

Mike stepped through the gate into the deserted parking lot in front of the Smiths grocery store. He turned to remind Katie to keep an eye on him, when a deep voice spoke from his right.

“Well, what do we have here?”

Mike spun around to face three men about his age, sitting cross-legged on the ground and leaning against the building, about fifteen feet away. They wore sleeveless t-shirts and had long, dirty hair, tattoos, and multiple piercings. Smoke from whatever they were smoking—something that smelled unfamiliar—wafted past him.

There shouldn't have been anyone there. He'd checked out this location thoroughly, just fifteen minutes earlier.

He glanced around to see if he could spot the gate, but it had closed behind him—there was no sign of it.

“Katie,” he called quietly in case she could see him, even though he couldn't see her.

“The name's Eli,” the deep-voiced man said, chuckling, “not Katie. You have a friend with you, do you? A gal? Bring her out here so we can get to know her.”

His voice suggested what he had in mind. The speaker stood slowly and moved casually toward him, the other two following and moving to either side of him.

Mike looked around again, this time for a way out, and saw that the few cars in the dark lot were spread out, with no one around them. He considered running, but didn't want to turn his back on them.

His mind raced. What had happened to the gate? Had Katie accidentally closed it? When it didn't reappear immediately, he wondered if she'd forgotten her instructions. Would she remember how to reopen it? Did she know he was in trouble? How had he missed seeing these guys, and how dangerous were they? *Come on Katie, get me out of here*, he thought.

He looked back at the three men. They had cut the distance to him in half and had spread out, trying to cut off any escape.

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Back in the lab, the last thing Katie heard as the gate shut down, was a deep male voice say, “Well, what do we have here?” She realized immediately that Mike was in trouble.

“Mike,” she called, but he didn't respond. “Mike! *Michael!*” she called again, frantically looking at the controls, and around the room, trying to figure out what had happened to the gate.

Mike had shown her exactly what to do to minimize the portal without closing it completely, so she could monitor what he was doing and then open it again if he had to return quickly.

She tried to remember exactly what he'd said and shown her, but now she couldn't think clearly. She realized she was panicking.

"That won't help Mike," she thought out loud. "Get control of yourself."

She took several slow, deep breaths to steady her nerves, shook both hands in the air, and tried to think. Turn this knob to the left, but not all the way to the zero. She'd done that, and it still wasn't on the zero. To get it back, she had to turn it to the right. The larger the number, the larger the opening. She turned the knob, but nothing happened.

Had she accidentally turned it all the way to zero without noticing? She turned the knob back and forth several times with no result.

She made a frustrated sound and stomped her foot. She didn't know what to do. Mike had told his dad he wouldn't try this on his own. And he wasn't on his own—she was here—but instead of helping, she was messing it up and didn't know how to fix it. She started to cry.

"Mike, I'm so sorry."

Maybe she had accidentally kicked a plug or something. She looked around for a power cord and soon found one that came from the Observer. She followed it to the outlet on the floor, under the work table. It looked okay. She got down on her hands and knees and crawled under the table, then wiggled it to see if it was plugged in all the way, which it was.

What else? She'd watched Mike input coordinates, but she didn't know enough about that to try it. Besides, she didn't want to change the coordinates—he'd told her to leave them where they were.

She couldn't think of anything else to try.

Mike had told her they were doing this at night because he didn't want their parents to accidentally walk in and stop them, the way they had the last time. She realized she really wanted her dad or Amos to walk in right now, but they were probably sound asleep.

Why did Michael insist on doing this on his own and after midnight? She realized, with tears streaming down her cheeks, that if she didn't get help, she might lose Mike forever—and she was wasting time.

"I'm sorry Mike," she cried as she ran from the room.