

Preface

Not in my wildest dream would I have imagined a nightmare whisking me away in the middle of the night, only to return me with no memory of the time we spent together. I could never forget that night—how and why it happened to me. So when the opportunity of finding out came knocking at my door, I couldn't just let it slip away. And so once again, not in my wildest dream would I have imagined a moment as chilling as this.

The sun beamed down on the illusive island and ran through every pulse in our bodies as we ran against time, so desperate to see the side of change that awaited us, in a faraway place called home. I couldn't help myself; I had to put it to the test—fate, that is. Now we were grasping, running for our lives, and our only hope of escaping was an injured

plane and a prayer.

Before long, the island's beauty would only be a memory etched in my brain. Its demise crept mercilessly beneath the burning sun. Before long, it would be what seemed...an ice age?

But how could that be?

Only in dreams, that's how.

Dream or no dream, surely we could die or be forever lost in this nightmare.

CHAPTER ONE

No Turning Back

In theory, there's only one day that comes and goes in precise intervals, that's unaware of itself and its unique charm. We rise accordingly and go about our daily routine, and near time for it to make its exit, we settle down in the same position as we started. And when the day rolls around again, we repeat. Almost mechanically. As if we were spellbound by the cycle of day and not know it. As if, when change comes along and snaps its fingers, the spell's broken. And it's a rude awakening...sometimes.

This day especially was like that. And it didn't

matter that it had been four years and three months, two weeks and a day in the making, and should go down in history as Pia's day of dread, though I had the guts to face it somehow, one precarious step after another, as I embarked on a trip moments away from takeoff. No. What mattered was the unpredictable path I was on and how it would end about a week from now.

With my backpack hanging off my shoulder and a mild breeze playing in my hair, I led the way to the plane. I couldn't believe that I was actually going through with this. But not only that, I had a weird feeling I just couldn't shake. But when you find yourself returning to a dark part of your past—to a place you thought you would never see again because your last experience there resembled episodes of the *Twilight Zone*, this place much like home to you too—then how should you feel?

I drew in a deep breath, and then stole a few moments to make a wish. A mere request, because I believed with all my heart that anything was possible—and because I had the experience to back

it up. So I closed my eyes and wished this moment away forever; wished away the nightmare and all memory of it forever times two. Then...*one, two*...I counted to five for good measure. And then I heard it! Something magical. A whisper. Right then I knew. Knew that my “wish come true” would have been exactly that had the little voice only said, “*Your wish is my command.*”

But it disappointed me instead. *Is that what you really want...never know what happened during the most critical hours of your life?*

Of course granting my wish would have served me just fine, I thought with pooched lips. But I knew all too well. Knew that deep down I would give just about anything to know what really happened that night at the Florida beach house, where I mysteriously vanished in my sleep. And if it took going back to find out, ultimately proving my theory of what happened, then so be it. After four long years of not knowing anything, it would mean the world to me. Not to mention that it would probably be the greatest solved mystery of all times.

I arrived at the plane looking back at my parents coming up behind me. I settled the backpack on the ground, attempting to stretch precious moments I had left, by any means possible, before boarding the plane. I looked up as one flew over me, closed my eyes, and let my mind wander up to the universe. Suddenly I was amazed that we were all right here, right where we were supposed to be...*at a point of no return*. Or was I just plain crazy about all this? Some people, however, wouldn't have a problem thinking so.

Suddenly, I felt a nudge on my back. In an instant I turned, thinking someone had snuck up on me but...no one was there. I frowned. *That was creepy*. I lifted my backpack and contemplated that some more. *I could've sworn...it couldn't have been the wind hitting me like that in just that spot*.

"Pia, is everything okay?" Dad asked as he and Mom approached.

"Yeah, sure," I replied, still in wonder. *Maybe it was the hands of the universe...had to be, urging me to get moving*. So I boarded the plane convinced

that that was it.

Mom and Dad filed in behind me. And in moments the twin-engine plane roared to life.

“All set?” Dad’s vibrant tenor reigned over the humming engines. Wearing dark shades and a ready-to-go smile, he looked back at me, as did Mom, her hazel eyes gleaming. Through them I pretended to read her mind. *Pia, if you’re not ready, it’s not too late to cancel this trip.*

I imagined her reading mine. *But Mom, it’s spring break, and we’re all set to go. And what about the pilot’s convention? The house? Dad could sell it for real next time. It’ll be okay, you’ll see.*

Mom was the reason Dad hadn’t sold the house already. She was right, though: the house had deep, sentimental value, had been part of the family for far too long to get rid of. Dad had lost sight of that and probably would’ve regretted selling it. And how could either of us blame the house? It hadn’t whisked me away in the middle of the night, stolen sixteen hours of my memory, and set my mind to see creepy things. It hadn’t...changed my life

forever.

We just needed to go back...to heal and...and because destiny was calling and because...just because.

I gazed out the window. *Was I really out of my mind?* Suddenly my fingers were tap-dancing on my lap. I stared at them for a moment then curled them into a tight fist. If I was a real nutcase, I supposed I would soon find out.

The plane taxied into position for takeoff. Upon clearance, it became a straight line of roaring thunder up the runway. Up, up the plane climbed over Houston. My eyes shut tight, hands gripping the armrests as anxiety grew like fever through my body.

No turning back.

We were on our way.

No turning back.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BEACH HOUSE

Finally, I was back at the beach house in Pompano Beach. Dad pulled into the driveway, turned off the engine, and we sat quietly looking at the house. I had a grave feeling, though shallow, that I hoped would subside sooner than later.

As cute as ever, the house looked the same. It looked as though it'd gotten a fresh coat of yellow paint. The awnings were unweathered. The landscaping, though moderate, was so neatly trimmed we must have just missed the groundskeeper.

“Well, shall we?” Dad broke the silence then

cracked open the door. He got out, opened the hatch. “Come on, girls.”

Mom and I smiled at each other weary smiles before getting out. By then Dad had grabbed bags and gone in ahead of us. What was left we collected then closed the hatch. Then we started up the walkway.

As I crossed the threshold, a waft of suffocating humidity wobbled me, and I gasped. I continued on, stepping into the dark part of my past, slow and easy, as queasiness deep in my bones merged with escalating pulses. Then I paused, turned my head over my shoulder. Panic hurtled my heart against my chest. I then instantly blinked away the startling image of someone sitting on the sofa. A tan shawl over the couch, that’s all it was. I took several deep breaths to calm myself.

Dad had disappeared somewhere in the shadows of the house. I could hear him now, doing something in the master bedroom. The air conditioner kicked on, exactly what this place needed.

“I have to say, I kinda missed this place,” Mom said, looking the place over. She put aside her luggage. “Suppose it could use some sunshine.”

At once, life began streaming through the windows as she went from room to room, opening drapes and blinds. I kept up with her movement as far as the kitchen, scanning as much of the house as my static position would allow. The kitchen divided the two bedrooms, and a half wall, about four feet high, separated the living room from the kitchen.

Only my head moved, as I looked the place over. The house didn't feel the same; it wasn't the same. The eeriness of that night permeated the walls and the suffocating warmth trapped in those walls. And I stood there, waiting for my feet to think, to move, knowing that they would decide to do just that. They had come this far.

I drew in more of the swollen air. Off from the kitchen to the right was my room. My feet made steps that way, sneaky steps, to a room that no longer felt like my own, rather a place of the unknown. A heavy dose of fright flushed through

me and lingered somewhat. It's all me now, slowly entering the room. I eased the luggage alongside the bed and dropped the backpack in an old accent chair. I moved to the window and strung the blinds open. The room was aglow now, and I wasted no time scouring every corner of it—the bathroom, the closet, even under the bed—knowing all along my looking here and there was pointless because after all, I was dealing with a nondescript, a ghostly coward, and a conniving one at that.

I got off my knees and noticed how neat the room was. Pillows were plumped, the bedding smoothed over. It didn't appear as dusty as I would have thought. Everything else appeared the same too, untouched. The books in the headboard that I never got around to reading remained. Over the chair, still in the same place, hung a collage of photos and drawings I had created when I was much younger.

Not that I was expecting to see things out of place; as far as I knew we were or had been, the only ones who spent time here anymore, not since

Grandfather passed away ages ago. The house then was passed down to Dad; he was the only one left with an emotional attachment to it. Uncle John had moved to Bermuda with Grandmother long before Grandfather's passing. Uncle John would use the house occasionally, but not for a long time now.

No...not anyone had been spending time here. "Not a thing," I mumbled, scanning the room again. I was at least 99 percent certain. But that 1 percent, that itsy-bitsy doubt, was as sketchy and as creepy as my world had been the past four years.

I stood staring at the bed now. *How did I leave this bed that night?* One theory, sleepwalking, but it was quickly shot down. No one could see how I went undetected for hours. Neither could I. For a good sixteen hours, it was as if I had disappeared off the face of the earth. Until finally, there I was, like an airheaded doll roaming the beach with no clue where I was or who I was, or what happened...somewhat distraught by it all. The horrible images I'd been seeing ever since that night, I believed held encrypted clues about what

happened.

If only I could remember.

I left the room then. Thirsty, I went straight to the refrigerator. Ice cold bottled water was on the door. I snatched one up, cracked it open, and took long delicious sips.

My parents came out of their bedroom, Dad with keys dangling and Mom with her purse dangling from her shoulder. I supposed they were about to leave to take care of the business they'd discussed on the way here.

“We’re going to see George before he closes up,” Mom confirmed. “Come on, we can stop and get something to eat afterward, then go to the supermarket for a few things.”

“Do I really have to go? I’d rather hang out around here.”

Mom glowered at me. “Sometimes I wonder if you bumped your head, causing brain damage or something.” Translation: *This is your first day back, and you’re not afraid of being here by yourself?*

Why I wasn’t afraid was inexplicable. To have

your life change overnight with no clue as to how or why it happened, then for some odd reason, practically insist on going back to the place it happened—well, that sounds like a person out of their freaking mind to me. That’s what I had been telling myself anyway.

“I’m just tired of being crammed up. On the plane, in the car, and now you want to drag me to some office,” I said earnestly, picturing stretching my legs out on the beach. *No harm in that*, I thought. I went on, “The office is—what?—just a few blocks away, not far...and you won’t be long, right? Besides, I’ll just be sitting around while you talk business. I’ll be okay...really.”

Mom looked over at Dad’s burly frame. It was hard reading his thoughts, or maybe not.

“C’mon, Dad,” I said. Almond-shaped lids framed my dad’s smoky gray eyes though dark shades covered them. So I couldn’t read his eyes.

“Just do what your mother says.” He turned away and headed for the door.

“Isaac?” Mom called after him.

I couldn't believe he was leaving it all up to Mom to decide if I could be trusted. For so long I had been limited to the things I could do and couldn't do and when I could do it. Just this past year things got better. But still it felt like them breathing down my neck every waking hour of every day. I needed more breathing room and a little more trust. But first, they had to remove the leash from my neck.

Of course, they had legitimate concerns stemming from that infamous night four years ago. Their concerns were doubts (about me), which made the healing process for them...unyielding. If only I had proof of being kidnapped. If only I could remember something, so I could prove it to myself. Not that I had any doubts.

“Isaac?” Mom demanded before he got away.

“Just going next door to let the Jenkins know we're here,” he answered.

Mom nodded and then approached me, smoothing a hand over my hair. “Look, honey—”

“Mom.” I pulled away, refusing to let her

butter me up with the caring-Mom bit. “I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, well, that may be.” She paused. “I, um...have decided not to go to the convention.”

“What! Are you serious? You look forward to the conferences just as much as Dad. Why? Nah...don’t bother.” I didn’t wait for an answer; it was clear why.

“Mom, I know it’s rough. But for what it’s worth, I’m not the same person I was four years ago. I mean I am, but I’m older now. Can’t you admit that I’ve been the model kid?”

She frowned. “What exactly are you saying?”

“What I’m trying to say is that your little girl is growing up—I’m graduating next year for Pete’s sake. At some point, you have to let go. You have to trust me...right here...right now. Because *here* is where you and Dad lost confidence in me to begin with, thinking here is where I made the worst judgment call of my life.”

She looked down at the floor. “You sound so grown up. But you’re known to wander off.”

“But Mom, that was—”

“I know. It was different from when you wandered off at the amusement park or when you left the house in the middle of the night to join neighborhood kids to see a lunar eclipse. But I’m still your mother.” She made a stern nod then pointed a finger. “And it’s my right to worry, to protect you. All the more reason why I should pass on going to the convention this time around.” She shifted weight to the other foot, crossed her arms.

“Okay. Stay. Babysit me. So does that mean I have to go with you now? Can’t I just go...kick my feet in the sand?” I grabbed her hand. “Come on...See for yourself that you have nothing to worry about, Mom. The beach is swarming with people.”

She let out a stiff sigh and resisted my hold. “I really don’t have time for this...but okay, lead the way.”

Gladly I did just that, surprised this was going easier than I would have thought. Maybe Mom was out of her mind. Maybe we were out of our minds together. For now, it didn’t matter. I slid open the sliding glass door that opened to a screened-in

porch overlooking a luscious green yard with an ancient willow tree. Bushes and rocks divided our property from beach property. We crossed the lawn to the far corner and descended wooden steps leading to the beach. It took only a few steps to prove my point.

“See, nothing to worry about,” I said, smiling.

“Yeah. It’s such a pleasant day for the beach,” Mom said collecting the view as a gentle ocean breeze tossed strands of our hair around. “I can’t get over you not being afraid. You know, we found you just up the way. And still, there’s that question loaded with great mystery: what happened that night? Can’t you understand my wanting to protect you? The person that kidnapped you could be out there somewhere.”

My eyes widened. “But, Mom—” I began, but she held up a hand stopping me.

I couldn’t believe my ears. From the beginning, my parents couldn’t fathom someone swiping me right under their noses. Neither of them had gone to bed that night; it was impossible for

someone to get in and leave without notice. It was easier to believe anything but kidnapping. Only I believed, of which proved her point: why wasn't I afraid?

"All right," she said, lightly shaking her head. "I feel like a momma bird letting her baby fly out of the nest for the first time. I can't believe I'm going to do this. But okay, but so help me—"

"Mom. Don't worry. You'll see. I won't disappoint you."

She folded her arms, twisted her lips, and then led the way back. "And I don't want you straying too far. You hear me?"

"I won't get lost, Mom, promise."

Back in the house, Mom took a quick glance in the pantry and refrigerator, removed a pen and notepad from her purse. "I'm gone," she said, jotting some things down. "We shouldn't be long. Make sure you have your phone on you."

"I will. I always do." I hugged her around her thin waist, feeling proud of having gained her trust.

Moments later, the storm door closed behind

her. Shortly after, I tracked her footsteps as far as the porch. They were pulling off now. “Bring Cheerios back,” I called out.

I relaxed my head against the balustrade, dragged in the fresh air, and sighed. I looked up and down the shaded street. A few people were out and about. Up the street, just past the light, were high-rises of luxury apartments of at least ten stories. I thought about how close Dad had come to selling the house, how Mom’s spirit wouldn’t let him. Then I realized how much I really liked it here—the house in this exact spot, the many types of trees, the footpath out back leading to the beach, the feeling of anticipating fun, the kind of fun I used to have and missed—all while the desire deep in my core intensified.

Chapter Three

Freaky Encounter

My walk drew me to the boardwalk. Why people called it The Boardwalk was beyond me. It's just a long stretch of smooth pavement with various restaurants, quaint resorts, specialty shops, and ice cream and pastry stands. Benches and patio tables, some with umbrellas, were conveniently scattered along the way. About midway set an outdoor amphitheater where entertainment went on year-round.

I was close enough now to see a peculiar hut with straw roofing. This strange addition to the boardwalk wasn't there the last time I was here.

Outside hanging upright against the hut was a scarecrow in a checkered shirt, black pants, and tacky red hat, an odd attention-grabber that inspired a grin. Was it there to scare birds? If so, I wondered if it was working. Or maybe it was for sale. However, the multicolored T-shirts hanging outside reeled me in. I stopped just to check the prices and was back on the move in a hot minute.

Maybe I'll pick one up on my way back, I thought as my mood to shop took a backseat to hunger.

I got out my cellphone. I had to let Mom know I was grabbing something to eat. The phone rang...no answer. Voice mail picked up, so I left a message.

Up a ways, I stopped at a familiar café. A guy, twenty-something, came from the back to the counter. He was medium height, with cropped wavy hair, and kind of cute. He took my order: bacon double cheeseburger, French-fried sweet potatoes, and iced tea. I noticed him staring on the sly.

“Are you from around here?” he asked. “You

look familiar.”

“I guess you can say that. I’ve been here a few times. We have a beach house up a ways.” I pointed that way.

His brows knitted together; he wore a thinking face now. “Uhh, yeah. I thought I recognized you. I don’t recall your name though. You been okay?”

“Excuse me, have we met?”

“Uh, nah, not exactly. I, um, just remember you. That’s all.” He pressed his lips into a thin smile. And in a bashful manner, I lowered my head slightly.

I had a hunch what was behind his handsome smile. My mug shots (as I called them) had been plastered all over the place: on poles, in stores, on TV—probably the Internet—everywhere, for the eleven-year-old girl who went missing. My parents had wasted no time the next morning getting my picture out.

What little I remembered I reflected on: me, distraught, wandering around, no clue of who I was. The elderly couple, telling each other—and me—

that I was the missing girl everyone was looking for. It wasn't until I reunited with my parents that I remembered who I was. Things started happening fast after that. The specimen examinations, the intense, dragged-out questioning. They all seemed like heartless monsters, the detectives who didn't believe me, their minds fixed on me having a spare key that I used to let myself out of the house, as opposed to me being kidnapped. Nothing...I knew nothing of a key, nothing at all; I had no memory of anything but going to bed that night. Later I went under hypnosis. Nothing helped, of course. By then I'd started seeing creepy things, visions—that was all in my head they claimed. But I knew better than that.

Yeah, without a doubt, this guy recognized me from the pictures. It had only been four years since the incident, and I hadn't changed. Well, not that much. Besides, my case was like those from *Unsolved Mysteries*. So I couldn't blame anyone for wondering...including this cute one.

“Oh...okay.” I crossed my arms, nodding.

“Well, I’m taking a seat out on the terrace,” I said, backing off, trying to avoid talk about the dark days of my past. A sweet melody went off in the messenger bag hanging off my shoulder: a text message. I reached inside of it to retrieve the phone.

“Sure, I’ll bring your order out to you,” he said, I nodded, and that was that.

Wrought iron confined the terrace, and a bulbous awning shaded the area from the sun’s glare completely. I pulled out a metal chair and seated myself facing the ocean. The text message was from my friend Tonya, checking to see if we’d made it okay. My thumbs went to work texting her back. The message was sending just as Mom was calling. I answered and assured her that I was all right.

After leaving the café, I walked farther up the boardwalk, looking for something special to jump out at me. Time flew by, and I knew I had better head back before I got another call from Mom, wondering where I was. So I added a little tailwind to my browsing gait as I headed back, so far empty-

handed. It was starting to look like I would end up with a T-shirt from the hut. And I knew exactly the one I wanted.

I claimed it immediately when I arrived. I browsed some more before finalizing the purchase. A pair of beaded earrings and matching necklace I adored. In the mirror, they looked perfect on.

As I continued browsing, a stiff breeze tickled my nose. I turned away quickly to sneeze, then looked off and spotted a group of boys putting on a show on skateboards, singing a cappella. With a ticking clock rushing me, they were very much a distraction.

But all of a sudden, I felt light-headed. I lowered my head with closed eyes, allowing time for the feeling to pass. Except it didn't, it got worse. Voices sharpened, gradually sounding like bees humming all around me, then came the floating-away sensation, anchored by a sinking one in the pit of my gut. I knew exactly what was happening. The symptoms were all too familiar. I had been living with them for far too long. And for the sake of

feeling or seeing myself move, I ran a hand over barely opened eyes.

Another one of those creepy visions. I just knew it. I was having the symptoms, so something had to be there. Usually there was. I wanted to look—no, I didn't. Yes, I did.

I stopped fighting the urge already, and my eyes flashed open. What I saw was a skateboard sailing in my direction, its owner in midair, falling. His falling eyes fixated on mine, his mouth wide open. I couldn't hear him, though, only the soft humming sound playing around me.

Our eyes remained spellbound as his long, drawn-out fall came to an end. My body began lowering as my right arm went up to minimize the blow of the skateboard. Except now, I felt nothing, no motion, no sensation, as if I really wasn't in my body controlling its movement. Yet in this awkward state that seemed to last forever, our eyes still locked as one.

And when he hit the concrete, at once my eyes shut.

The feeling subsided. The humming was nearly gone, and the voices were clearer. Though it felt like an eternity, in a matter of seconds I could feel my body again.

The stocky man with a distinguished accent from the hut was at my side now.

“Oh my, the board got ya good,” he said, looking at my forearm. “How are you feeling? You okay?”

I didn’t feel my aching arm until he mentioned it. I looked, saw the bruised bump, and instinctively added pressure. “I’ll be fine,” I replied. He suggested that I sit for a moment. I thanked him and stayed put. My attention wandered over to the boy.

His friends hovered over him now, astounded by the incident that landed him hard on his behind. Their faces wore aching smiles as they helped him up. Other people slowed to observe but kept moving seeing nothing serious was going on.

Back on his feet, he brushed off his loose-fitting clothes and checked his body for cuts and bruises. Our eyes met again, but something about

his glance made me feel nervous.

He carried on in conversation with his friends, each of them periodically looking my way. Then he was walking toward me, gently rubbing the arm he'd fallen on.

As he approached, he leaned over me, his hands on his knees. "Hey, I'm Cameron. You okay?"

I nodded. "What about you?"

"Yeah, a hard fall but I'm okay." He angled in closer, spoke in a lower tone. "Say, um...that was really something...that...whatever it was. We were in some kind of zone. You saw that, right?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed, forehead pleated. "That thing between us. While I was falling."

I shook my head nervously, feeling violated with him staring into my eyes as if he had the power to drag anything out of me—his thoughts, for instance. Was he serious or on drugs or what? I didn't see anything, that's for sure.

"You saw it, right?" he continued. "You had

to. Why else were you looking at me like that? Like...like—”

“Like what? What? What exactly...are you talking about?” I stuttered. “You fell off the skateboard—it’s what I saw, all I was looking at.”

“So you’re saying you didn’t do...um—?”

“*What?* Just come out and say it,” I demanded, fear trembling my lips now. Was he accusing me of causing his fall? Was he pissed off because we made eye contact? Or was he that bad at coming on to girls?

“You mean to tell me...” He grabbed my arm.

Scratch all the above; he was just stone crazy.

“Hey!” I shouted, yanking loose.

“Hey you! Get off her.” The attendant was back in half-rage to my rescue. “Why you all up on her like that? On another insanity trip, huh?” The attendant shoved him. “Huh? Get out of here and take this with you.” The attendant forced the skateboard into Cameron, then shoved him again. “Get out of here causing trouble—now!”

Cameron backed off some and waved off his

buddies who had taken steps forward as if they were going to get involved.

The attendant continued, “See the mess you caused, eh? You see, eh?” He was pointing to clothes and other stuff still scattered on the ground.

“Come on, man. We don’t have time for this,” one griped. The other boys nodded in agreement.

“Hold up,” Cameron encouraged.

We now had an audience wearing a “what’s going on” expression. But that didn’t bother Cameron as far as I could tell. He was back over me, speaking directly to the attendant.

“I’m really sorry, sir—really I am. But—” Something was troubling him that was clear. He turned to me, began to say, “You really—?”

“*Really* what? Didn’t stick my foot out to trip you?” At this point, enough was enough.

He seemed surprised by my reaction and backed off a bit. “So you didn’t...?” He paused, then recanted. “Nah...maybe I’m going too far with this. Maybe I’m just cuckoo.” He made a face.

“*You think?*” I said, thinking this wasn’t a

joking matter.

During a brief silence, there it was again, that confused, flushed look about him. What was going on with him?

“What’s your problem now?” the attendant demanded of Cameron.

“Nothing, nothing,” Cameron said, not budging an inch. “I was wrong, and I apologize for coming down on you like that.” He rolled his eyes at me, then back at the old man. I couldn’t tell if he meant it.

“You got that right,” the old man growled. “You need to get a grip on yourself. You can’t go around treating people like that for no reason.”

Cameron nodded, wiped a hand over his damp forehead. “Here.” Surprisingly, he offered his hand. “Let me help you up. Suppose I should have done this first.”

“First? Help me up first *then* harass me?”

“No, no...I didn’t mean it like that.”

Both of them helped me up, asking for assurance that I was okay. I nodded and thanked

them.

“Well, I better be going,” Cameron said. Still, there was that strangeness about him. And those eyes, the way they looked at me as if seeing something no one else could see. Something was really off with him, deeply so. I was seriously starting to think the shock of the fall affected his brain.

Cameron’s friends patted him on the back, exchanged a few words, and they all hopped back on their boards and began showing off their tricks as they headed back in the direction they had come. The manner in which they carried on was nonchalant, I thought, given the tension left lingering in the air.

“You better watch out for that one. He’s not altogether up here,” the older man said, pointing to his head. “He’s got a dead heart.” He pounded his chest like an ape. “And he’s nothing but trouble. The kind of trouble he’s been in...a girl like you don’t need to be getting mixed up in his troubles. You seem like a sweet girl so listen to me. Stay

away from him.”

“Mmm.” I nodded. “But what...what kind of trouble he’s been in?” I scoured his eyes for more.

“I won’t get into that. I warned you, so just listen.” He offered nothing more for me to go on.

“Insanity trip” were the words he threw in Cameron’s face. I thought about that as I nodded to his warning. And I had no reason to disbelieve him. Already I had gotten a dose of what he was talking about.

Even as Cameron distanced himself, he couldn’t stop staring at me. There was something else about him: a transformation in his sense of self. He now appeared cool, confident, and back in total control of that skateboard. In fact, he was too cool. And that final hypnotic stare, before he disappeared around the corner, was long and hard and—

I didn’t know but had a strange feeling I hadn’t seen the last of him.