

The Malefactor Kidnapping Conundrum Obfuscation

An original novel by your
Westminster Library Teen Advisory Board

Chapter One

I stood on the threshold of the door, clutching my bag in one hand, willing myself to step through it to my new life. The problem was I didn't want to leave my old one behind. Allison rolled her eyes. "Kevin, just go."

"Absolutely not."

She let it go; they all did; for the time being at least. Okay, so yes, it was inevitable that I would eventually need to go. But I figured that if I could put it off just a little longer, it would be completely worth it.

The reason I was leaving? Well, it was pretty obvious. My family finally got too fed up with me to have me around anymore and sent me to a boarding school. One of those posh ones that keep you around through the whole year, with only short 2-week breaks back home.

Sure, if you like, I can admit it - my family was a bit screwed up. I had a dad, seldom home, finding something wrong with everything I did when he was. My brother Perry, two years older than me, had single-handedly destroyed my parents' trust in teenagers. My little brother, Sam, was one year younger, and was just beginning to decipher how things really were, but didn't like it much. This brings me to my mother. Impatient, just this side of being a control freak, and not really too concerned about how anyone else wanted things to go. Yup. That was my home sweet home for all sixteen years of my life. Well, minus the time (as much as I could) I spent outside of the house, mostly over at Allison's or Greta's - where I was now.

Really, my biological family was the one that was screwed up. Those who acted as my family weren't so bad. Greta was the most motherly teenager on the planet, listening to all of us complain about our troubled lives, inviting us over most weekends, and, best of all, making us chocolate chip cookies. Jaxon, (Jackson really, but he refused to spell it that way), was a tough guy, He helps all of us out, mostly me, as I was beaten up a lot at school before he and I became friends, He's about six foot four, lanky, but with muscles rippling under skin that seemed to be stretched reluctantly over them. Allison was a real pistol, the one who was always starting fights and getting suspended at school. And all of them agreed that I was the most unpredictable. They say I'm quiet, which I agree with, but sometimes my sharp tongue gets me into trouble, but rarely out of it. Together, we formed a semi-functional family. Well if you count a family not having a single person over seventeen among them. Greta and I were both sixteen, Jaxon was seventeen and Allison was fourteen- she was the baby. We couldn't have gotten by on our own, but we took care of each other as best we could. It kept us alive and sane; we didn't do a lot of seriously stupid things. Well, I didn't anyways.

Greta gave me a few more minutes before telling me it was time to go, and that I wasn't making things better by hiding and ignoring it, but old habits die hard, and I'd spent the first sixteen years of my life trying to ignore as many problems as I could, I figured now

wasn't the time to start changing things.

I muttered something inaudible about /really/not liking her, and then turned to Jaxon. My protector. "This is it, I guess" I said, willing myself not to let my voice shake. Jaxon gave me his traditional half-smile. "Yeah" he said, and before I knew it, he swept me into a hug. It was very short, and awkward, but it was still a huge show of emotion for him.

I turned to Allison, and looked at her sideways through my horn-rimmed glasses. "This is it huh?" I said. I'd always felt a strange sort of attraction to her, not wanting to get too close, trying not to push her away. She grinned and gave me a sliding high five.

"Try not to get yourself killed or anything."

I gave a shaky laugh. "No promises."

Greta was last. She didn't waste any time and drew me into a warm hug that lasted several seconds, before drawing away and planting a kiss on my cheek. "Stay safe" she whispered in my ear.

I nodded, blinking to hold back tears, and shouldered my backpack, stepping outside and pulling up the kickstand on my bicycle. I swung one leg over the side, and coasted down the driveway, not once looking back.

In retrospect, I wish I had.

I'm not sure if I'm ever going to see any of them again.

Chapter Two

This was possibly the oddest car ride I had ever experienced in my 16 years so far. It had already been 4 hours driving in the car with my younger brother and my parents, on the way to the posh, stuck-up, boarding school they were exiling me to. I didn't feel abandoned or that my parents didn't love me, nothing remotely close to that. Those feelings were only for functional or even semi-functional families, mine wasn't even remotely considered a family. But they couldn't seem to care less that they were taking me away from the only people I really ever cared about, my friends, my better family as I referred to them. I missed them already. I dug into my bag for the chocolate cookies Greta had given me to survive the car ride with my parents.

While snacking on some of the best cookies on the planet, I found the picture the four of us had taken together a few months before, right after school had ended and we were just beginning with summer. Jaxon was on the left with his arm around Greta's shoulders, holding a blue Frisbee in the other hand, and slouching so we could get his tall frame into the picture. I was on the right with my arm over Allison's shoulders and her arms around my waist and Greta's. We were all laughing and had giant grins on our faces like we had just shared the funniest joke between us. It was a cute picture, we each had a copy, and I couldn't bear to leave it behind. I really was going to miss them.

A while later my dad's shiny SUV pulled up in front of a metal gate that made me think of those old black and white prison movies, with silent guys in stripes that escape by

digging a tunnel with just a spoon. Just as I was considering if I should have brought a spoon with me the gothic looking gates swung forward, and we drove down the driveway toward a cathedral looking building/castle. It was bordered on either side with a lawn that looked like no one had ever walked on it.

“Well here we are,” my mother said way too cheerily seeing how I wouldn’t be seeing them for at least four months, but I probably wouldn’t even come home during the break so it would be even longer. I just grimaced and tried to quiet my groan. My dad got out of the car without turning it off, so I expected they could get a hasty get away as soon as they could.

Right then the giant doors of the building we had pulled up in front of swung open and out walked a very pristine looking man. He was clean shaven with short brown hair and a very expensive looking tailored suit. He was definitely in charge. “Hello there. Kevin Bernstein I presume,” said the man. He walked toward where I was standing next to my bags and the bike my dad had just deposited at my feet.

“Uh Huh” was all I could manage. This guy’s voice alone scared the be-jeebers out of me. I sincerely hoped that if I ever got in trouble it sure wasn’t with this guy.

He shook my dad’s hand and introduced himself as Dean Ridder, and told him the whole spiel about how I would do great here at such a gifted school. After a few minutes of that, Dean Ridder walked a little farther away, back toward the doors, to leave us to our “emotional goodbyes.” Ha! Puh-leeze, that would never happen in a million years.

My father just shook my hand and told me to have fun. Whoa. He actually said something civil to me. Usually he just criticized me. Then he said, “Kevin, if you screw up here I will disown you.” Well at least that sounded a lot more like him. My mother came over and gave me a hug that was stiff, cold, and really awkward. She looked extremely pleased I was leaving, and I knew it was because I wasn’t the perfect son that could fit into her perfect 4.0 grade point average, social butterfly, football stud kind of dream for me. Me being me was never enough for her. All she said was “Bye”, and then practically jumped through the window to get into the car.

My younger brother Sam came over. Out of everyone in our family he was definitely the most low-key and normal, and definitely my favorite because of it. He actually gave me a warm hug and said, “Have fun, I’ll miss you.” One of the things I felt bad about by coming here was leaving quiet shy little Sam in the open clutches of my mother.

As the car drove away I picked up my bags, not feeling at all sad about the lack of my parents’ emotions. As I reached the stairs where Dean Ridder stood, he reached out a hand to help me carry my bags while I steered my bike. That’s when I noticed there weren’t any fingernails on his right hand and the tips of them were tinted a gross toxic-looking green color.

I looked up quickly, and caught his eye. He had noticed me looking at his hand, but all he said was: “Welcome to Torvoue Academy Kevin.”

Chapter Three

Once I got to my dorm room, I unpacked my suitcase and left my bike in the closet. I put the picture of my friends and me on the drawer next to my bed and hung some of my posters up on the white walls. I noticed that there was a mysterious red stain on my pillow. I quickly asked for another pillow from the maids down the hall. I took a hot shower, ate dinner, and crashed on my bed.

I woke up the next morning in my dorm room. I realized that I couldn't see Jaxon, Greta, or Alison anymore. Instead, I would have to wake up everyday knowing that I would never really see my family anymore. I would have to go to my classes. I slowly got up and got dressed in the school uniform. The boys' uniform consisted of a white polo with long brown pants. It was Monday morning. I went to the school cafeteria and got a quick bite to eat before heading to my first class.

As I was walking through the hallways, I noticed that the hall marble floors were super clean and sparkly, unlike my old school where the floor was totally trashed. I also noticed something even weirder - there were security cameras next to every classroom and the walls were made of some sort of stainless steel substance. Jeez, I'd heard of school safety, but how much safer could you get? Everyone wore IDs around their necks- school required. I had to get mine at the Counselor's office.

My first class was College Prep Chemistry. As I walked into the room I noticed students sitting at long sleek black tables, and posters of the periodic table and cells posted on every wall. I took a seat in the very back of the class. I had Mr. Borenstine. He was one of those tough, you're-not-going-to-pass-my-class kind of teachers. Mr. Borenstine had short black hair with tints of gray, and wore a dark green sweater with slacks. He also wore thick, black glasses.

After Mr. Borenstine took role he went over the rules of the classroom. "Welcome to Chem 101. I hope that you all memorized your elements during the summer. If you plan on passing my class, I expect homework assignments turned in on time every morning. I do not tolerate horseplay. And there will be a quiz every week," shouted Mr. Borenstine. "Let's begin by taking notes on distinguishing the differences between chemical and physical changes."

I quickly took out my notebook and scribbled down the notes. I looked around me and noticed several students yawning while a group of girls were gossiping, including some jocks laughing and throwing a football around. That's when I noticed a shallow, dark looking kid sitting by himself. His eyes were pink and he had some of the same green gross toxic stuff on his fingernails.

As soon as the bell rang, I bolted towards my next class. I decided to sit in the third row next to an open window. I had American Literature with Mrs. Smith. A girl with long, dark brown hair introduced herself to me. She was pretty, with emerald-green eyes. Smart too. "Hi, my name's Sophie Sparks. You must be new here. What's your name?" asked Sophie.

“Oh hi, my name’s Kevin,” I quickly answered. “So, how long have you been at this school?”

“Honestly, it seems like I’ve been here forever,” replied Sophie. Then the bell rang. Mrs. Smith got up from her computer and started handing out books called *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde. “Oops, I guess I better get back to my seat. I’ll see you later,” said Sophie.

“Ditto,” I said. My first day of school dragged on with Mrs. Smith explaining the importance of reading comprehension. I went off to my next 2 classes of trig/pre calc and American History. Then, I had lunch.

As I walked towards the cafeteria I noticed Sophie with her group of friends waving towards me pointing to an empty seat. “Hi, what’s up?” asked Sophie.

“Nothing, much,” I replied.

“Well, these are my friends: Brian, Katie, Oliver, and Natasha,” Sophie said, pointing out each of her friends to me. Brian had a lanky build, short brown hair and hazel-brown eyes. He was listening to music from his iPod. Katie had long blond hair with bright blue eyes; a clear complexion of ivory skin; and wore silver hoop earrings. She gave me a small smile. Oliver was about six foot two and suntanned with short blond hair and green eyes. Oliver gave me the heads up. “So, what school did you use to go to?” asked Oliver.

“I went to an old school downtown near Bell Street,” I replied.

“Cool, do you have any siblings?” asked Katie.

I quickly thought of my friends Allison, Greta, and Jaxon. I realized how much I really missed them. “Just a couple, but they’re all at home attending another school,” I said.

“Really, why aren’t they here with you?” asked Katie.

“Family stuff,” I replied.

Just then I noticed the dark, shallow kid from my chemistry class eating by himself at a nearby table. “Who’s that?” I asked pointing towards the kid.

“Oh, that’s Zach Taylor - he’s like the weirdest kid in the entire school,” commented Brian, looking up from his iPod.

“Yeah, he’s a sophomore; he doesn’t have any friends, so he likes to hang out by himself,” Sophie remarked.

“I heard that he goes to pharmaceutical companies to get tested on a bunch of drugs by scientists like a lab rat, so he can make money,” said Oliver.

“Ewwww, that’s so weird,” cried Sophie. Just then, the lunch bell rang, telling students to get to their next class. “Oh yeah and I forgot to mention - me and a couple of

friends are planning to have a party next weekend at my room, so if you could come, it'd be great. Well, I guess I'll see you later," said Sophie.

"Yeah, it was nice to meet you, maybe I'll see you there," added Katie.

"See ya," said Brian. The girls went off gossiping to their next class while the guys walked off in separate directions to their lockers.

I felt like I had learned a little bit more about the new kid Zach, as well as the new school. I walked off and went to my next classes. It was almost the end of the school day, and I was excited to call all my old friends at home. As soon as I got back to my dorm room and changed into my old clothes, I checked my cell phone. I received a wishing-you-were-here text message from Allison. I dialed back the message under call to talk to one of my best friends.

Chapter Four

I woke up with a start. A low, keening whine sounded from the hallway outside my dorm room. I frowned. Looking at my clock, I noticed it was a little after 2 am. I crawled out from under my covers and stood up. The cold floor sent little shock shivers up my legs. I tiptoed to my door and quietly opened it. I peered out. Everything was blurry. I swore. Hopping back to my bed, I scrambled to find my glasses. Putting them on, I went back to my door.

I listened closely and heard the whine again. This time it was longer. It sounded like the wail of a wounded animal. My interest peaked. I deduced that the noise was coming from down the hallway to the left. I quietly shut the door and slipped down the hallway. As I turned the corner, I glimpsed a quick greenish-yellow flash just ahead of me. It seared my eyes for a half second. As my eyes adjusted, I doubled over. Standing just ahead of me was Allison. She looked like she glowed from within and I had to admit she was beautiful. She smiled at me and waved.

"Allison! What are you doing here?!" I frantically whispered. I was pretty sure a school like this would have very strict punishments if anyone found out. She just looked at me and smiled sadly. As I gaped at her, probably looking like an idiot, she turned away from me and padded down the hallway.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was following her. Yet every time I gained on her, she would pick up her pace. Frustrated, I jogged after her. Inside I was dying of curiosity at why Allison was here and why she looked creepily sad. I picked up my speed, determined to stop her and talk to her. I was hardly paying attention to where I was going, so of course I didn't see the steps leading down.

I glanced down a split second before I was propelled over the first three stairs. I stumbled down another four steps, banging painfully into the wall. Finally, as I caught myself, I glanced up and noticed that Allison had stopped and was staring at a dark doorway. Her shoulders shook and as she glanced up, I was startled to see tears. They dripped off her face and my heart broke. She lifted up a hand and pointed through the door way. As I stepped on the ground, I noticed it had a thick layer of dirt. I scowled, but regardless, I hurried toward her. As I reached out to touch her shoulder, Allison slipped into the inky darkness.

I looked at the spot in which Allison had been standing, my eyes wide. I was about to follow her when something caught my eye. I studied the ground. Something wasn't right. Electrifying shivers racked my body when I realized what was wrong. There were only one set of footsteps in the dirt. My own.

I glanced up at the doorway, only I realized that it wasn't a doorway, but a door... with three sets of locks. I started to shake as I looked at the door. Terrified, I stumbled back. No way could Allison've disappeared into the solid wood. I was positively sure that I had seen Allison, yet all the evidence pointed out that I was wrong. It was too much.

My knees bent and I found myself sitting in the scary dark corridor. I took three slow breaths. I comforted myself with the thought that I was still in the school. In my mind, a little sarcastic part of me guffawed, "Just today you hated Torvoue Academy. Now it comforts you. Get a grip on yourself, Kevin!"

I stood up and turned away from the door. I set off down the hallway from which I had come from. I was painfully aware of the fact that I had no clue as to where I was and that I had just chased an image of one of my best friends into a dark scene that could've been out of a horror movie.

I reached the stairs, and slowly climbed up them. I was already starting to feel the bruises from my previous encounter with the wretched stairway. I reached the top and found myself staring at one of the very similar halls of Torvoue Academy. I felt a rush of relief. When I had been in the dank hallway with the locked door, a little part of my brain was unconvinced that I was still in the school.

I followed the hall down to the directional sign. As I looked at it, I figured out I was in the East Wing, in Hall B2. I had to get back to my room in the West Wing, Hall A5. I sighed as I traced the long route back to my dorm room. It was such a long way away...and I was so tired. I didn't even realize that involuntarily, I had curled up beneath the sign against the wall. My eyelids fell shut of their own accord. And, as if I were a boat, I glided easily into the dark waters of sleep.

Chapter Five

I knew sometimes that dreams could be weird, but this...this is completely different.

I dreamt that I was being carried. By whom or what, I did not know. Where, I knew even less. I just knew from the undulating motion of somebody's steps and the soothing harmony of breathing and heartbeat next to my ear that I was being carried. And the smell...it was so familiar, yet...yet I could swear that I never had smelt it before in my life. I couldn't describe it, for there were no words. But it filled my nose and swirled in my mind, bringing back fond memories that I knew didn't exist, hazy emotions that I never experienced, obscure thoughts that I never conjured...

Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to know who carried me. Whose strong, gentle arms lifted me from the ground and helped me when I couldn't go on. No—I didn't want to know; I *needed* to know. So I opened my eyes.

I know that I didn't know what to expect, but I wasn't prepared for this.

All around me were swirling saffron clouds. They were opaque and viscose, slothfully dragging across my vision. Immediately I felt the arms leave me, and I fell gentle to the ground, landing on my knees. The floor was made of the same clouds, but solid, like warm marble.

I felt motion pass me, in the same way you do when somebody walks by you when your eyes are closed. A small wake of air movement ensued, accompanied by that same indescribable fragrance.

Wait! I shouted into the space, but my mouth never opened. Yet, the words discharged out into the condensated void I was left in. *Wait!*

I ran forward a few steps, trying to chase what I couldn't see, but my efforts were negated when I realized I wasn't moving. Trapped. Trapped alone, with ephemeral hope fleeing away. My mental cry also was to no avail; whatever to which I was vainly howling either was unaware, or simply paid no heed.

Or so I initially thought.

Kevin.

I heard it. Like a clarion bell into the foggy bay it chimed, a voice nostalgic and familiar. I still could not recognize the source, but still it struck my very soul with a rich chord that simultaneous put chills down my spine and tears in my eyes. With all my willpower I could not reply. And so the voice continued.

I cannot be there, but I am always here.

Whether I really saw it or not, I could not be sure, but, for a single, fleeting moment, there was a small break between the clouds, through which I could see for a moment before the clouds close again a pair of kind, round eyes.

My mother's eyes.

I woke with a start.

Chapter Six

I woke from my dream with a fright. Shivers ran down my spine. I looked over and turned off my ringing alarm clock. I grabbed up my uniform and a towel. I tiredly walked out of the room and into the hallway. The cold marble woke me up right away. I went into the bathroom at the end of the hallway.

No one was in there. Was I the only one here who took early morning showers? I took my time taking a shower, and waited in my room until the sun arose from behind the trees of the surrounding area.

I walked down to the Mess Hall trying to take as long as I could. I wish I was home with Greta, Jaxon, and Alison. I could almost smell Greta cooking in the kitchen making her famous homemade waffles. I stood there with my eyes closed wishing to be there with my family. But that fantasy ended when someone ran into me.

I fell to the ground, smacking my head against the hard floor. I looked up to see who it was that hit me. The boy was younger than me with short caramel colored hair. He turned around and looked at me.

“S-Sorry,” he said mechanically almost like a robot.

“It’s okay.” Before my words could reach him he was already in the Mess Hall. I followed them in. I looked up at the center of the Mess Hall where a huge statue was. Right under the statue waving like crazy at me was, Sophie.

I grabbed my tray and got in line quickly so I could sit over by Sophie. I flopped some oatmeal on my tray with a side of scrambled eggs and a piece of buttered toast. I scurried over to where Sophie was and sat her table.

“Hi, Kevin.” She squeaked.

“Hi, Sophie.” I replied as through a spoonful of oatmeal in my mouth.

“So you’re an early riser too?”

“Yeah, I guess. Do none of your friends get up this early to eat with you?” Sophie nodded her head. She looked up at me through her dark brown hair.

“Well you better get to eating. Your food will get cold.” She smiled.

That part of her reminded me of Greta, with her mother like tone and reactions. I tried to eat my food as soon as possible. It was almost eight thirty. I had to get to my first class fast if I didn’t want to be late. I snuck by my dorm room and grabbed all my books. Then I sprinted through the courtyard to the eastern part of campus where my class was.

I walked into the classroom and looked around the room again. It looked the same as yesterday. I’ve seen déjà vu but never this bad. Everything was the same even the teacher. He was wearing the exact same outfit. I thought as a chemistry teacher you had to be clean apparently not. I looked around the room one more time looking over everything. Everything was the same except that creepy Zach Taylor kid wasn’t here. Where was he?

Chapter 7

I pushed the blaring question out of my mind and tried to focus on Mr. Borenstine’s lecture about acid-base equilibrium.

“The equilibrium constant can be found by dividing the concentration of the products by the concentration of the reactants” droned Mr. Borenstine.

Try as I might, the clouds of confusion surrounding the whereabouts of Zach Taylor refused to clear up. The sound of Mr. Borenstine’s voice drifted farther and farther away as I sank into my imaginings. My thoughts shuffled through the infinite possibilities of what could have happened to him. Maybe he was off with Dean Ridder and some green toxic finger gunk club doing experiments in cauldrons with different acids and bases (I guess some part of the acid base lecture leaked into my ears.) Or maybe he was off in the back smoking something that made his fingers grow gunk...Psh...I bet he’s just sick with a stomach bug or something; and with that resolution, I turned back to the lecture.

Suddenly, a boy who I assumed was some office assistant or something interrupted the lecture. Inside, I was jumping for joy - anything to put an end to the monotony of Mr. Borenstine's voice. I wasn't even truly listening to what he was saying to the class and I was bored. No wonder I had never gotten good grades in school as my dad liked to point out every second of my life. It's like my entire system turns down; my brain stops working and I completely zone out. Not that it mattered anyways. Even if it wasn't in my biological being to not pay attention, and I got good grades, I'm sure my dad would find something else wrong with me. I don't know... maybe that I was walking with strides that were too small or something. Why is it that everything leads back to my dad's disapproval? I hated that. How could something so disgustingly awful to me occupy such a great part of my mind? He certainly didn't spend this much time thinking of me, I'm sure of it.

Anyways, the boy strutted into the room like he was the president - right up to THE front of the room and said that some kid, Davy Grain, was needed in the office. Then, the two left the classroom without another word. Darn, that was an awful interruption, probably less than 5 minutes. I got my hopes up all for nothing.

After class, I saw Sophie rush quickly over to me. She shoved me into a nearby hallway and peaked around the corner to see if anyone was watching.

"Sophie, wha..." but she didn't let me finish as she put her hand over my mouth as she shushed me. She had a panicked look on her face. Ok, so I have to admit, the entire thing seemed a bit comical to me. I half expected someone to cue the scary music and right as she would place a kiss on my lips in preparation for the unknown, a zombie would pop out and we would scream and run away in terror...but that didn't happen. We weren't in a movie and she looked genuinely upset about something, so I stood there and listened to what she had to say.

Chapter 8

"Kevin, Brian's missing!" she cried, suddenly breaking down.

"What do you mean, missing?" I asked, alarmed.

"I forgot my trig homework, so I went back to the dorms and Zach just walked into my room, completely unaware of me. He looked at me and said that Brian was hurt and I just," she burst into tears again. After a suspenseful moment she continued. "Zach collapsed and we don't know what to do with him."

"I'll come and help." I said instantly. She led me through the winding alleyways to an out of the way building that didn't look anything like dorms. As we approached the door, I heard a scream from inside.

"What was," Sophie pounced on me, sliding me into the door, which opened on my entering. Inside were all of Sophie's friends, their bodies nailed limply to the wall dead.

"Sophie, what's going on here?" I managed to say. Zach caught my eye by the door, gagged. His eyes were searching mine, as though trying to tell me something.

“Why Kevin? They have my family. Slaughtered my sister and brothers. My mom’s the only one left. You would do the same as me. Wouldn’t you Kevin? They’ve already killed your friend Greta.”

“They... killed...,” my body shutdown. Greta dead. Sweet, kind Greta. The one person who was like a mother to me.

“I’m sorry. They will be here soon. They just want to run some tests. I suggest you agree. You don’t want to end up like them, do you?” She motioned to the side of the room, where what remained of Katie was sprawled, bloodied over the floor. Then she left. Greta, dead...?

“Don’t give up.” Zach’s voice startled me. “They’ve beat me for years. Put me in rooms with poisonous gasses and killed everyone I loved, but it’s much worse for those who do join them. Sophie will never be free of what she’s done for them and most likely they’ll just kill her mom anyway. I turned to him and was alarmed to see him still gagged. “I can speak to you through my eyes, from one of their ‘tests.’ If you untie me I can get you out of here. You don’t want to be here when they come back.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” I asked, so tired I no longer cared.

“What do you do if you can’t? Die? Will that do anyone good?”

“No, I guess not.” I got up and untied him and un-gagged him, but he remained silent.

“Why aren’t you talking to me?” I asked. “I untied you.” He opened his mouth to show a black stump where a tongue should have been.”

“They cut out your tongue?” I asked mortified. He nodded.

“Let’s go.” He said and we ran together to the basement.

Chapter 9

“Where are we going, exactly?” I asked, suddenly feeling uneasy.

“To the basement,” Zach answered.

“The basement? Is there a way to leave from there? And why do we have to leave from there? I didn’t see any guards or anything when Sophie brought me in here,” I said. We had hurried out of the tiny, suffocating room where Sophie had led me, and into a long hallway. Zach knowingly went to the left, where the hallway ended with a heavy-metal door. I followed, trying to keep up with his fast strides.

“You wouldn’t have seen any guards, because Sophie would have told them to stay hidden while she brought you in here. And yes, there is a way out in the basement. We can leave without all the security guards knowing,” Zach said with an empty voice. We had reached the last door at the end of the long hallway. He reached out and pulled the handle, with much difficulty. I lent him a hand as I said, “So you’re just taking me out of here?”

Together we pulled the door open with a loud screeching sound. Zach threw a frenzied glance over his shoulder.

“Come on, hurry up. Sophie will be bringing some crazy people with her, and I have no idea what new ideas and experiments they’ve come up with to force on people now,” Zach said. I sensed a hint of fear in his voice. The door opened to reveal a long flight of winding steps descending into the deep darkness down below.

“There’s a way out of here?” I asked doubtfully. Zach nodded and stepped down the stairs.

“You have to be careful, because there are no railings to hold onto. Just keep close to the wall. And shut the door behind you.”

“Then we won’t have any light,” I said. He pulled out a small flashlight from his pocket. I turned to the door, and gave it a tug. To my surprise, it shut quickly and effortlessly [and with an earsplitting *clang*]. Zach flicked on his flashlight. It had a very bright white light. He handed it to me so that I might see the way ahead as well.

“Are we just going to leave then? Shouldn’t we stop them, these people?” I said. He turned his head to shoot me a look of shock. It sent prickly chills down my spine.

“Stop them? Are you crazy? It’s a huge conspiracy! Don’t you know?” he said in disbelief.

“Well of course I wouldn’t know,” I replied snarkily. “I’m new to this place! I’m completely out of it. What do these guys want anyway?”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re new. Well it wouldn’t matter anyway, no one really knows about this.”

“So what do these people want?” I asked impatiently. “You say it’s some sort of conspiracy.”

“Yes, it’s... a conspiracy against the government. It started only a few months ago, and it was pretty small, but it’s growing. And it doesn’t look like it can be stopped,” Zach said grimly.

“What are they doing, exactly?”

“They’re rebelling against the government. To be specific, they are trying to install superhuman abilities in specimens. That’s what they think of all these innocent people that they’ve so viciously ensnared in their trap. People are treated just like little helpless animals, to be tested and tortured with who knows what. They can be killed, they can be enhanced, or

they can live the rest of their lives permanently disabled, but it makes no difference to the conspirators,” Zach answered bitterly. I felt bile rise in my throat.

“What do they want?” I inquired hesitantly, not sure if I really wanted to know.

“To overthrow the government. And if their experiments with superhuman abilities are successful, then everyone, government officials and members of the public alike, can be silenced. The superhumans will always remain a constant threat to any rebels. To keep them in check.. And at the center of this is Nolan Vinet. I don’t know much about him, except that he’s incredibly power hungry. And he’s willing to do anything to get his way.” Fear clouded my mind.

“So he’s after power...and he can do anything to get it? But if we just leave, escape from here, then this whole thing would just keep going on, and getting bigger,” I concluded, struggling to keep the fear out of my voice. Zach just looked at me in silent agreement. I took a few moments to understand the significance of all this, and to eventually pull myself together.

“Then we should stop them,” I said finally, trying to inject a good amount of rigidity into my words.

“That again?”

“Well we can’t just leave it like this! I can’t just leave it like this. I mean, I’m not just trying to be all heroic about this, but we just can’t leave it like this. Would you be able to live with yourself when this Nolan guys takes over all of us, with the knowledge that maybe you could have stopped him?” Zach considered this.

“And then who knows how many more lives will be destroyed with this nut case’s crazy ideas,” I continued. “And you said the whole thing actually only started a while ago. A scheme this crazy would take years to complete successfully, with all the testing and experimenting and whatnot. That means there’s still a chance of stopping these maniacs!”

Zach was silent for what seemed like years. Then he said slowly, “Okay. I guess we might as well try. Nothing to lose, I suppose.” He looked at me.

“Let’s do this.”

Chapter 10

We were now at the bottom of the stairs. I looked back up. The stairs wound around so much that I couldn’t see the top. “Hello? Earth to Kevin,” Zach whispered, making me jump.

“Sorry,” I said turning back around.

“Just pay attention, you could get lost. It’s like a maze down here.” Zach lead the way down a hall, turning down one, then another passage. There were doors on either side. Some had windows, but I didn’t dare look in them. All the doors had numbers.

We walked on; as we walked I noticed that there were no lights on anywhere. “Zach, why aren’t there any lights on?”

Zach stopped. “Because those who aren’t asleep are up in Sophie’s room expecting to find you.”

I gulped. “Umm ok.” We started walking again. “Where are we going?” I whispered.

“The main room, where all the computers are,” was the reply.

“Why?”

“I want to see if something they have been working on actually turned out right. Now shoosh!” We took another turn and found ourselves face-to-face with a door. Zach opened it; he shined the light from the flashlight around the room. The beam showed tables full of computers and papers. He turned on one of the computers and started muttering to himself, though how I don’t know. Suddenly he sat up straight.

“What? Did you find what you were looking for?” I asked, my hand on his shoulder.

“Huh? Oh yeah I found it, but I found something else you might be interested in.” He pointed to the screen. “Seems that Sophie lied about your friend. She’s alive, but they did some sort of new test on her.” I read what was on the screen in disbelief. Yeah, it was Greta all right, and the picture was unmistakable.

“Can we find her?” I asked. Zach scrolled down the page.

“Yeah... she’s in room 295, cage 114. The room I need is room 281, so she’s close enough that we can grab her when I’m done.” He stood up quickly and turned the computer off. “We need to hurry though; they’re probably on their way back and I bet they’re not happy that you’re gone.”

He led the way out of the room and down the halls. Room 279... 280... 281. Zach opened the door and we walked in. It looked like a laboratory. Zach grabbed 3 syringes full of some sort of liquid. “They’ve been working on this for quite a while, and finally got it right. Here.” He handed me one. “It makes you invisible whenever you want.” He pocketed the other one. “That’s for your friend.”

We raced down the hall, me frantically searching every door. 293... 294... 295. I opened it. The room was lined with cage after cage. I ran down the rows, not daring to look in them, till I came to the hundreds. When I got to Greta's cage I stopped, shocked. That computer page Zach had found had been right; they had done tests on her. Greta was no longer normal Greta... a Siberian husky looked back at me... a dog with Greta's eyes.

"Kevin." She whispered. I was glad that she could still talk. I knelt on the ground and unlatched the cage door.

"Greta are you ok?" I asked hugging her to me. I swear, if she could have given me a look she would have.

"Oh... other than the fact that I'm a DOG, I'm fine."

Zach knelt down next to us. "We have to get out of here. Greta hold still." He pulled the syringe of invisibility stuff out of his pocket. I quickly explained what it was to a nervous Greta, and we were out of there before you could have said Torvoue Academy.

Chapter 11

"So, what are we supposed to do?" I whispered, leaning in close to Zach and Greta. We had made our way outside and were sitting a short ways away from the school in a patch of grass hidden by several trees.

"We have to come up with some sort of plan against them..." Zach's voice echoed through our heads from his eyes. The three of us sat in silence for a moment.

"So... those rooms in the basement... how many of them contain these... creatures?" I asked.

"I believe one hundred of the rooms contain them... each have two hundred cages inside, but not all of them are full. Another hundred rooms are used for experimentation, and the last hundred are for storing supplies and creating new ones. Every ten rooms it changes from one category to another," Zach explained. I did the simple math in my head. That would mean the school could contain a maximum of twenty thousand 'experiments'.

"So... how many cages do you think are full? Just give me a guess."

"I don't know... I think they try to spread out their numbers so they don't have all of them in one cage, so they probably start filling in the first room of every group of ten rooms. Greta was in cage one hundred fourteen in the fifth room of her group of ten... there were maybe four other cages after her's filled, so I'm guessing fifty cages are full with around 118." We sat in silence for a moment longer before an idea struck me.

"There are thousands of creatures in there, all of which could be used against us... but, Greta, you would obviously help us over them, so, maybe there are others there who would help us. I mean, if those people killed those they hold dear, then maybe they would want revenge."

"So, then, we are going back in?" Zach asked, standing. I nodded in agreement, and we turned toward the ancient building.

The secret exit was closest to rooms 350 and three 351. We entered room 350, the first room in this group of rooms with cages. Most of the creatures in the cages were, indeed, sleeping, but those that were awake either looked deathly sick or were very restless. We walked cautiously and tried to make as little noise as possible. It was hard to believe that most of the experiments were once human. We came to a stop in front of several cages with people who looked mostly human. They were calm and awake, and were staring at us with glowing, green eyes.

"These people who did this to you... do you know their cause?" I asked, sitting in front of their cage.

"No, but we are much more powerful now than we had ever dreamed of," the one in the middle hissed.

"Do you want to leave this cage and make use of your powers and help us defeat these people? They are planning on overthrowing the government... and, I'm sure they will try to take control of the world as well, imprisoning everyone who lives on it."

The girl in the middle threw back her head in a frightening cackle. When she calmed down, she whispered in her hoarse voice, "Then let us be in lead of this army. We would rather thank them for this by ruling the world than destroy them."

Zach and I looked uneasily at each other. We turned and continued down the dark hall, looking for anyone else in the cages that may help us. Suddenly, I felt a hand clasp around my mouth. Zach and Greta kept walking, but they didn't get far before two shaded figures grabbed them, too. The one holding me pried the flashlight out of my hands, and, for an instant, the figures before me were lit up. They looked human, but something about them was... off. I didn't have time to examine them very clearly before the light was flicked off. The only thing that registered in my head was the blank, empty, black eyes.

Chapter 12

My head hurt. That was the first thing I realized. Then I realized I was lying on something cold, hard, and metallic. I tried to raise my head, tried to open my eyes, tried to make sense of what was happening to me, but all I could do was lie there and hurt.

I missed my friends. They may not have been much, but they were all I had. I missed my brother-Sam, not Percy, I don't think I'll ever find it in me to miss Percy- I even missed my mother.

I remember once when I sick with the flu, and I mean really sick, my mother was nice to me. She bought me the real 7-Up instead of the knock off brand, because she knew I liked it. She let me watch TV, and she kissed me on the forehead when she took my temperature.

I hear a low sob and realize that is mine. My hearing is coming back slowly, there are people talking about me,

“Severe head trauma...”

“May have to evacuate...”

I try to block it out. That practice worked so well for me in the past, but I found that now, lying here, bashed on the head, it wasn't helping. My problems were just as immediate and pressing as they had been when I was acknowledging them.

My thoughts flicker from one thing to another, *What happened to Zach? And Greta?* I try to open my eyes but that is still beyond me. I feel cold and I taste blood in my mouth. My head is already messed up from whatever it is that hit me, and I start to wonder if I'm dying. Maybe I am, I seem to have all the symptoms. Coldness, blood in my mouth, not being able to open my eyes...

What if I am dying???

That scares me. I'm too young to die.

Then that thought strikes me as absurd. People die every day. Young or old doesn't matter. But I had so much left to do, so much left to say. I wanted to tell Greta that she made the best chocolate chip cookies in the world. I wanted to tell Jaxon that he didn't have to be so tough all the time. I wanted to tell Allison to stop fighting. I wanted to tell Zach—that no matter what I'd thought, he was a good guy.

I try to open my mouth to say this, but when I do all that escapes me is a low moan. I try to stop it, but I can't, that moan seems to have a life of it's own. I hear Zach say, “I think he's coming around.” Hear Greta whimper.

Greta!

I force my eyes open, then wish I hadn't. The cage that I am in is bathed in bright light, and it hits me like sledgehammer to the face. There are people talking even louder now, but I can't really hear them, not at all. I reach my hands to my head where my head itches and find that it is wet. I hear Zach tell me, “Don't move man.” But I disobey, because as we all know, that's one of the things I do best. I look at my fingers. They are red and covered with blood.

Someone shines a light in my eyes, and I groan again, and right before I pass out, it occurs to me that the blood is mine.

Chapter 13

Epilogue

Diary of Dr. J. Hyde

There is a reason we don't give patients our real names. They are here for various reasons, and they have hard, insane lives that, at times, frighten me half to death.

When Kevin came in, with his head bashed in from falling off of his backyard play set at age eight, they said he wouldn't survive, but he did. They said he wouldn't be able to speak again, but he did. Yet there was one thing that Kevin could not do. He couldn't come back. He would lie in his bed, staring unblinking at the ceiling and muttering strange, incoherent sentences. Sometimes he would shout the name Sam or Percy, the names of the doctors who had taken care of him in surgery.

My son was eight years old at the time too. He was in Kevin's class. His mother was friend to my wife and yet there was so little we could do for him. He didn't know who his parents were. It had been nine years. Sometimes I wonder if he could even see or hear them. He might just have been better off dead.

His nurse, Greta Smith, was a very kind, giving woman. She cared very much for the boy. She even believed she could get through to him. But she couldn't. Her care for him bordered on obsession, until I had no choice but to reassign her to another patient. She gave it a try, she really did.

One morning she walked into the care room in street clothes with flowers, and asked if she could see him as a friend and not a nurse. I let her. She sat down by his side, laying her hands on top of his and putting a rosary to her lips in silent prayer. I left them alone. It was a mistake.

About half an hour later I heard screams. Running to Kevin's room, I stopped just outside. There, in the middle of the room, hung Greta, her body dangling uselessly from the ceiling. A knife sunk into Kevin's chest, a ring of blood forming around it. Kevin was going to die, and ... wasn't it fitting that the only conscious words he had spoken in nine years were his last?

“Greta. It is my blood.”