

Prologue

I squeezed the straps of my backpack and my jaw clamped tightly. Escape. I needed to escape. My gaze landed on the students rushing past the doorway, and my body went numb. I would have to wait.

I glanced across the table at Kelsey Smith, the most popular sophomore at Claytonville High and shook my head. No, I definitely needed to leave. *Now!*

“Here’s your notebook,” Kelsey said.

She held the spiral across the table, and I carefully grabbed the edge farthest from her fingers. I couldn’t risk making contact, not with that leather-strapped bracelet she wore.

“Thank you,” I managed to mutter.

Kelsey’s brows furrowed, and I dropped my gaze before she could say anything. I bit my lip and jammed the notebook inside my backpack. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking. If that particular piece of jewelry came into contact with me, my secret would be out. I knew the true owner of that bracelet wasn’t Kelsey. It belonged to her best friend, April. And April’s been missing for a week now.

I sprang out of my seat to leave. Kelsey’s head snapped toward me, and she frowned. I hesitated slightly, then turned away from her. Crowded hallway or not, I was out of here. I didn’t mind helping Kelsey catch up on our history notes, but I’d tempted fate for too long. I sucked in a breath and stepped into the hallway.

“Heather, wait. I wanted to thank you—”

Kelsey’s voice came from behind me, and I paused at the pressure on my shoulder. I drew back and tried inching away, but her voice faded into a completely different one. And I was no longer myself...

I crossed the mall parking lot, and my eyes narrowed at the black pickup truck parked beside my car. My back muscles tightened as I scanned the area. Tons of empty spaces and the driver chose that particular spot to park? I harrumphed. Why had I parked in this desolated area?

The overhead lights cast more shade around my car than light. I shivered and glanced behind me in a search for more shoppers. Nobody. I huffed a frustrated sigh and marched forward. Movement within the shadows of the truck spiked my heart rate and I froze, rooted in place.

Who or what was that? I waited momentarily. The wind blew strands of hair across my face, and I released a nervous laugh. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me.

I shifted the shopping bag to the side and reached for my phone. I'd call Kelsey. She'd keep me company. I quickly dialed her number and waited. *Please answer the phone.*

"Hey, girl," I said, dropping my shoulders. "What's our plan for tomorrow night?"

I stepped forward, comforted by Kelsey's voice. Which was stupid. What could she have done if I was in trouble?

"Kay, sounds like a plan. I'll see you tomorrow." I stopped beside the driver's door and turned the phone off. I glanced at my purse and tossed the phone inside, then dug around for the buried keys. Mom's criticizing voice echoed in the back of my head. "*April, you should always be prepared.*" I wanted to curse at her for constantly being right. A shuffling sounded behind me. I paused momentarily, my hand hovering inside my purse.

I glanced up and flinched at the sudden reflection in the car window. My pulse spiked as if fear itself had grabbed my heart and clutched it tightly. I was in trouble. The image of a man wearing a long, black coat appeared directly behind me. I threw my purse and shopping bag at him, then darted to the right. I stumbled backward and winced from the strong grip on my arm. He quickly overpowered me. Although he was much stronger, I kept squirming to get out of his control. I opened my mouth to scream. A cloth emerged from his hand and concealed my face, stifling any sound. My jaw clamped shut, and I shook my head back and forth. *Don't breathe in.* His arms remained tightly wrapped around my body, the rag firmly in place.

The pressure built in my lungs and I could no longer hold my breath. I inhaled deeply and a strong chemical odor engulfed my senses. The ground spun beneath my feet as the heady, intoxicating, scent enveloped me. My legs wobbled and I became weaker and weaker, succumbing to the total blackness.

A faint sound—perhaps a whimper—echoed faintly in the background of my mind. Seconds later, the sound returned, ringing annoyingly through my head. *Just go away.* A few moments passed and I realized the annoying sound came from my own mouth. Something wasn't right.

Where was I?

All mental thoughts meshed together and made it impossible to concentrate. I was dominated, trapped by the total darkness that surrounded my mind. I couldn't move, rendered

motionless from my semi-conscious state on the hardened, concrete floor. I groaned. I wasn't lying here by choice.

I took a deep breath and used what little strength I had to force my eyes open. They barely budged. I slumped farther against the floor. My heavy eyelids made the simple task of opening them impossible.

What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I move?

Part of the problem was my pounding head, it hurt so badly. It felt as if someone was beating a drumstick on top rhythmically. Boom... Boom... Boom...

I tried raising my arms, but could barely lift them off the ground. I let out a long, low sigh and lay perfectly still for a few more minutes. I had two options: continue to lie here without moving, or figure out what had happened to me. After a few seconds of debate, I opted for the latter.

I opened my eyes as far as I could manage and tried to ignore the agony. Everything was dark and blurry. A burning sensation emerged deep in my chest, as if any minute the suppressed panic would burst. I squeezed my eyes shut again, the pain unbearable. Another soft whimper escaped.

Maybe I should just continue to lie still. Focus on something other than torment. Breathing... I needed better control of my breathing. I concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths, but began to gag. Ugh... that smell. It stank of stagnant, damp air mixed with stale cigarette smoke. I paced my breaths and cringed at the scent, while the question of my location lingered in my mind.

My sense of hearing wasn't helping any. The quietness had an eerie presence about it, and I strained to recognize any noise hinting at my location. The only audible sounds came from me.

What were my last steps?

My body shook and pulse raced as pieces of my last memories flashed through my mind. A guy. I remembered a guy in a black coat, who appeared rather suddenly behind me. He drugged me with the cloth placed over my mouth.

A tingling sensation jolted through me, and I shivered at that memory. That snapped me back to here and now... wherever here was. I wanted to cry, but that wouldn't help me. *Be strong, April, and find a way out of here. Try to escape.* I repeated this to myself, like a pep-talk, but first, I needed to move.

I lifted my head off the ground, but only managed a few inches. It was so heavy, I swore an anvil sat on top of my shoulders where my head belonged. Giving up, I lowered to the ground and reopened my eyes.

As things slowly began to focus, I scoped my surroundings and crinkled my nose at the peeling plaster and cobwebs hanging from the floor joist above. A basement. I was in some type of cellar.

I shifted my gaze to the left and squinted at the faint light shining through a tiny window. Small particles of dust floated innocently in the air. My stomach fluttered as I continued to stare. Maybe, just maybe, the window offered a way to escape. If I figured out where I was, I might have a chance.

I pushed off the floor and sat upright. The room started to spin, immediately making me dizzy. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply and slowly in hope of warding off the nausea. The stale, foul air wasn't helping, but the slow breaths calmed my stomach. At least the pounding in my head diminished.

Tilting my head to the right, I studied the dark area. The stairs leading to a door had to be somewhere, but was the guy who took me waiting behind the door?

I swallowed hard and glanced at the only source of daylight. The window was my best option. Inhaling deeply, I began to stand. My legs shook, making every move more difficult. I kept my focus on my destination and ignored the tingling sensations shooting up my legs. I had to see if anything was recognizable.

At a slow pace, I wobbled to the filtered light despite the lack of leg strength. A moment later, a hint of a smile crossed my mouth. Only a few more steps to go. I extended my arms to reach for the windowsill, and stumbled over an old plastic milk crate hidden in the shadows. A curse word escaped as I stared at the perfectly sized stepstool.

I quickly scooted the crate under the sill and stepped on to it. My head dropped, shaking slightly. Big iron rods obstructed the view and crushed all hope of crawling out.

I fought back the threatening scream and peered farther out. I studied the lake to the right. Was that Desti Lake? I scanned the area for some type of distinguishing features. Anything. But nothing stood out. I sighed. The only section of the lake I'd been to was the beach.

The beach. A lump developed in my throat, and I blinked away tears from the warm memories of my friends at the beach. The very thought of never seeing them again was almost

too much for me to comprehend. My bottom lip quivered, and I leaned closer to the glass panes. I had to keep trying. I peered out and moaned. Nothing was recognizable. Next door stood a one story, weathered log cabin. A rock strewn path trailed to the edge of the lake that housed a small decorative lighthouse. I frowned, this information didn't help me.

I stretched and leaned to the left on my tiptoes, desperate to see anything. I wobbled and the crate scooted out from underneath me. *Thud*. I landed on the floor and gasped, the sound of my heartbeat thrashed in my ears. My head whipped upward to the heavy footsteps overhead. *Crap*.

I rushed from the window and halted in the middle of the room not knowing where to go. The back half of the room still remained dark, and I wasn't sure about the layout. My head tilted toward a squeaking sound that pierced the deafening silence. I flinched from the click of a light switch. Soft amber light suddenly created shadows throughout the room from a single light bulb illuminating a staircase along the far wall. My breath caught and my pulse quickened. A dark figure stood at the top of the stairs.

Home flashed through my mind, along with images of Mom and Dad. A safe haven where I was secure and loved. Longing to be there, I knew in the back of my mind it wasn't going to happen. I'd never know the safety of my loved ones again.

With short panted breaths, my heart continued to race, but my legs refused to move, leaving me paralyzed. Trapped. I stood completely useless. I clutched my arms around my stomach and started to shake.

Move, April. You need to move, *now*!

He drew closer. A low whimper escaped. Fight or flight... words I'd heard many times my entire life, not giving them a second thought. Fight or flight... I needed to do something quickly.

The guy's face came into focus, and my eyes grew wide. I knew him. He was the custodian's assistant at my school. My breath hitched as he leaned closer. His darkened stare penetrated me, and I shuddered at his outstretched arms. *Why couldn't I move?* His fingers wrapped around me, and I found my voice, letting out a blood-curling scream...

I snapped out of my vision and grabbed my throat. Oh my God, did I scream out loud? My body shook from the vision of April's kidnapper. The hallway came into focus, and I suppressed another scream. Dozens of students stood gaping at me. A few of their mouths were opened, while others had a dazed look. My ability no longer a secret.

I shuffled back a step, and Kelsey recoiled as if I was poisonous. My head snapped to the right, and I bit my lower lip. The single word “freak” hung in the air.

What have I done?