin’s head calling, “Next!”

When Colin held both arms out holding back as many people as he could, the man stood up and signaled the nearby officers assigned

to his tent. I noticed, beyond them, that a number of officers stepped into action when they saw this, including Officer Avery. I screamed, "Officer Avery! Please! We need you!"

She flinched hearing her name, but her eyes couldn't find me as she ran toward the tent. I waved my arms and screamed again, "Officer Avery! Over here!"

She saw me, then looked over at Colin. I watched her as the puzzle pieces fit together. Colin noticed her too and slid over to where I was standing, dissolving the situation he created. Everyone's eyes were on us.

"Janice is in trouble," I yelled.

"What kind of trouble?" Avery asked.

"Life or death trouble," Colin said and shot a glance at the man at the table who had now stopped everything he was doing to listen in on our drama.

From behind me Russ added, "They have guns and they took her," which was probably not the best thing to say in the middle of a crowd of scared and desperate people.

With his single utterance he transformed the numb group into a herd as harried as the first group we encountered on Broadway. Someone from behind shouted, "Active shooter!" and everyone pushed forward on the barricade seeking to be behind its police-protected force field. I was smashed up against the barricade and felt the wood cut my stomach as Russ fell on top of me. Colin was whiplashed over the barricade as well and, in an attempt to regain his balance, he elbowed a burly man standing behind him. The man at the table blew a whistle he had around his neck which brought even more police into action.

"The deli on Eighth," Russ sputtered over my shoulder at Officer Avery.

She looked over the crowd and then back at us. In her hesitation I could see that she was torn. We were in trouble — all of us at that barricade — but so was Janice.

“How many are there?” she asked.

“Two,” I exhaled.

Russ pulled his head up and yelled, “Go!”

Avery grabbed two officers who just reached the tent and ran away. At first I thought that something was lost in our communication, but then another people-surge thrust Russ back onto me and cut me even deeper in the stomach and I could think of nothing else.

“Can you get under it?” Russ asked. I could tell he was trying to whisper, but the strain force amplified him with every utterance.

I put both arms on the barricade and tried to push myself off just enough so I could slide down, but it was no use. I knew Russ was a big guy, but this was much more than his weight and my own that I was trying to pull back. I just shook my head to let him know it was no use.

“Lay down,” Russ said, which confused the hell out of me and Colin, who turned and looked at him quizzically. “I won’t let you fall.”

He could promise all he wanted. I had no idea what he was talking about. I tried again to push back praying, hopelessly, that the blood I saw trickling onto the barricade wasn’t real.

“Oh!” Colin said, suddenly looking much shorter. “Go limp! Stretch out your legs!” Colin’s legs were splayed underneath the barricade as if he was... well... laying down. That’s what Russ wanted us to do. I understood his promise to not let me fall now, too. If I just “laid down” then I would surely crack my head on the floor once I fell completely.

Colin slipped a little bit every time the crowd gave even just an inch, but with every surge he got pinned again. I tried to put my legs out in front of me and I felt the barricade tear up and saw more blood pour.

I screamed from the pain, but my scream was overshadowed by the sound of gunshots down the block. Everyone turned around, giving just enough for us to make our move. Russ had grabbed Colin's arm just in time to save him from bouncing his head off the asphalt. Since I was trying to pull myself up from my tearing wound, I felt the instant we had some space and I looped myself under the barricade with Russ and Colin.

Two officers lunged on us just as Chief Grady was running our way because of the gunshots, barking questions that, it seemed, only we could answer.

"Officer Avery's down at the deli with two other officers," I called to him.

This brought his attention to us and the officers that had grabbed us. "Take your hands off these kids, you idiots. They're the volunteers!" The officers let go immediately and Chief Grady asked us for everything we knew.

He sent out three more officers directly over the barricade which helped to bring order to the crowd. One of the mounted police trotted over on his horse, with a megaphone and spoke to the crowd, assuring them that everything was under police control, and that they simply should remain where they were until further notice.

It was around that time that Colin noticed I was bleeding, "What the hell happened to you?"

And, as if to bow due to its recognition, the cut burned with a searing pain. I pulled my shirt up revealing a long horizontal red dripping stripe across my abdomen. It looked like the Joker's smile — not the nice neat one they draw on the Batman cartoons, or the cute semicircular spiky-toothed smile of LEGO Joker, more like the scary jagged disturbing one from those *Dark Knight* movies. I felt lightheaded when I saw it.

“Holy shit, Natalie!” Russ scooped me up — a romantic move in any other situation — and ran me over to the medical tent.

I was brought inside immediately and put on a cot. Russ paced in between the two empty cots next to me while bumbling questions and apologies at me like they were being shot out of an automatic firearm, “When did that happen? How did that happen? I did it. Oh god I’m sorry. How did I do that? Was it those guys in the store? Did they do this to you? Or no. No. It was me. It was me at the barricade. I’m so, so sorry.”

He didn’t give me time to answer or tell him it was okay; that it wasn’t his fault. He just kept spiraling and as I tried to keep up I felt the room spinning. The people cleaning my wound, those around me and the sounds they were making started to float away becoming more like echoes of themselves rather than the real thing.

I don’t know when I passed out exactly, or how long I was out, but when I woke up my stomach and my two hands were all bandaged up. I felt like I had slept for days, but I could see that the sun was still up, although it had made a pretty long trip since I last checked on it. Despite the passage of time, the room I was in had become even more active. The cots beside me were now occupied. Janice, or at least someone that looked a lot like her, was in the cot directly next to me. The cot next to her was surrounded by people working on someone. I imagined someone else got messed up at the barricade. It really wasn’t that difficult for me to almost get ripped in half.

I looked at Janice. She had been crying, that was obvious, but now she looked numb. I stared at her waiting for her to see me, or say something, but she just laid there staring up into nothing. Slowly, I pulled myself up into a seated position thinking she might notice me then, but if she saw or heard my movement she gave no acknowledgement of that fact.

“Janice?” I said in a hushed tone.

She blinked.

“Janice, are you okay?” I asked, deeply fearful of her answer.

“Didn’t I say to keep the door locked,” she said, still staring at the nothing.

“I’m so sorry, I thought —”

“Didn’t I say to keep the door locked?” she said louder.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

Then she turned, looking directly at me with wild, empty eyes she screamed, “Keep the door locked!” causing the people at the next cot to turn and grab her. Both of her hands were covered in bandages stained in some mixture of pink and brown, blood and antiseptic, I guessed. One of the people holding her whispered to me, “Get out of here.”

I quickly moved off the cot, grabbing onto its side when the speed brought the spins back. Carefully, hoping I wouldn’t pass out again, I made my way to the door. The person on the next cot was Officer Avery. Her arm was bleeding. She had been shot.

Written in Natalie’s Notebook

Times Square 10/7

I have to stop doing this. Helping may make me feel better, but I am really, really bad at it. I don’t have a job right now and maybe that’s for the best.

I need to get home.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Apologies Unaccepted

When I emerged from pop up triage, everything about Times Square had changed. While we were expecting a decrease in police presence as we got closer and closer to sun down, the opposite happened. I guessed the gunshots changed the priorities of the day. Add to that an officer being treated for gunshot wounds and we had ourselves a huge lockdown in effect. The officers no longer positioned themselves behind the barricades, but in front of them. One of the mounted policemen was doing large laps around the perimeter of Times Square monitoring the surrounding areas leading up to it.

The tkts booth, where people in the know usually lined up all day to get discounted tickets to Broadway shows, was surrounded by police. It was a strange sight. Instead of keeping their backs to the booth as if they were protecting it, they were all looking in. When I saw Russ and Colin making their way over to the booth, I went in the same direction. The police parted for them and then, surprisingly, they did the same for me. Inside, handcuffed to a pole and badly beaten, was the man

from the deli, the younger one. He was in the middle of cursing out one of the officers who was taunting him when I came into his view.

“Oh there’s my little sweet thing,” he said, licking his lips, “I should have taken you before the ice.”

It looked like he tried to wink with his bruised eye when the officer inside with him kicked him in the side saying, “No one will question it if you turn up dead just like your buddy.” The man coughed and laughed as I felt my body being pulled away from the booth.

“What are you doing over here?” Russ hissed.

“I saw you and Colin so I —” he cut me off when he saw my bloody shirt.

“Are you even supposed to be up right now?” he said, pulling it up revealing my clean bandages.

I pulled my shirt down and said, “I’m fine, Russ. They told me to get out of there. Janice lost her shit when she saw me.” I looked over to the triage area wondering how they calmed her down, if they calmed her down at all. “I mean, I know I messed up in letting those guys in, but I thought she sent them, you know? I didn’t realize...” I looked up at Russ and saw his fury melt into concern. “I made a mistake. We sent for help. We got her out of there. The guys were caught. Officer Avery’s the one who should be mad at me. Janice looks like she got away—”

Russ stopped me again, this time by putting his hands gently on my shoulders, “Gunshots aren’t the only way people get hurt, Natalie,” he said softly.

“No. No, there wasn’t time,” I said. “No no no she looked ok, Russ. She just looked...” *What?* I asked myself, *What did she look like? Panicked? Unbinged?* They had found a way to hurt her, but how? I remembered how that guy had looked at me, what it felt like he was thinking. I remembered the powerful darkness of the implied

thought. What kind of terrible blow could be dealt with turning that look into an action? I stood silently staring beyond Russ, through Times Square, through time, into the past.

I waved at him, I thought. I invited both monsters into our lives. I opened the door for both of them to come in. I knew something was wrong. I sensed something was off with them and what did I do? I hid behind a counter. I let Russ and Colin walk right back to them without a warning. I left Janice with them.

“It’s all my fault,” I finally whispered.

Russ thrust his arms around me as I fell to pieces, but I barely felt him beyond my own shaking.

“It’s all my fault,” I sobbed.

Colin came over with Chief Grady and a couple of other officers.

Grady spoke first, laying his large hand in between my shoulders, “I apologize for that, young lady. We are looking to get this sorry excuse for a life form moved out of here so none of us have to be in his presence, particularly you.”

I pulled away from Russ and looked at the chief. “I’m so sorry, Chief. I really am. I hope you believe me. I didn’t mean it at all. I was confused. I thought they were there to help. I’m so, so, so sorry.” I couldn’t stop myself from the rambling sorrow.

He looked at me cockeyed and said, “Sorry for what?”

“I did it,” I said. “It was all my fault. I’m sorry about Officer Avery and Janice.”

“Avery will be fine, Honey, she was just grazed,” he said. He floated his hand right by my right shoulder and smiled. “A nice clean bandage and some doctor ordered pain killers will do her just fine.” A couple of the other officers laughed, pleasing Grady. Then he took on a much more serious stance before continuing. “As for Janice, that ain’t your fault. It never was and it never will be.”

“Well, she thinks it is and I think she’s right,” I told him.

“Listen, you were the first person she asked about when we got her out of there. She wouldn’t shut up until she saw you. You were out cold, so she freaked and asked whether or not those cretins had hurt you. She felt as guilty about leaving you behind as you do right now.”

I doubted that.

I tried to explain to everyone that the men didn’t force themselves into the store, but it didn’t work. Everyone wanted to treat me like some kind of innocent victim instead of the catalyst to all of the afternoon horror. Brenda and Rainbow cornered me to ask if I was okay and if I need to talk. Daria and Princess both told me they were sorry. In the meantime, all of the boys were uncharacteristically silent around me. Dustin held Stella a bit closer, Terrell steered clear of me, and Colin worked his way around the group retelling the tale in hushed tones, as if my hearing it would be some great offense. Murph kept looking at me, but never approached, and Russ had apparently gone missing, back to whatever he was working on before, I guessed. However, beyond the awkward group and my feeling that the sun was moving across the sky faster than what felt like normal. I looked up to the sky and, when it peeked out from the clouds, the sun was right in the spot Chief Grady had jokingly pointed out to us when we agreed to stay and help out.

“Is Officer Avery awake?” I asked Stella, who seemed to be the only person in my small tribe that was still treating me like a normal human being.

“She’s being taken to the hospital on the next carriage, I heard,” she said, pointing out another two horse-drawn carriages pulling into Times Square. One was pulled as close to the Express store as it could get — which was pretty close since one group spent the afternoon rolling cars out of the center of the street. The other pulled across the

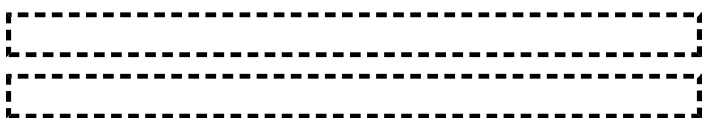
Square to one of the precinct tents. I watched as they carefully pulled Officer Avery into the back of the carriage, followed by Janice carefully climbing in behind her. I guess she had to go to the hospital too. Two police officers got in with them and the carriage pulled away.

As soon as it started moving, Officer Avery woke up and screamed. I presumed the bumping of the carriage was painful for her, but otherwise I couldn't say for sure. On the other end of the Square police piled into the back of the other carriage, along with the prisoner. It took a long time for them to organize the entire situation and take off in the other direction. The carriage moved in the direction of the northwest end of the city, but it passed us on its way out.

Murphy was standing next to me, but as the carriage approached he stepped in front of me, blocking my view of the prisoner's exodus. And, while I knew this was an attempt to save me any more grief, he couldn't save Russ who showed up right as the carriages came by. The man heckled Russ as the carriage pulled slowly by, "Hey little boy, I think your little girlfriend wanted me."

Murph's entire posture tensed. I could see it in his shoulders, his fists and arms. Russ lunged for the carriage that appeared to pick up the pace just in time. I reached out for him. He was pulsing, like I could feel the blood pumping through his arms. I whispered, "I'm sorry." Which received the most terrifying response I could think of.

Russ turned on me, screaming, "You have to stop apologizing for *him!*"



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blame Game

Russ scared me, although I knew he was justified in his fury over my apologies. I just wished he would say what he was really thinking. Something like, “I’m sorry doesn’t do shit to make up for the danger you put us all in!” or maybe, “Why don’t you save your sorries for Janice?” Chief Grady pulled Russ away from me and took him for a walk. I was surprised who came to my side. It was Rainbow... and Murph.

“He doesn’t mean it,” Murph said. “He’s just completely freaked out and feeling helpless.”

“He’s been crazy ever since the deli,” I said as I watched him walk away. “I don’t think he’s normally like that.” I felt the need to defend him in this situation, especially with Murph.

“He isn’t, you’re right,” Rainbow agreed, “but that doesn’t mean it’s okay for him to treat you that way now.” She looked in his direction. “I mean... especially now.”

“It’s a guy thing,” Murph said to both of us, as if that explained everything.

I just looked at him. I knew he was a guy. I knew guys acted weird in certain situations, but I don’t like all the yelling. I agreed with

Rainbow. I didn't think saying "it's a guy thing" was enough of a cover for the whole irrational behavior thing. And, yet, I felt I deserved it anyway.

"It's more than that. It's that I put him and Colin in danger and Janice got attacked because of me. Russ knows it as much as I do. He's got every reason to be mad at me. I just don't understand why he's still acting protective of me. I wish he would just say what he's really thinking. He's got every right to just leave me out in the cold."

"That's just stupid," Murph said.

Rainbow shot Murph a side eye, but saved her energies for her response to me, "Geez, Nat! That's not what's happening here!" but before she could continue, Chief Grady interrupted her asking for me to come with him. He brought me over to the tkts booth which was now an isolated, quiet booth, with Russ sitting inside.

"Mr. Sandberg needs to talk to you, Ms. Turner," the chief said as we walked up, "Let him speak before you say anything."

"Okay," I said tenuously, bracing myself for the true onslaught of blame I was about to receive.

"I'll be out here if you need me," he said as he walked over to a nearby bleacher seat.

Inside, I found Russ crumbled up in a ball on the floor right where the criminal was cuffed to the pole earlier. Russ was a mess of angles of legs and arms folded in strange zig zags to fit his large form in a small corner. I didn't like seeing him there, nor did I like being in there, but I moved closer and sat down beside him. It took a while for him to say anything or even to acknowledge I was there. As per Chief Grady's instructions, I didn't say anything.

When Russ looked up at me I was shocked. He had been crying. It was obvious by the tightness of his face and the glossiness of his eyes. He wiped his face with his sleeves before speaking with a nasal

voice, “Natalie, I am so sorry for everything, but most of all for how I’ve yelled at you. I am just past my limit with the insanity we have been exposed to in the last 24 hours. All I wanted to do was find a way to have a good time with you on this trip, you know, once the opportunity availed itself.”

I heard the words he said, but in my mind they didn’t make any sense. Was this all crumbling down to what Russ calculated as a horrible first date?

“I have liked you for so long. I joke around with my sister crushing on Rog, but I was in the same boat. I just never thought there was a chance. I mean, maybe, like if I was the last guy on Earth and stuff. And then you were with Murph or whatever, but we still got to talk and stuff. Then the world ends and I think at least I can keep my eye on you, keep you safe. The artsy idiot leaves you alone and I think maybe it was meant to be this way, the two of us making it through the craziness of the altered planet *together* and I think to myself, ‘I am so happy I am with her for all of this because I can protect her,’ but I can’t. The *one minute* we are separated you are caught with two animals who wanted to attack you,” he stared down at the ground between us and his eyes welled with tears again. I watched him struggle with his fury and pain again. I said nothing and waited.

“Then, as if it couldn’t get any worse, *I hurt you!*“ he said while pointing at the blood on my shirt. “And, like a complete *dick* I decide to scream at you like some sort of maniac every time you remind me of everything I did wrong.”

Now I was flabbergasted — everything *he did wrong?* I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t mean to be insensitive to the situation, but I laughed.

Russ gave me a sidelong glance. “You’re *laughing* at me?”

“Can I say something now?” I asked, thinking no matter what Chief Grady said, I had to stop Russ from plowing down this path of incorrect thinking.

Russ nodded.

“Well, yeah I’m laughing at you. Practically everything you just said is ridiculous. First of all,” I raised my forefinger for effect, “the fact that you supposedly have liked me for ‘so long’ is utterly ridiculous. You never even talk to me! I didn’t even know you have been carpooling my brother around Staten Island until today! Aren’t you supposed to talk to someone you like?” I glanced quickly at Russ, whose eyebrows raised.

“Aren’t you the expert crusher? How often did you talk to Murph before, what? Like, yesterday?” he said and tapped my nose.

“Right,” I said. “Okay. Touché there, but don’t distract me.” I plowed on through to my second point, raising my second finger up. “Secondly, the world did not end. I think you have stretched the truth for dramatic effect there. To a ridiculous level, I might add,” catching his eye that time, I saw him start to crack a smile. “And you say you wanted to protect me? Ridiculous! This world is nuts. My parents couldn’t even protect me, neither could Mrs. Krimble or Dr. Davies on this trip. You can look out for me, and I can look out for you, sure, but protect me in all cases? Sorry, Russ, that ain’t happening.” That one made him laugh. “But really, the most ridiculous thing you said is that you thought you hurt me.”

This time I took a deep breath, grabbed his two hands and looked directly into his eyes, “I want you to understand that *nothing* you have done on this trip — or ever, that I can think of — has hurt me. Russ, I thought you wanted to tell me how much you hated me just now for everything I had put you through. This is by far one of the most ridiculous conversations I have ever had!”

“But I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” he said quietly.

“Maybe not, but I shouldn’t have let those two guys in the store alone with me, so who’s done the bigger bad here?” I shrugged, but before my shoulders could return to their normal position, Russ’s long arms were around me.

“I don’t know what I would have done if they hurt you, Natalie,” he whispered into my neck.

I wiggled my arms free and held him back because I had just remembered how I got out of that store. “If you didn’t pull me out of there they probably would have,” The tears felt hot and heavy in my eyes as the reality of what he had done for me finally hit me. “Russ, you *did* protect me. You saved me.”

“I think I would have tried to kill them,” he said.

“You saved me,” I whispered back, because with everything that had happened so quickly, it just hadn’t hit me until that moment.

“I’ll do it every time, if you let me,” he said.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Good,” he said before kissing me on my cheek. His lips were warm and soft and perfect. I wanted to kiss him back, but I was too lost in the moment, still covered in the ugly emotions of the day. I took his warm kiss and gathered it in my heart, letting it work a calming magic over me.

“Thank you,” I said because he had saved me again. This time he saved me from myself.

When Russ and I walked back up to the group hand in hand, the dynamic of how everyone looked at me completely changed. I guess I didn’t look as fragile or damaged after talking to Murph, Rainbow, Chief Grady and fighting to bring Russ back into the fold smiling and relaxed. We were now together and, therefore, more balanced and easier to deal with. I think the group feared us each on our own in our

own individual attempts at dealing with the insanity. Now we made sense.

"It's getting late," I said to Russ.

Rainbow overheard me and agreed. "We were kinda hoping you guys were talking to the chief guy about getting us out of here, too. Not for nothing, I think he completely forgot about getting us out of here with everything else going on."

We hadn't talked to the chief about getting to the ferry, but it was the right idea. I stepped up to where Chief Grady was talking to some other officers.

"Excuse me, Chief," I interrupted, no longer fearing this man after he bridged the gap between Russ and I. "Are those carriages coming to take us downtown soon?" I pointed to where the sun was and smiled, hoping he would remember his joke and laugh along with me.

"I can't do anything for you until they return, hon," Chief Grady said, "but I promise when they do, you are the first group to go."

"They left?" I asked.

"Darlin', you just watched them leave!" Then he smiled, as if that were some kind of light-hearted, humorous realization.

"It will probably be dark by the time they get back," Russ said. "I've been watching them all day, it takes forever for them to return. Do you see that sun?" He pointed to the sky without taking his eyes off of Grady. "It's not waiting!"

"Russ," I said softly, "the chief knows. We are all in a difficult situation here. Why don't we get something to eat and get all ready to go. That might take all the time we need."

"Yeah, I guess," he said, but then he turned to Grady and put a finger up in his face, "that doesn't mean I am going to disappear. I'm going to be on you like white on rice, Chief. You promised us. You are *not* going to forget about us again!"

“Young man,” Chief Grady said, “that’s a deal.”

They shook hands and I felt confident we would be safely downtown by the time the sun set.

I was wrong.

Written in Natalie’s Notebook

Times Square 10/7, late afternoon

Waiting

Waiting

Waiting

While yesterday we seemed to be waiting for the sun so we could move safely toward our home, today we are waiting in spite of the sun’s decent. It’s the first time I think we are actually waiting for something — a ride to get us that much closer to home — but it’s another thing that’s just outside our realm of control.

It’s all so much slower than life used to be. I could have an Uber here in five minutes if I could just get my phone to work.

If they could just get their cars to work.

If this world were just a little more familiar.

Written in Natalie’s Notebook

10/7, a little later (my “time stamp” is getting more and more pointless as I continue this book!)

I just got to thinking about what I wrote about how everything is much slower now. It’s like the whole world is in slow-motion. It can be annoying, sure, but, why do people use slow-motion? Why did I do frame by frame analyses of the WOLF NIGHTS teaser trailers?

Simple.

*You miss a whole lot when things play too fast. A whole lot.
Maybe my life has been moving too fast. Maybe I've been missing a whole lot. I'm beginning to develop a list of stuff I was missing before the slow-motion took over my life.*

A List of Misses

The stars

The sun's movement

A colorful friend right under my nose

The signs he wasn't for me

The guy who I should have always seen.

Chapter Thirty

Bumps In The Night

When I suggested we get food while we waited for the horses to return, it was because I thought it was a good distraction. However, it became clear that the idea came straight from my brain-gut connection. We hadn't eaten in a while and I was starving. Of course, I couldn't help thinking about Janice as we were back at her tent, but, hunger always helps distract. I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a lukewarm bottle of water. Not the most delicious meal of my lifetime, but maybe the most satisfying. We sat in a cafe in Times Square, as if we all just decided to stop and eat while exploring the more touristy corners of our city. I imagined how much a peanut butter and jelly sandwich would cost in a place like that while I listened to everyone else's stories of their volunteer jobs.

Princess and Brenda both worked at one of the precinct tents. All they could talk about were the hot police officers. Murph threatened Brenda that he was going to go back to his cousin with all of this information, to which Brenda replied with a stuck out tongue. Rainbow said she was helping out in the medical tent. She wasn't too happy with her station. "There wasn't anything to do until something bad happened." Everyone looked over at me.

“No, no, I don’t even mean that,” she said. “I mean — yeah — of course, that was bad and we were busy cause of all that, but I mean before that. All I did all day was organize first aid supplies until someone would come from one of the inventory tents giving us the name of a DB.”

“What’s a DB?” Colin asked, he was sitting next to her with his arm propped up on the booth seat behind her.

“Dead body,” Stella said quietly, “I sent a couple of those names your way.” She looked down at the table in front of her, quiet until Dustin put his hand over hers. “The people who came with the names were so... sad. Some people were there to tell us about their neighbors that they went to check on, others came to tell us about their parents — those people looked broken.”

“That’s so sad,” Brenda said.

“That’s not even the worst,” Stella said, swallowing hard, “This one woman brought us her baby. She was devastated.” Stella gave each sentence its time. I could see that she was reliving the moment in her mind. For us, this was just a story, to Stella it was a constant replay. “The baby was dead.”

“Oh god,” Daria said while Princess gasped.

“She said the baby had a nebu-lazer?” Stella said, unsure.

“Nebulizer,” Daria clarified. “I have one of those at home.”

We all looked at her. I had no idea what a nebulizer was, so, for a moment, I thought it was vlogging equipment or something.

“What’s it for, Daria?” Stella asked, “because the woman just kept crying that the nebulizer wouldn’t work and I had no idea what to say.”

“I have it for my asthma,” she said. I had forgotten about Daria’s asthma. It was a lot worse when we were kids, or at least I thought it was. I remember her carrying around those little pumps everywhere

we went and always needing it at recess. In fact, in middle school, she was excused from Gym class, something I always envied her for. “If I have a really bad attack I have to use it just so I can breathe.”

“Oh...,” Stella said. And I could tell that she was thinking what we were all thinking. The baby couldn’t breathe. The baby suffocated and all that mother could do was watch.

We may have missed our electronic devices, the cars and the convenience of our life since the CME, but other people were missing out on what kept them alive. Life was in danger. Any life supported by power. And then it hit me — the hospitals are full of people like that. What was happening in the hospitals?

“She was two years old,” Stella whispered.

Rainbow said, “Megan Fishman?”

“Yes!” Stella said, “How did you know?”

“I cried when I got her name. I mean, two years old?” Rainbow looked up as if praying her tears wouldn’t fall, “That just doesn’t make any kind of sense to me.”

We all sat quietly for a minute until Terrell asked, “And what were you supposed to do with those names?”

“We had a running list of the dead. The list had to be brought to the hospital’s morgue so they could figure out how to gather the bodies before disease spread or anything like that.”

“That’s so nasty,” Princess said, putting her sandwich down.

“Seriously Man,” Colin said, “I’m eating here.”

“I’m sorry,” Rainbow said. I could see that she was still shaken from her day. She, like most of us, wasn’t used to dealing with death so blatantly.

“What did you do, then, Colin?” Russ asked.

“Barricade bonanza,” he said.

“Which one?” I asked.

“Oh, I was lucky enough to be thrust back to the insanity we walked through to get into this hell hole. I got to dance around horse shit and get spit on by the natives,” Colin explained this with the typical dead-pan delivery he used for all conversation. He took a bite out of his sandwich before continuing. He raised one hand and said, “But there was a major win for the team over there. I had the joy of telling Brenda’s friend to go fuck off, with the full support of the police behind me.”

“Brenda’s friend?” Princess asked.

“That psycho woman, right?” I asked.

“That’s the one,” Colin said, pointing his sandwich at me.

“She the one that spit on you?” I asked.

“One of many,” he smiled. “I don’t have — what do they call them things? — Oh yeah, people skills.. It just ain’t in my nature. Plus, I get cranky when I’ve been straight too long.”

Brenda laughed, “Dude! What is ‘too long’ for you? You were completely baked just last night!”

We all laughed and added details of Colin’s evident incapacitation due to foreign substances.

Outside the café the light was dimming. Daria wanted to bring some food to Rose and to see what her progress was. It was just about the worst time to have to find someone in our group. Trying to see the separate faces in the twilight was difficult. We gathered outside of the Triage area while Daria went inside.

I was looking through the window to see if I could even find Rose inside when everyone’s attention was drawn to the barricade as we heard the sound of horse hooves hitting the asphalt.

The carriages were back.

Chief Grady saw the group of us standing by the Triage and gave us a thumbs up from over by the barricade. One of the officers from the carriage dismounted and spoke for a long time to the Chief. There

was a lot of back and forth and hands flying through the air before the chief ultimately exhaled and turned to greet us. He was not wearing the expression of relief I had anticipated.

It was bad news.

One of the horses was hurt and the other was exhausted. Neither carriage could take us downtown.

“What does that mean?” I asked. I was exhausted — both physically and emotionally. While the cot served its purpose when I passed out earlier, it still wasn’t my bed.

“I can offer you a police escort on foot to get you to your shelter. It should take about two hours, if you guys think you are up for it,” he said. “You won’t get to the ferry tonight, but you can rest up and do that first thing in the morning.”

My body had already signed up for a ride, not more walking tonight. I hated this plan, but there were no other options presented. I couldn’t just rebel against the group because I didn’t like what we had to do.

I couldn’t, but I guess Princess could. “No way,” she said. “The cops are staying in the hotel. Why can’t we?”

“What are you talking about, Princess?” I asked.

“Right there, the Marriott! They have beds in there and there’s no way that they’re using all of them. We can stay here tonight and go in the morning,” she demanded.

Russ and I looked at each other, then at the Chief. “Chief,” Russ said, “I don’t think any of us can walk away from the prospect of sleep in a bed with what we have ahead of us.”

I could have kissed Princess, but I didn’t want to celebrate yet. I loved her plan, but that didn’t mean it was going to work out for us. I realized I was holding my breath in the silence that followed as Chief Grady looked from the hotel to us and back again.

“Right,” he finally said. “Yeah, we can work something out.”

By the time we finished discussing the arrangements with Chief Grady, the sun was completely gone. The stars were overhead again, but I was too tired to appreciate their beauty. The police pulled back the barricades giving them less area to keep secure since they had less officers to work with. There was a huge loss in presence once the curfew began. Many of the officers had to move to their positions on foot since the carriages were out of commission, but a lot of them, unbeknownst to me, had been resting in the hotel prepping for their night shift.

The hotel was scary. We had flashlights, but not many since we were limited to the type that were unaffected by the solar storm. We had to take the stairs up to the fourth floor. The police had already taken the first three floors divided up between them and the guests who opted to stay.

I can't say I was still loving the plan as we climbed the stairs, but when I got to the bed, all of that changed.

Chief Grady and Officer Chris Guild walked us up and helped us find rooms that were in decent shape. While we didn't have running water or lights, particularly after our climb, we didn't really care. We brought candles up to the rooms since the chief and the cop were the only ones with the flashlights. I also still had at least two glow sticks floating around in my backpack, and I knew I wasn't alone there as I had split them up between the group, so I wasn't terrified of being trapped in the dark. And, you know something, I was actually becoming more comfortable with the dark anyway.

Chris put me and Stella in room 423. It only had one bed, but it was a huge bed. All of our rooms were attached and Chris said we should keep the connecting doors open so we could hear each other and get to each other in case of emergency. He said this way we could all sleep

in a bed rather than all clustering up in one room just for safety. The only type of protection we had was the bolt lock on the doors to the hallway. All the other locks — in between rooms, for each floor and the actual rooms' doorknobs — were all automated and zapped by the CME. This is why Chief Grady was so resistant to us staying in the hotel. He said it wasn't secure and that he didn't have the manpower to spare to keep us all protected. We reminded him that we survived the night together in an unprotected museum the night before without the benefit of the Chief of Police sleeping downstairs. This was a huge upgrade in security as far as we were concerned. That's what sold the Chief. He and Officer Guild came up with the plan to lock us in, but keep the connecting doors open.

I didn't care what the hell they figured out, as long as I got to sleep in a bed. So, when I got to room 423, I took my shoes, hoodie and socks off and crawled into bed. I listened to everyone else settle into their rooms and then I heard Officer Guild shout out, "I'm in room 411 if you need me. Remember, odd numbers only, so count down from where you are."

"Room 415 with Terrell, Murph, and Colin," Terrell called out, then 417 was called out by Dustin and Russ. In 419 Princess and Brenda, 421 had Rainbow and Daria, and, finally, when it was our turn in 423, Stella announced our location adding that she thought I was already asleep. I didn't realize we were the last group on the block, but I didn't mind. I figured it would be more quiet that way. It didn't take long for the block to become extremely quiet. We had barely slept the night before with all of the aurora excitement and, in many ways, today was a lot more exhausting than the day before. Rest is what we all needed. And the pillow on my bed was intoxicating.

I don't know when Stella left the room. I don't know if she was waiting for me to fall asleep, or everyone else. In fact, I didn't even re-

alize I was alone in the room until another voice woke me up, "Natalie, is this your room?"

It was half a dream, half a reality when it first entered my ears. Then the voice came back again, "Natalie, I'm sorry. Is this you? I just don't want to scare you."

"Russ?" I was sure I was dreaming when I identified the voice.

"Yeah. Natalie?"

"Yeah. What are you doing here?" I asked, slowly propping myself up in the darkness.

"Stella is an animal. Her and Dustin are at it again. I'm worried there's going to be a solar storm baby from this trip," he said while yawning.

"Stella left me?" I was shocked that I had been left at the end of the block all on my own.

"Yeah, and she kicked me out!" he said. "D'ya know if you guys have a couch in this room?" he asked and I heard him shuffling around.

"For what?" I asked.

"I'm exhausted," he said. "I just want to sleep."

"Russ, don't be ridiculous. You need to feel these beds, they're amazing."

"I know," he said, "I was in one," he said bitterly.

"Just get over here," I said, too tired to process the forwardness of my demand, "I trust you and, anyway, I know you're too tired to do anything."

I saw his silhouette stop and stand up straight. He didn't say anything for a minute. I saw his hand rub his head as if he were having a hard time processing his options.

"Dude, I'm done. I need to sleep and you are waking me up with all of your walking around, just come to the bed. It's enormous, you won't even know I am here."

“Alright,” his voice crackled with the thickness of his exhaustion. I felt so bad for him. Stella was crazy.

I laid back on the pillow, pulled the covers over me and felt a whole new kind of warmth when the bed leaned into Russ’s weight. Stella might have been crazy, but I suddenly understood why she might have craved the feel of Dustin by her side. I smiled and fell right back to sleep.

When Stella came to wake us up, the room was soaked in sun, “Wake up you two. I told the cop you came to get me to wake up Dustin,” she said in a very businesslike tone and I began to reflect upon all of her goodie goodie moments. I wondered if Stella was as good as we all thought, or if she just knew what to say and when to say it. I also wondered why she seemed so stoic after getting away with spending the night with her boyfriend. It just didn’t seem to match up for me.

“I guess I better get back there,” Russ said sleepily, “I’ll see you later.”

When he left I decided to talk to Stella about putting him in such an awkward situation, “You know, you could have given us a heads up about last night. I had no idea you left me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly while putting on her shoes.

“It was kind of crazy to go down to their room, wasn’t it? I mean, you guys could’ve gotten caught,” I added.

“Caught?” Stella asked, “Caught doing wha— Oh. No. That’s not why I went down there, Nat. I just couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about her,” she went quiet.

“About who?” I figured she missed someone in her family, or was worried about her cat or something.

“Megan,” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

“She was so small, Natalie,” Stella began to cry. “She was blue. I didn’t tell you guys that, but her face was blue. She was wrapped in a pink and white blanket that looked just like the one my grandmother made me —”

I finally realized who she was talking about. The baby who died without her nebulizer.

“Why did she have to die?” she just broke down into sobs. Daria and Rainbow heard her and Rainbow went right to her side.

“I’ve been thinking about her too, Stella,” Rainbow said. I had almost forgotten that Rainbow had a Megan moment of her own the day before. The more I thought about it, the more I understood. While I had my own slap of reality yesterday, I didn’t have to face death in the same way these two girls did. I faced the violence and the reality of the darker side of humanity. They had to face the unjust reality of mortality. All life ends. In some cases, it is at the hands of illness or old age and we can justify the ending of a person’s time on this planet because their time here was lengthy and well spent, but what is the justification of the death of a child? And how do we deal with that death when it comes in the hands of a natural disaster, a fluke, by all intents and purposes, a blackout. How does one sleep when they are haunted by the eyes of a mother who held her child as she suffocated because she couldn’t help her?

I wondered about the mother, the father and everyone in the family of the baby Megan. I sat down on the edge of the bed just thinking, wondering about my own family and how they were holding up. I remembered Roger when he was two years old and how he was so dependent on all of us. I was only six, but I had so much more of a handle on this planet and this life than he did. I sat there knowing he was old enough to be okay on his own, but I felt a sudden need to run home to make sure he was okay. As I listened to Stella’s sobs

broken only by hiccups and deep breaths I focused all my energy on suppressing my own emotions.

Roger's okay, I told myself, He was in Staten Island. He's with mom and dad.

I guess word got down the block about Stella, because Dustin came rushing in our room pushing everyone else out of the way. Looking at his face, you would have thought he was told she had been shot or something. "Stell, Baby, please," he said, kneeling on the floor in front of her, "I'm here." He was so gentle, so unlike the crass and outlandish Dustin I was used to. "She's in a better place, Stella."

"She must've been so scared," Stella sobbed.

He leaned in and hugged her midsection. "What did I tell you about that?"

Stella's breathing evened out when he held her. "She's not scared anymore."

He leaned back and looked at her, wiping her eyes with his fingers, "She is not scared anymore, Stella. She wasn't even scared when you saw her."

Stella nodded, pulling herself together. Which, honestly, is not something I think she would be able to do without Dustin there. Officer Guild walked in just when Stella got up and hugged Dustin. Dustin nodded to the officer to signal that it was okay. He didn't protest or ask for clarification. He just said softly, "Alright guys, whenever everyone's ready, we'll meet outside the front doors." Then, turning back to Dustin, "Take your time."

Russ came in behind them. He walked right over to me, "Is everything okay?"

I looked over at Stella on the other side of the bed, "Yeah, I think she's okay now."

Russ pulled my face back towards him, “What about you? Are you okay?”

I exhaled and said, “I think so.”

And then he grabbed me up off the bed and held me tight. I don’t know if he was inspired by Dustin, if he needed it or if he just somehow knew that was what I needed. I didn’t care. I was just happy to be in his arms.

Chapter Thirty-One

Gifts of the New Day

Outside the hotel there were three horse pulled carriages waiting for us. Each had a cooler on the floor and enough room on the benches facing each other to fit three to four of us on each side. We were the first scheduled trip for the carriages and we were going straight down to the Staten Island Ferry terminal. Since it was early, Chief Grady suspected that we might not have to stay in Manhattan again if we got moving right away.

Russ and I climbed up into the first carriage followed by Colin, Terrell, Rainbow, and Princess. Dustin and Stella got into the carriage with Rose, Daria, Murph, and Brenda. A couple of volunteers from the medical tent brought Rose a separate cooler filled with extra doses of a medication that had been helping her feel a little bit better, but had its own share of side effects. One of the volunteers, a young guy who could not have been a doctor yet, turned to Daria, “Remember to keep her hydrated. If she gets pins and needles go for Gatorade and potassium foods. It’s a quick fix for now, but Rose, honey,” he turned

back to Rose, “you have to get to a specialist as soon as you can. You sure you don’t want to stay in the city?”

Rose laughed and it was the best she sounded since everything went sideways. “I’m positive. Gary, you’ve been the best — all of you have. I know I can never repay you, but I will do my best to not ruin whatever healing you put into place for me, okay?”

“That,” Gary said, “is the best deal I could ask for!” Then he gave her an awkward hug over the others in the carriage and gave Daria a high five as he stepped out.

We were finally on our way. I sat back and tried to appreciate the fact that I was not putting any weight on my still-tired feet.

“Wait!” a guy I recognized from Janice’s tent — I think his name was Jeremy — screamed. He was running up to the carriages waving something that looked like an orange flag. My heart sank. I thought we were done for. They were going to take the carriages away again, this time for some food related emergency. He caught up to Daria and Rose’s carriage first, said something to them and then looked over to our carriage, hopped down and came running over to us. “Which of you is Natalie?” he asked. That was not at all what I was expecting.

“Uh... me,” I said with hesitation.

“Right,” he said as if he knew that all along. “Look, I know you want to get going, but Janice asked me to give this to you.” He handed me the wadded up orange cloth. “She said to say thank you and she was sorry.”

I unraveled the cloth and saw it was a volunteer Food Bank T-shirt just like the one Janice had. I felt a lump in my throat.

Jeremy said, “Don’t lose faith in humanity. That’s what she had said. Yeah... that was the important part.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “Tell her I won’t. And thanks.”

It was quiet after that. Jeremy nodded and stepped back so we could finally get moving. I was awestruck.

She didn't hate me? She wanted me to have a gift to remind me of the time we worked together? It didn't seem to match up. Except for that thing my mom always told me about crises — about the reason she insisted we open our home to Amy's entire family during Hurricane Imelda and for as long as they needed it. "In helping there's hope, no matter how bad it gets."

I had forgotten about that, but I had come to that realization myself too, hadn't I? That it was the helping that made me feel the best. So here was Janice, suffering in her own way, but reaching out to help me get past our shared horror. Perhaps it was this gesture that could help her heal.

Even after the bad she experienced, she kept going. She didn't lose faith in humanity. I smiled. That was a pretty good policy to live by.

I'm not going to lie and say that the carriage was a comfortable ride. That would be a ridiculous statement. There's a reason why the romantic horse-drawn carriage rides are limited to short distances around Central Park — any longer and people would lose that loving feeling as it morphed into physical discomfort. The driver took us over to the West Side highway, where there was a path cleared. Cars, and even some buses, had been moved to the side. I suppose this is one of the things the police had been working on as they kept getting shipped out of Times Square. As we drove through the streets some people waved at us from their windows, others from the street, and Janice's request seemed doable as I was reminded of how kind our city could be. Along the west side there were a number of cyclists and runners in the early morning sun as if it was just another ordinary day in the city. It was an awesome sight to see.

The sight didn't erase the horrors of the previous day, but it balanced them. It reminded me of another phrase my mother always says, "This, too, shall pass." Any time I was feeling sick or sad, she'd pull that phrase out to let me know that the bad feeling wouldn't last forever. She was right, but as I thought of that I wondered will *all of this* pass?

Will we get our power back? Will these cars move again? Will the phone in my pocket ever ring again? Will Russ stop caring about me? Which things will stay? Is nothing safe?

I shook the idea from my mind and decided to enjoy the moment, the new T-shirt in my lap, and the warm sun on my face. I leaned my head on Russ's shoulder and I think I fell asleep for a while.

Russ nudged me awake as we passed by the Freedom Tower. We were getting close to the ferry and I guess he wanted me to clean up my sleep drool from my face and his coat before we stopped. I was a little embarrassed until I saw that Colin, Rainbow, Princess and Terrell had also fallen asleep on each other. For that whispered moment, it was just Russ and me alone, in a sense, on the carriage.

"I'm a fan of you sleeping on my shoulder," Russ said, touching the side of my face where I was sure I had sleep lines from the imprint of his coat.

"What?" I said, not sure if he was joking about all the time in the recent past he had spent next to my sleeping body.

"I think you are beautiful, Natalie," he said, "and when you are asleep you look so peaceful."

All of my self consciousness came pouring all around me. He was looking at me in my sleep after two days of no shower and no brush

for my hair. I knew he had just called me beautiful — and I heard that, I really did — but something inside wouldn't let me believe that was actually what he meant. I wanted to talk about something else so he didn't feel like he was being held accountable for the things he said in this apparent bout of insanity, "Do you think Catch 'Em Crazy will have those dragon eggs saved whenever it comes back on line?"

His brow furrowed and his head tilted as he looked deeply into my eyes, "Natalie Turner, I am telling you I think you are beautiful."

"You don't have to," I said.

"No, I don't, but I just did," he said and then he leaned in and kissed me. Not on the cheek like he did the day before, but right on my lips. Those same soft, warm, tender lips that brushed my cheek yesterday were on my lips and I was sinking deeply into all of the feelings they brought with them. *Russ thinks I'm beautiful*. I *felt* it as much as I felt his hand caressing the side of my face as he kissed me.

"There it is," said Colin groggily. Breaking Russ away from my lips. He was looking down smiling. I just stared at him, hoping like a two year old child that if he was the only one I saw then he would be the only one there. But that wasn't true. They had all seen. Princess had woken up first and she woke up the rest of the carriage for the show. They burst into applause. I just laughed while my face burned with embarrassment.

"Oh Natalie, if only you knew how long he's been dreaming of that," said Colin. "What the hell took you so long, bro?"

Russ punched him in the arm, then wrapped his other arm around me.

I wanted to stay embarrassed, I felt like it was the right thing to do, but I couldn't stop smiling. Rainbow, who was sitting across from me, flashed me a quick thumbs up in her lap where the others couldn't see. It felt good to have her stamp of approval.

It all felt good.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Free To Go

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Ferry Terminal 10/7

Waiting

Waiting

Waiting

...And this time I don't care! I can taste home. There are no ferries, but there are volunteer boats taking people across the water back to Staten Island.

Look to the helpers. There really is hope everywhere.

At the Ferry Terminal, where I could all but touch the singular waterway between myself and my home, I allowed myself to finally believe that it was very possible I would be sleeping in my own bed very soon. Many New Yorkers owned boats and saw this as a way to help. I had never been on any boat besides a ferry, so I wasn't sure I wasn't going to get seasick on a much smaller vessel like a sailboat with the wind and the waves as our guides, but that price was well worth the

reward. I just hoped the poor volunteers running the boat could put up with my weakness.

A line was pointed out to us to stand on to wait for passage to Staten Island. As we stumbled along, getting ready for another long wait, I spotted Murph looking a little lost. "Russ, I'll meet you on the line, okay?"

"You okay?" he asked as I let go of his hand.

"I'm the best," I said. Then I stood up on my tippy toes to give him a kiss on the cheek. "I just see a place to help. I promise I'll be right back."

He was smiling from the moment I kissed him and I'm not sure he heard anything else I said because he turned around and hooked his arms around Rainbow and Colin's necks as he pulled them toward the line saying, "So let's talk about who's *really* taking forever to make his move..."

Matthew Murphy was a good guy, my Captain Distraction, but my whole perspective of the relationship unfolding between Murphy and I changed. Before I imagined it as some romantic interlude with kisses, embraces and the mystical previously unattainable "love," but, there at the Ferry Terminal, where we were now something else, I recognized the opportunity to redefine it for both of us. Murphy wasn't someone for me to adore, he was someone for me to care for, to appreciate and to be good to. I still felt a great admiration for the artist and person he was. It somehow felt even more exciting and intimate. It also felt more realistic and doable.

Where there was fear of the unknown before, now there was a feeling of excitement for what was to come.

Murph didn't even see me coming. He was trailing the group with his head down and his hands jammed in his pockets. I stepped next to him and matched his stride. I elbowed him as we walked side by side

with hands in our pockets, looking at the ground. He looked at me and flinched. I smiled. “So I was thinking,” I said as I stopped moving once I had his attention. “You know what I think you need to do?” I poked him right in the chest when I said “you.”

He looked at me blankly.

“Matthew Murphy, you sir, need to sketch something.”

It may have only been a day since Murphy had sketched anything in his book, but it felt like weeks. When he opened up the book and we looked at the figures beneath the dinosaur skeleton, I felt like I was looking in on the lifetime of another Natalie. The pictures were familiar, but like I had watched them on TV, not that I lived them.

Murph walked over to be by himself sitting down, leaning up against the side of the building we were all lined up next to. I let him be while he sketched the line of people waiting and some memories from the previous day. Then, when he found a discarded mirror (there were tons of things left behind by people who didn’t want to overfill the sailboats) he asked me to come sit with him in the sun. “If you don’t mind leaving Russ for a little bit.”

Russ was having too much fun tormenting Colin and Rainbow anyway, so I joined Murph, away from the group, sitting up against that wall. We were both looking at the group when Murph said, “So I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry, like, officially or something.”

“It’s okay, Murph. It kind of all worked out.” I looked over to where Russ was laughing with Rainbow again and wondered if I ever would have noticed him, if I ever would have realized that he wasn’t into Rainbow, if I had my phone in my hand. Which made me realize how much of my time with Murph the day before had been spent that exact way — not noticing — with my eyes on the screen. “And I guess I’m sorry too, if I think about it. I was on my phone a lot all day before everything happened. That couldn’t have been fun.”

He laughed. "I tried to find you," he smirked. "Do you mind if I do a quick sketch of the two of us just for the memories?" He held up the mirror he found. "I'm trying to capture as much of this trip as I can in this book."

"Sure," I said and I sat still as he set up the mirror and fumbled through his bag for something.

"What's this?" he said as he pulled out the box of pencils I had put in there for him from the gift shop.

"Oh wow," I said. "I completely forgot. I picked those up for you when you were gone. I thought you could use them."

Then he came out of nowhere and hugged me. "I messed up, Nat. Thank you for always thinking of me. Forget the sketch for now. It'll take too long anyway."

"You sure?" I asked, stealing a glance over to where Russ and Rainbow were online and Rainbow was looking over her shoulder at me looking concerned.

"I'm sure." He put his two hands in between our faces making a rectangle with his thumbs and forefingers. "There you go. Snapped in place. I've got that face in my mind's eye. You are free to go."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sail Mary

I ran over to Rainbow and covered her eyes from behind, “Guess who?”

“Well, your hands smell like socks, so —“

“What?!” I shrieked, smelling my hands quickly. Russ, Colin, and Rainbow all continued their seemingly unending laughter. They had evidently been talking about our sock war the night before and they all wanted to know where the hell I came up with the idea for such a weird activity. I was happy to relive the memories of good times with Amy and Rog and laugh with this new group of friends about all those hi-jinx. As the conversation and the laughs continued, and Russ shifted from holding my hand to putting an arm around my shoulders and then even a full blown embrace from behind while we talked, part of me wished I could live in that moment forever.

I was certain the only other joy-filled surprise left for us was getting to the front of the line and on a boat home. Then I saw the familiar gait of a man I only barely got to know, but would forever be a part of my life story: Dr. Davies. He was at the front of the line of people waiting to go to Staten Island, bopping his head in and out of the crowd, looking left and right, speaking briefly to some, ignoring others, shaking

his head at every turn. I stepped out of Russ's arms and shouted, "Dr. Davies?"

He turned our way and ran, pumping his arm in victory. "Yes! You are here!" As he approached us he took us all in looking from face to face. "Are you all here? Where is Matthew?"

I pointed over to where Murph had stumbled, imagination first, back into his sketchbook. "Murph! It's Dr. Davies –" I could barely hear myself say his name because everyone around me started shouting and cheering at once.

"That's not all," Mrs. Krimble said, smiling at me as I turned. "Oh! Oh — be gentle," she said through soft, weak laughs, as Princess and Terrell nearly tackled her from both sides with their hugs.

I was speechless while everyone else's questions and conversations filled the space. It was already some kind of coming home being all back together, then Dr. Davies gave us even more good news: a boat had been waiting specifically for us if he and Mrs. Krimble could gather our class.

Everything moved quickly then.

The sun was high in the sky, but it had passed its peak so it was probably about one or two o'clock in the afternoon. According to what we were told on line, the trip across to Staten Island would take anywhere from one to two hours. We were told to go to the bathroom and to drop any weight we could to help the trip go even faster. I really hoped that I wouldn't be sick on this trip.

The boat was beautiful. It was all white except for the thin blue line around its rim which matched the letters in the boat's name, *Sail Mary*. The boat's Captain, Bud Sanders, was a retired bus driver who kept cracking jokes about how he thought his time with commuters ended a long time ago. His wife, Carol, was dressed as if this were just another day of sailing for her. She acted that way too. The couple

looked like they had been plucked off the top deck of some leisure cruise on its way to the Caribbean — her sun visor cutting through her too-red-to-be-real hair, his socked-and-sandaled feet, both smiling in a way only the truly relaxed, free from worry people can manage. When we got on the boat, Carol greeted us individually with a big smile and then, from a giant box, she pulled out a necklace of flowers for each of us. She ceremoniously placed one around our necks one by one.

Bud said, “Don’t mind my wife, she just likes to ‘ley’ everyone who comes aboard. It is just her way of being friendly.” And he laughed hysterically at his own joke.

My flowers were sky blue and I loved them. They were the first clean thing I had put on since the morning I left for the museum. Between them and the salt water air, I felt more refreshed than I had in days. Carol then came around with a pitcher of iced tea that was actually cold, filling up the plastic cups she handed us when we all got our seats. I thought it was a miracle. I looked at the ice in my cup and I remembered Janice and what she was willing to do to save the ice and food for the people who needed it. I thought about how excited she got when she saw the refrigerators filled with chilled drinks. I savored each sip.

“Excuse me, Carol?” I said as I watched her dip under the deck of the boat to get even more ice and iced tea.

She turned and looked at me with her luminescent smile, “Yes honey?”

“Where did you get the ice?” I asked.

“From the cooler, of course. Why?”

“Sure, I know that, but it should have melted by now. You can help a lot of people with this ice if you’ve been able to keep it cool for this long,” I said.

Bud turned from his navigation and said, “We’ve finally got a smart one here, Carl!”

“We’ve done at least six trips today and no one has picked up on that yet,” Carol said. She put down her iced tea pitcher and walked back over to where we were all sitting. “Bud hasn’t wanted me to tell anyone about it until someone noticed.”

Bud turned to me and said, “You were the first person to understand the enormity of the ice, young lady. The *first one*. Why do you think that is?”

The only way to explain it was to tell them the story of what happened at the deli. Nothing could more vividly describe the preciousness of ice than the battle fought over it with guns held to my friends heads and Janice throwing her body in the way to save us all from unknown horrors. Maybe everyone else who traveled with the Sanders was too caught up in the dramas and horrors of their blackout battles, but at least one of mine actually was related to the need for ice.

“I was helping out in Times Square, we all were, really. But I was helping out in the food gathering with this lady named Janice.” Everyone looked really worried when I mentioned her name. “She was — is — really an amazing person. She was trying to get as much food to people as possible while we were there. The restaurants and stuff donated stuff, some of them just gave us the keys to go in. When Janice and I went to this deli, I never saw anyone get so happy about ice and refrigerators. That was my first clue. But when two men came into the store and held guns to the heads of my friends... for ice?”

“I don’t think it was just for ice, Natalie,” Colin said.

I looked at him right in the eyes, “Before you guys came in, the only thing they wanted was the ice, Colin,” I said.

Russ cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. I grabbed his hand.

Carol looked pallid. Her perky demeanor was wiped away and replaced with horror.

“You see, Carol?” Bud said, “That’s why we don’t put the lights on at night. That’s why we don’t advertise. And that’s why we waited for someone who was brave enough to ask.”

“I’m sorry for bringing everyone down,” I said.

“Honey, you didn’t bring me down,” Bud said, “You just proved something to my wife that I have been telling her the last ten years: Most people are wonderful, but you never know when you’ll meet the rest. I’m sorry you had a bad encounter, but I think you earned the right for us to tell you.”

“Tell us what?” Mrs. Krimble asked.

“We are survivalists!” Bud exclaimed.

“My nutty husband has been preparing for something like this for years. It has essentially been his job ever since he retired, in fact,” she said almost begrudgingly.

“*Sail Mary* was my first big purchase!” he said with a smile. “Can’t really be a survivalist and live on an island if you don’t have a boat!”

“And I wasn’t about to agree to a row boat,” Carol said.

“But how do you keep the ice cold without power?” Rainbow asked.

“Who said we don’t have power?” Bud said as he winked at Rainbow.

“Oh wow. He’s going to make us work for it, isn’t he?” I asked Carol.

“Believe me, after 47 years you get used to this nonsense,” she responded.

“Okay Captain Sanders, how do you still have power when the entire Metro New York has a fried grid?” I asked.

“I built Faraday cages around my generators!” he said with flourish.

“Oh shit,” Russ said, “really?”

“Oh snap,” Brenda said.

Mrs. Krimble gasped.

“Oh ho! This group is getting better by the minute. Are you telling me this crew knows what a Faraday cage is?”

“High School Science teacher, at your service,” Mrs. Krimble said.

“Dr. Davies and Smithe and Mrs. Krimble were talking about them yesterday, to protect our phones or something, but it was too late,” Russ said.

“Also, *Dark Times* talks about them a lot,” Brenda said which led to Murph groaning.

“What do you think, Carol?” Bud said.

“Couldn’t have asked for a finer, more deserving group, if you ask me, Bud,” Carol said.

“For what?” I asked, looking back and forth between our boat’s crew.

“Bud’s been looking for a group, or family, to share his survivalist training with. A group to give one of our Faraday caged generators to, but he wanted to make sure they would appreciate it and be able to understand ‘the enormity of it’,” Carol said.

“Too many people these days are primarily concerned with the loss of their gadgets and TVs,” Bud said, “I’m all for that when there’s enough power to go around, but during times like these, you have to know what is important.”

“Like iced tea,” said Carol, raising the pitcher and pouring another round.

“Like iced tea,” Rose said quietly. We all laughed, raising our glasses in a toast.

For the rest of the trip home Bud and Carol told us about their home, their preparations and what they had hoped for the future. Bud

said that while he was truly fearing some future where there would be some sort of food shortage, he never ruled out a massive grid failure. He was shocked to find out that it was caused by a natural event and not some enemy attack, so we were useful in providing him with that good news.

Carol explained that their house wasn't a big one, but they have a nice sized backyard. That's where they started growing their own food and raising chickens. Daria jumped on that. "You really have chickens? I have a vlogging buddy in Brooklyn that has chickens, I was always sort of jealous of him. What do you guys do with them in the winter?"

"They have a coop," Carol said. "They are actually fine in the winter, you only have to add extra heat if you want them to keep laying the same amount of eggs, but, otherwise, it hasn't been getting cold enough lately for it to be necessary for their survival. Honestly, the chickens are my favorite part of Bud's whole endeavor."

"You'll insult the boat, Carol!" Bud said feigning offense.

"Well, of course I love the boat," Carol said rolling her eyes, "It just hasn't been quite as cost effective as my birds."

"I say this boat is priceless," Terrell said.

"Here, here my boy!" Bud said. "Free boating lessons to the smart one in the corner!"

I leaned over to Carol, "I only have like thirteen dollars on me, but I'm sure my parents would give you something for the ride."

Russ agreed and so did the others. Dustin already had his wallet out.

Carol just laughed and put her arm around my shoulders, "I don't want your money, darling. This is the first time the boat is paying for itself. Service is the greatest reward anyone could ask for. I would never take money from a bunch of students on a class trip anyway, that's unconscionable!"

By the time we reached the Staten Island shore Bud and Carol had given us their home address and told us to come by anytime we liked.

At the dock we each thanked Bud and Carol and shared hugs all around. A group of us had made solid plans to go visit them on Saturday to see what their place looked like and to get started on our own survivalist training. Daria was going to go the next day so that Carol could start showing her the ins and outs of being a chicken owner. She said that she could bring home one or two of her baby chicks by the end of the week if she could put together a suitable coop for them. Daria was so excited. And she wasn't alone. The entire boat ride, the super sweet tea, the edging closer and closer to our home soil energized us all. My face was frozen in a smile while my hand was glued to Russ's. Murph had spent a good portion of the ride sketching and had added another six pages to what he had already done. I couldn't believe how quickly he was turning out these sketches now, or how good they were. He let me see most of them, but not all. Rainbow had sung a couple of songs with Bud, and Princess and Terrell had cozied up in the back of the boat, both with huge content smiles throughout their entire conversation. We really looked like a bunch of people out for a leisurely sail boat ride. It was nice.

Bud and Carol hitched their boat for a while to go home and "check on things." The rest of us were going home for the first time in two days, to families who didn't know what had happened to us, to families who had their own two-day tales. We all made arrangements for pairing up to walk each other home as efficiently as possible. "I'm walking you home, just so you know," Russ said.

"Yeah you are," I said, swinging his arm.

"I was just wondering," Rainbow spoke up, "this may sound dumb, but I really just don't know... how are we going to get in contact with one another?"

Everyone just stood there silently.

“It’s just that I always used whatsapp and tumblr for that, you know?” she said looking around, “I mean, it’s not even like we can use regular phones, can we?”

Murph said, “I don’t think so.”

“So then what?” Rainbow said.

Everyone looked at me. Again. It was weird, but I was starting to get used to it. It was like my blog, *Talia’s Tales*, when any news came out of the *Barista Boys* or *Wolf Nights* production companies, I knew all eyes would be on me to update my peeps with a post. This wasn’t unfamiliar ground, I realized, it was just new information.

“Why don’t we make a plan now to meet up somewhere?”

“Tomorrow I’m going to Carol’s,” Daria said.

“And god bless you for that,” Stella said, “because if I have my way I am sleeping straight through the next 24 hours.”

“Why don’t we just meet the next day at the school?” Rose said.

“You think you’ll be up to that?” Daria asked.

“If I’m not, you’ll inform the group, okay?” Rose said.

We all agreed that was a good idea, but then we got really confused about what *time* we should meet.

“I’m good at noon,” Russ pointed straight over his head. “I haven’t really mastered the rest.”

“Wow, this is really advanced stuff, guys. Bud and Carol have no idea how much work they have in front of them,” Daria said.

“Okay,” I said, to recap. “Not tomorrow, but the next day, I might go by the school at” and I pointed my hand right over my head.

We all laughed.

“Okay, seriously though I need to get home,” I said, “Who lives the furthest?”

“I do,” said Stella, “But Dustin is going to go with me, so I’m okay.”

“Okay what about everyone else?”

Everyone had a walking plan with a pair, if not a trio. After saying all of our goodbyes we laughed when we realized we all had to walk up the hill from the water anyway. When we passed the police precinct, two officers immediately stopped us, asked us what we were up to and informed us of the 6:30 pm curfew which Colin pointed out was both “unnecessarily constrictive and insanely accurate in a world without watches.” That didn’t rub the officers the right way (no big surprise, Colin has that effect on authority figures), but their entire attitude changed when Rainbow explained who we were. One of the officers ran back into the precinct bringing out a whole crowd of cops with him when he came back out, “It’s the Prep kids!” he announced. The crowd of officers cheered and clapped.

They asked us where we were when everything happened, how we made it back and what it was like in the City. We told them as much as we could. Colin reminded them that we couldn’t keep on with our story if we needed to be in our houses at 6:30. They laughed at him this time and separated themselves among our traveling parties. We all hugged each other before separating.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Home

Officer Gary Doone walked me and Russ home. Of course I wanted to walk with Russ alone, but I can't say I minded the police escort. I was tired of being "on" all the time, of being hyper aware of my surroundings and being tense every step of the way wondering who or what might jump out at me from every shadow. We had protection now, but more than that, we were home. We talked mostly to Gary rather than each other, but that was okay too. Talking about everything with Gary, like it was already all in the past, like it was truly over, brought on another wave of relief.

I only live about three blocks away from the precinct. When we got to my house and I walked in the door my mother screamed. I promise you I am not exaggerating. A full-on blood-curdling scream. Then she grabbed me and hugged me so tight I thought I wasn't going to survive. I thought, *Sure, after all of this I will be killed by my own mother's joy*. I couldn't help myself, but when I saw Roger run down the stairs with my dad while I was still in my mom's arms, I started crying. I think I had convinced myself that I wasn't ever going to see them again. In fact, I think some part of me forced myself to believe

that just so I could go on without seeing them. But none of that was true. They were here, home and they were safe.

And so was I.

I pulled away from my mom and introduced everyone to Russ. Which ended up being pointless.

They all knew him.

In fact, mom started crying when she pulled him in for a hug, too. She told him that his sister had just been over that afternoon and they were all worried about him too. Russ gave Rog a pound and said, "So you got her home okay without me?" And Rog nodded pretty seriously. "Thanks little dude." Then he pulled him in for a hug and I think I saw his eyes water.

Officer Doone had told Russ and I that he would need to talk to our parents for a bit when he dropped each of us off because all of our parents had submitted missing persons reports for us. So I took Russ out to my backyard and sat down just to talk for a bit. He said he wanted to stay with me, but we both knew no one was going to allow that. So, instead, he promised that he would see me at first light.

"Which window is yours?" he asked.

I pointed at the window closest to the gate.

He said, "Perfect, if you aren't already outside, I'll knock on your window. Is that okay?"

"That would be great," I said because I felt like a night without him was already too much time to be apart.

Rog came out and started asking us about everything we saw and told us how "boring" his two days had been. "The most exciting thing, no offense, was going to the police about you."

I felt bad for him. And yet I was so grateful. I could have wished nothing better for my little brother.

“Russ,” Officer Doone called from the back door, “we better get going.”

Russ stood up, said goodbye and gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek. I was happy that’s all he did even though I kind of wanted more, but everyone was watching

Dinner was barbecue. Mom had a cooler that she had put all of the meat she had frozen. Normally it would take us months to go through it all, but she said we had to eat it before it all went bad. She gave some of it to our neighbors because she knew we’d never make it on our own. Over dinner that night Mom, Dad and Rog all told me what happened to them in the last few days. There were a lot of anecdotes about lost technology appliances and lights. A tale of inconvenience at its best. The worst part was the loss of contact, not only with me, but with all of our family. We still had no idea how anybody else was doing. There was a new newsletter from the police precinct, that the mailman delivered, by bike to each zone. They pasted them up on street corners informing residents of people found, news about “The Event” and where to go to get or provide various services. Things seemed to be organizing even if it was at a slow pace.

I told my parents everything that happened (minus any juicy details that will remain private between Russ and I), but I kept out the details about Janice when I told Rog. I’ll tell him someday, just not now. I don’t want him thinking about that or about what could have happened to me. To be honest with you, part of me doesn’t want to think about it any more either, but I owe it to Janice and the woman she was and I pray she will continue to be. The woman I still want to

be. A woman who helps others in a time of need, protects those she can and bravely faces foes for the right to give instead of take.

Janice was my hero, but she wasn't my only one. The way Dustin came to Stella's rescue time and time again, was amazing; Stella's bravery in the face of true death; Rose's ability to fight through her pain; Officer Avery for running into an ugly scene and taking a bullet to protect the rest of us; Chief Grady for bringing a touch of humanity to every interaction in our adventure, for reminding us who we are no matter what the world is turning into around us; Mrs. Krimble for risking her own safety to try to get us home as quickly as possible; Ben and Carol for finding a way to beat the odds and then give back; Daria for finding something new to be excited about... they are all heroes. Because what I realize is that heroes aren't always the grandiose people wearing spandex and capes. The real heroes are the ordinary people that don't back down when life deals from its trickiest deck of cards. Heroes are those that continue to play.

I thought the bed at the Marriott Marquis was the most comfortable bed I had ever experienced, but getting into my own bed, with clean sheets after a sponge bath where I was actually able to put *clean clothes on* afterward? Hands down, easily the most comfortable bed ever. But even in its comfort, my bedroom was a foreign landscape to me. I can not even think of a time where I have ever set my head on those pillows without some electronic device in hand. I looked over to my iHome in the fading glow of twilight, and, on my nightstand the iPhone I carried home with me from the museum. They were useless, but what was more, I didn't need them.

I was going to stay in touch with my friends. I was going to see Russ at first light. I was going to see the rest of the gang when the sun hung high in the sky not tomorrow, but the day after that. Rainbow had showed us all how we could still find music without our iTunes, and

Dr. Davies left the clues for Russ that brought us to a show that beat anything I have ever found on Netflix. As for stories? I thought maybe tomorrow I would sit down and read a little bit of that *Lord of the Flies* book from Mr. Gideon's English class, just to see what it was all about. Who knows? Maybe there's something there too.

I fell asleep not too long after the sun set. I dreamed of nothing and everything at once. Upon waking there was nothing for me to remember, but I knew that I had lived another adventure in my dreams. I woke because I heard a tapping at my window, which was full of light. *First light*, I thought.

I threw on a zip up hoodie, slipped into my sneakers stepping on the heels so they transformed into slippers and I snuck out the side door like I usually do in the middle of the night. I didn't want to wake my family too early. There was Russ in a hooded sweatshirt, long boxer shorts and beach slippers. I ran up and hugged him. He smelled like soap. "First light," he said pointing up.

I looked up and couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was another aurora.

"How can this be?" I asked.

"Remember when Dr. Davies said they thought they were seeing another storm when everything happened? This must be from it," he said, "Got a place we can sit?"

I grabbed his hand and pulled him into my backyard, but before we got to the chairs, he stopped me and said, "There's just one thing, Natalie. Have I told you that I think you are beautiful?"

But before I could answer him, he kissed me. This was a much longer and deeper kiss than any of the others before. His arms wrapped tightly around me. I felt the balance of his strength and tenderness and I put my arms around him. I felt goosebumps all up my legs and arms, but I knew it wasn't from the cold. This was the kiss — not

the one on the cheek, or even the one on the horse-drawn carriage — this was the kiss we were both waiting for, longing for. It was a moment shared between us not steeped in suffering, agony, and repentance. It was a moment between only us without an audience, or applause or congratulations. It was a kiss between Russ and I, alone; it was an expression of how good we made each other feel, of how much we wished to be there for each other, and it carried all of our potential to love one another. It was a kiss as a kiss is supposed to be: intimate, personal and affectionate, dare I even say passionate. And as the auroras glowed above in this magical moment, and we separated I knew that “this too shall pass” so I decided that instead of analyzing it I should just enjoy it. So, instead of saying anything, I kissed him and that kiss lasted even longer than the first one. I sunk deeper into Russ’s lips and arms and let myself feel everything until I finally lead him to the lawn chairs where we sat together for hours, hand in hand, watching the colors dance in the sky.

Epilogue

Written in Natalie's Notebook

Dusk 12/7

Everyone's headed to bed. It's just me and my paper tonight. I'm about to write to my peeps.

I like this slow-motion version of my life. I'm getting used to waking up at sunrise and unwinding when it sets. The days are getting shorter.

The whole world is a little less expectant of the unplugged peeps.

Mom and Dad asked me and Rog if we want a new computer for Christmas. They're not cheap, that I know, and I'm not even sure if they will be able to get one by then, but I guess they wanted to know if they should make the effort on our behalf. Not unless I could make it worth it somehow.

Instant Messenger

Dec 13 7:43AM

Talia: What time you guys leaving?

Aims: Mom says about an hour.

Talia: I'm so excited.

Aims: MEEEE TOO!!!

Talia: Need to hear ur voice!

Aims: See ur face!!

Talia: SEE YOU SOON!

Aims: <3

Talia: Going to post.

Aims: l8r

Posted to TALIA'S TALES

Dec 13 @7:48AM

Reconnection.

Amy's coming back, my peeps. We don't know for how long, but for the time being, I don't care. I get to see her face, hear her voice, and have her here — IRL. Her mom's pregnant and her dad wants to be as close to medical care as possible while the rebuild is still going on. New York has been a little more efficient with moving forward than the town they had been living in.

Posted to TALIA'S TURNUPS

Dec 25 @10:52AM

Good morning, my peeps and welcome to my new site and new movement! We all got a chance to unplug this Fall — did you learn anything?

I did.

You are important to me.

You.

And this tech is a tool for connection.

Connecting me and you to DO THINGS.

Let's meet.

Let's unplug and make a difference IRL.

It's time to turn up and help out.

Talia's first TurnUp:

On the Staten Island Ferry, January 5th.

See you then.

I can't wait.

~Talia

#unplugged #sendhelp #turnup #reconnect

About the Author

Nicole Rivera is a different kind of dragon who resides on an island oft forgotten, named Staten, in the shadow of the city that never sleeps. Her dragon hoard consists of memories, fictions, poems, and competing delusions of grandeur and insignificance. In ancient times, long before the isolation, she spent her days in a castle on a hill where she toyed with the magic of Mathematics and the education of adolescents, but an evil spell took over her body, trying to steal her sight and trap her in a cave, alone, for an eternity. Nicole tamed the spell and today, she wields modern technology to overcome the enchantment of isolation by leading a community of creators under the banner and chant "Stop Writing Alone!" When Nicole is not in front of her computer, projected in a tiny digital box communing with her creative community, she can be found having picnics or walking in the woods near her home with her husband, son, and their pet bearded dragon, Lexemo.

Join the community:

<https://stopwritingalone.substack.com/>

Read More:

<https://storyhoarder.substack.com/>