

INBETWEEN

The beginning of an epic journey in a world where time
doesn't exist.

Megan Huntley

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DEDICATION

For all that dream big, aspire greatness and enjoy going through life
slightly crazy.

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1. EMELIE

Emelie rubbed her eyes, glad to be almost done with the last piece of research; it would likely be her best work yet. Somehow, once she got lost in her research, it was hard to remember her surroundings, and she remained in the same position for far too long. Turning her head from left to right, it popped satisfyingly, and she let out a small moan. The clock on her desk indicated it was almost midnight again! Lately, this had become all too common, and her staying past normal working hours happened more and more often. Finally, after hitting the save button, it was time to head home. She had been at Becking Daily for about five years now, and it was the first place she'd truly felt at home. At the time she had applied, there had been one vacant position, that of assistant researcher. It wasn't what she'd been looking for, but she'd made it work. Her promotion to junior researcher had happened in less than two years. Now her goal was to become a senior researcher. When deciding to work at a newspaper, doing research had not been Emelie's first choice. Being a proper journalist and seeking adventures and thrills had been her ambition. Yet it had all changed when she first stepped into the building and felt right at home.

Becking Daily was situated on the top floor of an ancient and dilapidated building. The ancient elevator was constantly out of order. Half of the employees were completely out of breath by the time they'd made it up to the newspaper H.Q. The floors creaked loudly and sagged with every step you took. At times, Emelie

wondered how the building remained upright. The top floor contained nothing but old desks and chairs. None of them matched, and most of the color had faded away. As there was no budget for new furniture, they often went to scrap yards to find a new table or chair. Twenty-two desks filled the space. Currently, nobody was around.

That's what you get working this late.

Emelie made her way over to the stairs, passing the elevator's out-of-order sign.

"Emelie, could you come in here, please?"

After turning around, Jane, her boss, stood in the doorway of her office – it was the only office on the floor; the rest was an open structure. Jane was a tall, lanky woman that wore a bright blue power dress. It suited her perfectly as she exuded power, authority, and knowledge. Just by standing there, it was clear that Jane was not a person to mess with. It wasn't that she spoke in a dominant or forceful way, yet pretty much everyone did as they were told. This occasion was no different; Emelie turned around and followed Jane into her office. Four comfortable dark green chairs were situated in the middle of her office. Three of them were already filled. On the left was Finn, looking like he had just come out of a photoshoot. His short brown hair and bright blue eyes mesmerized many girls and plenty of men at that. Relaxed, he leaned back, one leg over the armrest, seemingly without a care in the world. To Emelie's surprise, Finn had quickly become one of her best friends. She'd never expected a gorgeous man like that to have such a patient and funny personality.

As she entered the room, he gave her a drop-dead-gorgeous smile. Seated across from him was Dax, sitting upright. Never entirely at ease, she was a total geek. Her long dark straight hair was always tied back in a ponytail, and the typical oversized glasses that framed her face completed the aesthetic. Emelie had previously noticed that Dax was always carrying a leather backpack and had often wondered exactly what was in it. She never seemed to let it out of her sight. Emelie had asked about it once, but all she had gotten in response was a shrug. Dax was the opposite of Finn, always serious and rigid, but somehow the three of them had formed a bond. Victoria sat in-between them, the 'office princess'

as Finn liked to call her. Nobody really knew how she'd ended up here; the most likely hypothesis was that her beyond-rich daddy had made it happen. But Emelie wasn't so sure of that, as she'd seen Victoria work her ass off. Yes, she was obnoxious, spoiled, and entitled, but it seemed as if she really wanted this. However, her tireless work ethic didn't match her looks. Victoria always wore designer clothing, with never a stray hair out of place, and a general air of entitlement permanently lingered around her. Jane stood behind her desk, waiting for Emelie to take the last seat.

"Good to see some of you are still here. I need your help."
Straight to the point, as always.

Jane perched on the side of her mahogany desk, her long legs crossed at the ankles. Emelie felt inspired by her presence, seeing where she herself wanted to be in a few years.

"We will need all of your various skills if we are to change the narrative of this story."

Folders were handed out, and Emelie quickly peeked into the file – always a little impatient – but Jane continued talking, drawing her attention back to her.

"We have been contacted about certain horrors that took place in this building. Now I do not have all the details, but a certain number of people want to buy this building and will abuse the information. You are going to find as much on this story as you can. As I said before, you all have a good mix of skills: Victoria and Emelie, you two on research. Dax, I want you to find whatever it is that is not public knowledge. Finn, you are to write the narrative. There isn't much information in the folder, but I have the utmost faith in you. The board will convene tomorrow early afternoon, which means I will need your input early. Once more, I cannot stress how urgent this is if we are to keep the building. Good luck!" Jane took her purse, closed the door behind her, and left. All four of them sat there dazed.

"Okay, so what was that all about?" Emelie asked.

"No clue, but why do we have to do her dirty work? She could at least stay here and help us," Dax complained. Yet she leafed through the folder anyway; she was always up for a good mystery. The lights flickered, then turned off, putting them into complete darkness for a few seconds before turning back on. Victoria gasped before replying eagerly.

"I don't mind. Maybe we will find something interesting." Her

face lit up as she sifted through the pages. This intrigued Emelie; there really was more to her than first met the eye.

"Like what? Come on, there is no story big enough to bring down the paper," Dax said without looking up. Again, the lights sputtered on and off.

What the hell.

Emelie stood up and walked over to the big round window that looked over the square with the now-closed shops. Two bars and a restaurant still had their lights on, cleaning up after a day of business. It seemed they had no issues with their lights, and the sky was completely cloudless. There hadn't been a report of storms in the area either.

"If this keeps up, we might get a lovely, cozy, candlelit work date," Finn winked at Emelie, making her laugh.

"Just makes the research a bit hard," she winked back at him, knowing that his flirting meant nothing; he did it with everybody. Emelie was bad at flirting, but this came easy with Finn, and she enjoyed it in her relationship with him.

"Ah, well, then we just make up the facts." He put an arm around her, and they both looked up at the sky.

"What are you thinking, Finn? We cannot just make things up!" Dax snapped at him just as the lights went out again.

"Chill, Dax, I didn't mean anything by it. I know how seriously you take your work. Just joking over here," Finn commented as they made their way back to the chairs. Again, the lights went out, but this time they didn't instantly turn back on.

"Do we have any flashlights around?" Emelie asked. Nobody replied.

"This is crazy; there's no storm out here," remarked Victoria, now standing over by the window.

"Well, it is an old building, so it isn't all that uncommon," Dax replied, "but getting some flashlights might not be a bad idea, and we should check the fuse box."

A thundering sound boomed through the room, shaking the windows. Victoria shrieked.

"What the hell was that?" she'd clearly started to panic. Once again, the lights flickered. But the lights stayed off longer each time they went out.

"Let's go find those flashlights, so I can better protect all of you ladies," Finn said, trying to lighten the mood, yet his otherwise sparkly eyes were worried. He led Victoria away from the window, just in time. Another loud sound cracked through the room. The window shook and exploded into a million tiny pieces. Finn immediately dove on top of Victoria, protecting her from the glass shards. Emelie leaped behind one of the green chairs.

As the lights turned back on and the night quieted, she poked her head out from behind the chair to check on the others. Her heart rapidly pounded in her chest.

Focus, stay calm; you got this.

After taking a few deep breaths, her heart slowed down, and she saw the devastation before her. It covered every surface in tiny pieces of glass, now glistening in the light. Finn, who was still on top of Victoria, grunted softly as he tried to shift away from her body without hurting her. Glass crunched underneath his weight. Emelie got up and made her way over to them. Dax was nowhere in sight. Clearing some of the remnants beside Finn, she took his shoulders and guided him to sit in a glass-free spot. His tight-fitting t-shirt was slashed in various places, and small trickles of blood had appeared. Even though his arms and back had some injuries, his face remained untouched.

"Are you okay?" Emelie asked before turning her attention to Victoria to help her sit.

"I'm fine. Where's Dax?" He looked around, trying to find her.

"No idea; I'll check once I know Victoria is alright."

Victoria huffed and puffed. Her perfectly straightened hair was messy, tears streaked her face, and the shock in her eyes was worrisome. But, other than that, she seemed alright. Thanks to Finn.

"I... I... am fine," she sobbed.

Probably used to having her servants protect her completely. How hard life must be for girls like her.

Emelie instantly felt bad for thinking like that, but Dax swiftly interrupted her train of thought, running into the office, first aid supplies in hand and four flashlights hanging around her neck. Her eyes were panicked and afraid, but there was something else there

as well. Emelie couldn't quite identify what it was.

"Sorry I left. I went and got some supplies." There was definitely something else, something she was not sharing. Emelie left it at that and did not ask. Maybe later, she'd ask where Dax had gone.

"I only have some scrapes, nothing too serious," Finn chimed in once he'd gotten himself and Victoria upright. He seemed in control, and the torn sleeves just added to his charm.

He should not be allowed to look that good in a situation like this. Victoria as well; even though her hair is a mess and her make-up's runny, she somehow still looks like a supermodel. Emelie considered her own appearance for a moment and thought she probably looked like a mess. Out of the four of them, she was by far the shortest, and the way she had her hair tied in a ponytail only highlighted her youthfulness.

Right, I can do nothing about it. Looks can only get you so far. Focus on what is happening now!

"Crap!" Emelie yelled as the lights went out with a loud pop, as if all the bulbs popped simultaneously.

"It's a good thing I went and got the flashlights," said Dax as she tentatively handed a flashlight to everybody, still clutching her bag.

Nobody replied; they just turned on the flashlights and stared at each other, waiting for somebody to tell them what to do.

Emelie knew Victoria would be out, the same as Dax. It would be her or Finn to guide them – might as well be her.

"Okay, how about we find the fuse box?" she suggested.

"Sounds like a plan!" Finn instantly jumped at the chance to go and do something. He stalked over to the stairs and held the door for the ladies to pass through.

"What a gentleman you are." Victoria touched his arm as she walked past, her eyes lingering on his.

Not the time to flirt!

Emelie never understood how people could flirt, no matter the circumstances. Perhaps her annoyance was jealousy as much as anything else.

There were still no lights as they entered the lobby. The front door was an electric sliding door. After hours, it would not open

from the outside, but it always opened from the inside. Without electricity, the system should be overridden, and the door would open automatically. Emelie's heart sank as the door remained closed. Just for good measure, she walked over to it and hoped it would respond to movement. But, of course, it did not.

"Double crap."

She turned to see the others were looking at something near the reception desk. But before she had a chance to say anything else, the building suddenly started to shake, not too hard at first, like a minor earthquake. However, earthquakes didn't happen in this part of the country. A few seconds later, the shaking stopped. Emelie quickly made her way back to the others.

Now's not the time to wander off by yourself.

"The doors are not opening!" Panic had set in.

"Nothing is working; I tried the phones and computer," Dax announced, still trying to use the phone.

"Do you guys smell that?" Victoria piped up, but everybody ignored her.

"Okay, so what do we do now?" Dax asked, throwing the phone across the room. There was such anger behind the movement that it surprised Emelie.

Inspired, Finn spoke up, "What if we took something and smashed it through a window? I know the double doors are supposed to be bulletproof, but what about the side windows?"

"Oh damn, you might be on to something!" Emelie's eyes sparkled. She kind of loved the idea of breaking something. When stress was high, she needed an outlet. Usually, she went to a kickboxing class after work.

"Guys, that smell," Victoria tried again, but the others were focused on finding something to throw. The building shook again, this time harder than before.

"We have to go now, before this place comes down around us," Dax urged.

Finn stopped in his tracks. He took the desk chair, walked over to the side window, and threw it as hard as he could. It didn't even make a dent. Exasperated, he walked over to the window, lifted his leg, and kicked it in frustration—yet the result was a cursing, hopping Finn and one fully intact window.

"Okay, so we gotta find that fuse box. This is crazy, guys.

Dax, where would the panel be?" Emelie asked. Their situation was becoming direr by the second.

"Basement," she said and jogged back towards the stairwell.

"Vic, let's go," Finn jogged by her and grabbed her hand, pulling her along before she could protest.

As the building shook again, Emelie had to lean against the wall to stop herself from falling over. Dust fell around her, and she coughed.

"Ugh, what is that smell?" Emelie asked.

"That is what I have been trying to tell you; it smells!" Victoria snapped, perhaps rightly so; none of them had listened to her. Victoria stood was taller than Emelie and looked down on her. She didn't like being chastised by anybody, let alone Victoria. *Forget it. Now's not the time!*

They all ran down the stairwell and entered the basement. Thankfully, the door was ajar, and the panel that looked like it housed the circuit breakers was on the side. Dax marched over to it, flashlight in her mouth, and tried to yank it open. The smell was even worse inside the basement. Emelie couldn't identify the odor; it wasn't familiar. It nearly made her double over and gag. She looked up and noticed there was a small window up high. No way she could reach it.

"Finn, help me out?" He marched over and placed his hands in front of him as a step up. Emelie made her way up to his shoulders, and he put his hands around her ankles to steady her. She took the latch and tried to push the window open. Her hand touched a lot of cobwebs, trying to move the latch. There was no moving this damn window.

"Crap!"

She slid down. Finn caught her and held her for a few seconds.

"New curse word? You've been saying that a lot lately." The smirk on his face always made her feel less anxious. Even now, when he clearly had to feel just as frightened as the girls did, or at least she imagined so.

"Situation calls for it!" She tried to mimic his tone but failed miserably. The stress was really getting to her.

"Can't get this panel open," Dax complained.

It seemed the stress was affecting everyone. Amid it all, Victoria

stood safely near the stairs, ready to bolt the second she thought something had gone wrong.

Without warning, dust suddenly rained down, and the building started to shake violently, much harder than it had before. Something in Finn changed. The smirk had left his face, and his back was rigid as he marched over to the panel. He slammed his hands into the side latch – nothing. Frustrated, he let out a groan, placed his fingers on the side, and pulled as hard as he could. The muscles on his shoulders bulged under the pressure, and blood dripped down as some of the small cuts opened up again. The panel creaked and, in the end, gave in. As it swung open, some sort of black goo spilled out and slid down the wall. The smell became overwhelming. Emelie raised her shirt and tried to cover her face. Dax and Finn went down instantly. Their knees buckled, and they hit the floor, passed out. Victoria tried to run up the stairs, but she didn't make it very far; two steps up and she crumpled to the floor as well. Being the furthest away from the panel, Emelie had a few seconds longer, and she backed into the wall with the window. It was in vain; her vision blurred, and her knees were too weak to keep her upright.

"Triple crap," she whispered before falling like the others, and her world turned black in an instant.

2. DAX

Thud, thud...thud...thud. What was that annoying sound? Dax tried to open her eyes, but they were extremely heavy. All she really wanted was to stay like this and go back to sleep. Yet something nagged in the recesses of her mind. What had happened? Where was she? Panic took over her body. Her muscles cramped up; even breathing became hard. She needed to relax; there was no way she was going to succumb to a panic attack. It had happened before, quite often, but that was in the past. The last panic attack had been over eight years ago.

Breath in through the nose, out through the mouth. Feel the movement.

She chanted the mantra over and over until, finally, calmness set in. As the panic left her body, she noticed a foul stench. Her nose wrinkled in disgust.

The smell triggered something within her, yet the memory didn't form. Bile rose up, but she pushed it back down again, not giving in but focusing on her breath. Dax remained calm. While opening her eyes, she rose to a sitting position. The room spun. As it steadied, it appeared that she was in a basement. It felt familiar, but Dax was unable to place it.

Weird.

What was she doing in a basement? She spotted Finn close beside her, unconscious on the floor, Victoria on the stairs, and Emelie all the way across the room. What if they weren't just

unconscious, but... Terrible memories tried to take over her thoughts. Her brother, the water....

Do not panic, do not panic.

Dax managed to compose herself and forced the memories back down. This was not the time to lose control. As her mind settled, Dax realized she'd triggered her recollection of the basement. Time to get moving.

"Finn?" she whispered while slowly making her way over to where he was lying. Shaking his shoulders didn't wake him up. "Come on, Finn, damn it!" Dax shook harder.

In the background, she heard someone stir, but was so focused on Finn that it didn't register.

"Whoa, where are we?" a groggy voice, clearly belonging to a now-waking Victoria, asked.

"Basement. Check on Emelie, please!" Dax responded hurriedly, trying hard to keep the desperation from her voice. "Come on, damn it, Finn."

This isn't happening again. This time I won't be too late. I won't! Out of frustration, she slapped him across his cheek, and Finn's eyes shot open. His bloodshot blue eyes were unfocused, trying to figure out what was going on. At least he was awake and, above all, alive.

"Oh, thank goodness." She quickly turned her attention to Victoria and asked, "How is Emelie?" without taking her eyes off Finn.

"Waking up." The relief in Victoria's voice was evident. Thankfully, they were all fine. Dax felt herself settle.

"Where are we?" Emelie asked the exact same question Victoria had when waking up.

"Still in the basement, but that's all I know. Something feels off." Dax slowly got up and walked to the panel.

Figure out what happened after the black stuff came out.

"No goo, nothing, and strangely, it seemed as if this panel hasn't been used in a long time. There are cobwebs everywhere." Dax removed them and began to open the door, a bit hesitant at first. What if it happened again? She swallowed and opened the door fully.

"Oh boy, it's empty! What the hell?" she whispered.

The other three joined her, stumbling a little as if they had a massive hangover. They all stared at it for a while, with nobody

saying anything.

"Have any of you checked out the inside of the basement?" Finn asked.

"No, why?" Victoria said as she turned around and gasped. Dax and Emelie also turned to see what had upset them.

How have I missed this?

The basic layout was similar, but the interior was completely different. Instead of electrical appliances, furniture, and some old file boxes, it was nearly empty. The room was lit by daylight, with no flickering or working lights to be seen. The window itself had changed from an intricate cast-iron framed one to a basic light wooden window.

What is going on?

All of them were in shock over this revelation. Maybe somebody was playing a joke on them?

Victoria made her way to the stairs and sat down, head in her hands. Her long hair fell all around her as if she was shielding herself from what was going on. Out of the four of them, she seemed to be the most overwhelmed. Finn had taken up pacing in front of the panel with long and powerful strides. With his hands behind his back and head bent down slightly, he was lost in thought. Emelie was still looking at the panel; she had cleared away all the cobwebs on the inside. She traced her long fingers over some of the dark lines on the wall – the places where the wiring would have been or had been the previous night.

"Guys, come on. What the hell?" Emelie turned around, looked at Dax, and threw her hands up in frustration. "There is no evidence of any electricity in this place, except for the dark lines on the wall. There is no light, no light bulb, nothing. Why don't we go upstairs? Maybe we're all hallucinating or something. Maybe when we get up there, somebody will yell, 'Got you!'"

Without waiting for the others, Emelie impatiently turned on her heel, stepped around Victoria, who still hadn't moved, and stalked up the stairs. Finn shrugged and simply followed her without saying a word, also disregarding Victoria. So now she was left for Dax to deal with.

Great.

Dax couldn't just leave the girl behind like that. Of course, she was glad none of them had died, yet that did not mean Dax was the caring type. She had been on her own for as long as she could remember. At least since her grandfather had died. Brushing off the annoyance towards Victoria, she sat down beside her and placed a hand on her back.

"We will figure this out, you know." No response. "Come on, Vic, we have to get up and see what's been going on." Still nothing. "Damn it, get yourself together," Dax snapped at her. "This is not your princess household where your hand will be held, and your nanny can fix everything!" She got up and started to march upstairs.

"Wait," Victoria wailed, "please don't leave me alone down here!"

Heaving a sigh of impatience, Dax stopped.

"Just come up then. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on." She tried once again to rein in her annoyance, but it was hard.

Victoria was a complete mess, her eyes dark and watery, her lip trembling. Nevertheless, Victoria got up, took a tentative first step, and followed Dax up the stairs. As they entered the lobby, they stopped and simply stared, shocked by what they saw. Victoria sobbed again.

Great, can somebody shut this girl up?

This time, Victoria remained standing. That was something, at least. It wasn't until Dax stood in the lobby that it hit her. Her bag wasn't around her shoulders. This was bad. She couldn't go without that backpack; it was the most important thing. She took a deep breath. Maybe if she focused hard enough, she wouldn't need the bag's contents. She knew it was wishful thinking, but what could she do? Nervously, she picked at the hem of her shirt.

"Uh, guys?" Tentatively, Dax took a step forward.

Finn and Emelie were huddled together, talking in hushed tones; they both looked up as Dax spoke.

"Something strange is going on here," Emelie asserted as she and Finn made their way over to Victoria and Dax.

"No shit! That much is clear!" Dax couldn't contain her annoyance. "Have you guys figured out what exactly?"

"Well, no, not really. We found something, though. It seems

like the building is, for lack of a better word, fading," Emelie explained.

"What the heck does that mean?" Dax felt her control slipping; it had been a while since she hadn't been in control.

"Look at the desk over there; everything seems old. Not just antique, but as if from another time. A time well before electrics. The light over there seems to be one of those old oil lamps. That simple chair over there, if the health and safety inspector saw it, they would have a fit. Now that's one thing; the other is even more worrisome. The color of this building seems dull. Yet, if you look outside through the window near the front door, it is bright, vibrant, and the way it should be. The building itself seems to be, I don't know, like I said, fading. Somehow, the world outside does not seem the same as the world inside this building. I don't know how to explain it to make it any clearer, and it's just a hypothesis," Emelie spoke in a calm, matter-of-fact way.

Dax knew that that was Emelie's coping mechanism: looking at the facts from the outside in, with no emotion. Dax also knew that Emelie had grown up without a support system. That kind of life could change a person.

"What do you mean not the same world?" Victoria piped in, a bit frantic.

"Go, look, see for yourself."

Finn took Victoria's hand and steered her towards the front door. Gone were the electrical sliding doors of the night before. Now it was just as Emelie said, a simple wooden version. Not only that, all the furniture seemed dull, almost as if things were disappearing around them. Emelie had been spot on. They both walked to where Finn and Victoria were standing to see what the world outside looked like.

"Wow, it's so bright out there!" Victoria, still holding Finn's hand, had thankfully stopped crying.

Finn had a calming effect on almost everybody – a quality Dax had been envious of more than once. The moment was immediately interrupted as a grinding noise rasped overhead, making them all look up. The building shook. Some of the wooden beams sagged. The noise was so loud that it seemed as if the building would break apart around them. Suddenly, a beam fell, and parts of the walls and ceilings came down with it. Without thinking, they all rushed for the double doors. They pushed and

pulled, but it didn't budge. A small iron lock was just visible on the outside of the door, confining them inside.

"Damn it," Finn muttered as he jammed his shoulder into the door; the door did not move at all.

"The window," Dax said, pointing to the small side window on the right side of the door. Just big enough for them to get through. Now she only needed to find something to throw.

"Over here!" Emelie yelled.

Dax ran over to find a small crate wedged underneath the desk. The crate was heavy, and it took a lot of energy just to slide it out from underneath the desk. The scraping on the floor made her ears hurt.

Crouching over, bracing their backs, Emelie and Dax lifted the crate, dropping it almost as quickly as they'd picked it up. The second try was more effective, and they shuffled towards the window. More and more dust rained down on them. The building shook on and off, but it maintained an incessant moan.

Finn was still working on the door, but he wasn't making any progress. Victoria stood off to the side, completely useless. Not knowing how to contribute, it was obvious they had pampered her all her life. Dax wanted to yell at her, but now was not the time. Instead, Emelie and Dax took their positions in front of the window. They lifted the crate up high, swung it back as much as possible, and on the count of three, threw it as hard as they could. They hoped it would have a big enough impact to shatter the window. Another loud crash signaled that more of the building was collapsing. As more dust fell down, Dax coughed.

"Hurry, we don't have much time," Victoria pleaded in a terrified voice.

"So why don't you make yourself useful?" Dax snapped at her in between coughs.

"Once more, Dax, we've got this. Try not to breathe too much; we don't want you to get an asthma attack here," Emelie interjected. "Finn, come here and help give us a boost."

Finn hurried over, and it was a good thing he did, as seconds later, a small beam broke off and clattered to the floor where he had been mere moments before.

"That was close," he sighed in relief and positioned himself behind the crate. He would give it the final push forward. "Ready?"

he asked.

"Ready," they both replied.

"Let's do this!"

They started swinging. The trio didn't rush, but the pressure was on as part of the sidewall caved.

The crate hit the window, and a small crack appeared, but it did not break.

"What the hell? This place seems as old as the Middle Ages, falling apart all around us, but that stupid window will not break!" Emelie yelled out in frustration.

"Once more, keep calm. We've got this," Finn soothed, always there to keep everyone calm and focused.

Dax checked to see where Victoria had gone and gasped in shock as she saw that a large wooden ceiling plate had come loose and was falling straight towards her. Everything slowed to a crawl; the ceiling plate almost seemed to hover in place as Dax rushed toward Victoria.

You cannot be late again. This time you will save him...her.

The panel crashed to the floor, scraping the back of Dax's heels. Victoria's eyes widened just as Dax's body slammed into hers. Both toppled to the floor painfully.

"Guys, hurry, or we won't make it!" Emelie yelled from the other side of the room, ignoring what had just happened.

"Don't panic. We've got this," Dax repeated the phrase out loud, more for herself than the others. She often used it as her personal mantra to stay calm. Unfortunately, it hadn't helped her during the one event she'd needed it most. Dax coughed again; it was getting worse. The dust had affected her lungs, but her inhaler was also still in her missing bag. Panic surged through her, no inhaler, no meds; this would not end well. She felt her control slipping, and her snippy comments would only be the start of it all.

Then, out of nowhere, Victoria offered Dax a hand, pulled her to her feet, and they hurried to the door. Dax was grateful for the help; standing up on the verge of an asthma attack was hard. To everybody's surprise, Victoria was the one to help lift the crate. Before their eyes, she changed from being scared and useless to helpful and present. Yet there was no time to be in awe. One after another, the beams and plates came loose and gave way, each one closer and closer to where the group stood.

"Two swings, and we go! There's no time left!" Finn yelled. The urgency in his voice ushered them on.

Nobody said a thing as they took their places. They swung once, twice, and then threw the crate at the window with all their might. It was enough to crush it completely. Pieces of glass rained down. Finn was already on the move, and with Emelie's help, he positioned the crate, fortunately, still on the inside, and pushed more than helped Victoria out. Dax didn't need the help and was already on her way up. Emelie was next; Dax stood on the outside, giving her a hand. Finally, Finn made his escape, his body barely out when the entire building collapsed.

The dust that rose was overwhelming, blinding them all. Dax was coughing like crazy, and she felt her lungs seize up. There wasn't enough oxygen, and there was no way she would make it out. After a few steps, with her head spinning, Dax was lost. A hand touched her shoulder, and she instantly knew it was Finn. She could do nothing but follow him. It was hard to stay upright, her lungs now fighting for every breath. Stars crept into her vision. Her left foot caught behind her right, and she nearly fell over, but Finn was there to steady her. She leaned heavily on him and trusted him to get her out of this. Just as she was about to pass out, Finn gently placed her against a tree. Coughing and wheezing, it was so hard to keep a clear head. At least the air around her felt fresh and dust-free.

Damn that asthma.

Dax tried to refocus.

Don't panic, don't panic.

Her internal monologue chanted over and over, hoping to calm her down. At that moment, somebody sat down next to her. She was so focused on simply breathing that she didn't know who, and it really didn't matter.

"Breathe, slowly, in and out," Emelie instructed repeatedly.

At long last, Dax's breathing returned to normal. She looked up for the first time and gasped out, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. There was no building, no debris on the ground; even the dust seemed to be totally gone. The surrounding grass was green, and flowers sprouted in between rocks. Everything was bright and colorful; not a single indication that a building had ever existed

there.

"How is this possible?" Dax asked Emelie, who looked relieved to see her friend back to normal again.

"No clue. Finn and Vic are walking around trying to figure out what is happening. Honestly, this feels like some sort of horror movie," Emelie spoke calmly, but she felt just as lost as Dax.

"Right, so what do we do now? The building being gone and all that?"

"I have no idea; this is all uncharted territory. I want to stay upbeat and positive. Yet it's kind of hard when it seems everything we know has simply vanished. I honestly can't believe it, but we appear to have ended up in some strange world. I just want to wake up now and find I've fallen asleep at my desk."

"Ha, right, yes, if only," Dax retorted. Taking another deep breath that agonized her lungs, she said, "Okay, Em, let's go find the others and see how we can get out of this mess." She slowly stood up with Emelie's help, relieved she felt somewhat normal again and hoped it would last.

3. VICTORIA

Finn had asked Victoria to come with him to get away from a hyperventilating Dax. It had been kind of him, given she was completely out of her depth when there was no nanny or coach to tell her what to do. Being at Becking Daily had lit a fire inside Victoria. However, she was still not used to 'normal' life, as her mother would call it – a feeling unknown to most of the rich and spoiled girls that ran in her circle. It had taken some persuasion to get the job, but she loved every second of it once she had gotten there. At Becking Daily, she'd finally found a place where working hard was rewarded; nobody cared who she was or where she came from. The trio that she was currently stuck with in this strange world were by no means friends, but at least there wasn't any real animosity, well maybe a little from Dax. Nor did they pretend to be her friend to gain access to her family's money or status. Being in this freaky situation made her appreciate them even more. They stepped up and left no one behind, yet Victoria had done little to nothing at all. She felt bad about that.

I will do better now; I will not weigh them down!

Now, as the dust had settled and a warm breeze was stirring through her long black hair, Victoria felt more at ease. The clearing they had ended up in was gorgeous, if nothing else. She almost felt invincible. She had no clue where that feeling came from, but it felt right. Victoria took a hair band from her wrist and tied her long tresses back into a ponytail; it would only get in the way right now.

Besides, looks didn't really seem to matter when you've just stepped out into a strange world.

"What do you think happened?" she asked Finn, genuinely curious about last night's events.

"Not sure. I mean, there's no sign of the building at all. Plus, we're surrounded by nature, while the Becking Daily is in the city. I don't know if it's hit me yet; I'm probably gonna freak out soon," he laughed. Yet Victoria felt some truth in what he was saying.

So far, she hadn't freaked out because Finn had helped her focus. But who would keep him sane? He was human, after all, and could only take so much. She wanted to be supportive and help him, but she couldn't stop herself from asking a question he could not answer.

"Okay, so how do we get back then?"

"How am I supposed to know that, princess?" he snapped out of nowhere. "I got here the same way as you did!" Finn had been nothing but kind to her, so this was odd, and it hurt.

She puffed up; nobody spoke to her that way, but reluctantly she had to admit he had a point. Without saying another word, Victoria elegantly turned her back on him and marched back to the others. They hadn't wandered far, or so she thought. Yet Dax and Emelie weren't sitting by the tree.

Or was it another tree? Where would they have gone?

Turning back to recheck the meadow, Victoria was confused. They couldn't have gone far. It was one open spot surrounded by woodland trees. The trees stood close together, and apart from two small openings with dirt roads, there was no sign of any civilization. They wouldn't have gone onto a path without letting everyone know.

What is going on? This is not how things were supposed to go.

"If only Mimi was here, she'd know what to do," Victoria whimpered before snapping out of it. Finn had pretty much told her just now that she was useless. She would not be exactly what the rest of the world thought of her. "Okay, so find the others and figure this thing out then. Get back home and forget this ever happened," she determined out loud. Talking to herself had always been a way of coping and not completely crashing – another thing Mimi had taught her, oh how she missed her.

Thankfully, it was still light outside, and as the sun was up high,

Victoria figured they had a few hours of daylight left. Not that this was based on any scientific knowledge, but the basics were simple enough. Though exactly how many hours she did not know; sometimes it turned dark before you knew it.

"Finn, they're not here!" she called out. No response. "Finn?" Radio silence. Victoria ran back towards where she had last seen him. "Crap! Come on, Finn, this is not funny," she whispered the last part. She felt more alone and afraid than she had been ever since this whole ordeal started. All the courage she had just talked herself into had been replaced by nerves. Her heart rate picked up as her breathing became shallow. She never should have left Finn. This was what happened when you went walking around in a foreign place; she was bound to get herself into trouble. That was the problem with never having to worry about consequences; she impulsively did as she wanted, while others were tasked with fixing her messes. Not wanting to cry again, she refocused on finding Finn and the others.

Since she'd last been with Finn and she was already on her way to where she'd last seen him, Victoria knew it would be best to try and find him first. The grass was not high enough to hide someone easily, but it reached up to her knees. Some pretty flowers peeked out above the grass. Suddenly, she realized she hadn't heard any birds chirping, nor did she see any insects flying from flower to flower.

Oh god, where is he?

No longer able to control her tears, they fell down her cheeks. 'A show of weakness,' she knew her father would say.

Come on, damn it, get yourself together. Mimi is not here to save you anymore; you have to do it yourself!

Somehow snapping at herself worked. She made her way back, trying to retrace her steps. As she stood in the middle of the clearing, twirling around to view all sides, she saw no trace of the girls or Finn. Before letting herself become overwhelmed, she decided it would be best to get out of the sun. It was hot, and she'd started to get thirsty. Victoria had no idea how long she had been out there.

Maybe time worked differently here as well?

Her mind shot in a million different directions. Trying to shake it off, she headed to the tree line to find some shade and spotted a

few berry bushes.

"Score!" At least she wouldn't die overnight. After taking a few berries, she sat down at the base of a tree. The berries appeared to be ripe, red, and juicy. With her stomach growling, she couldn't hold back any longer and hurriedly plopped them into her mouth. "Yummy."

Only then did it hit her that berries could be poisonous. Her heart rate sped up, and sweat dripped down her neck. Victoria's world suddenly spun. Terrified, she kept her hands on her stomach and her head bent down.

Surely it wouldn't work that fast, would it?

Some of the breathing exercises Mimi had taught her came in handy now. As the adrenaline faded, so did her energy, and she slowly drifted off.

"Vic!"

"Victoria!"

It felt as if sand was stuck in her eyes, the eyelids so heavy it was near impossible to lift them. She just wanted to be left alone. Whatever was out there was not important.

"Damn it, Victoria, wake up!" a voice snapped.

Annoyed, she opened her eyes to stare into Finn's gorgeous baby blues.

Oh, not so bad after all.

It should have scared her to have a face this close to hers when waking, yet it was oddly comforting. Finn was the typical sexy male that women threw themselves at. Victoria was used to those types of men, yet she had always had a slight crush on Finn. That was also why she didn't dare go after him. Platonically, everything was fun, but her feelings could get hurt. Furthermore, Finn was a playboy, so why even bother?

"There you are," he winked at her and sat back. Then, as the rest of the world came into focus, she spotted Emelie and Dax behind Finn.

"Gang's all here," Victoria giggled at her own comment. It was short-lived, though. She turned from being relieved to feeling pissed in a split second as she realized they had all disappeared before.

"Where the hell have you guys been?" she snapped, standing up far too quickly. Her world started to spin again. Finn reached

out to steady her, but she ignored him, knowing when in a confrontation, you had to make your point clear. Her father had hardly been around, but this was the one lesson he'd taught her: never back down from somebody and, if possible, physically have the higher ground. Of course, being the tallest of the girls, Victoria had the advantage over them. Finn, on the other hand, was even taller than she was. But two out of three wasn't so bad.

"I have been looking around for all of you; you just disappeared," she fumed. "What the hell?!" Victoria continued without a pause, giving the group no time to recover from her sudden mood swing. "I deserve better than this. I know you all think I'm a princess – trust me, I've heard all those comments before. But this is no way to treat me, especially when none of us have any idea what is going on!"

"Okay, slow down," Finn urged, and he lifted his hands as if to touch her shoulder, but thought better of it.

"No, if Victoria has something to say, she can say it. But that also means we get a go at her," Dax cut in, gearing up for a confrontation; she felt annoyed at being called out.

"Look, I am just scared. I was looking for you two, and then suddenly you weren't there. Then when I turned around, Finn was gone as well. It scared me, okay? I do not know what is going on or where we are, and just the thought of being out here all alone..." Victoria didn't finish her sentence. All the fight had left her now that she'd confessed to being scared more than anything else. She wasn't one for arguments or confrontations and usually backed down quickly. Especially with these three, who knew how long they would have to spend together?

Before anybody could respond, she picked a few berries and showed them to the group.

"Any idea if these are edible?" she asked them as she handed the berries to Dax, not telling them she had already eaten a bunch. She felt fine, but before eating any more, she thought it might be wise to know more first.

"So, because I am a geek, you hand them to me?" Dax snapped, but she eyed the berries with genuine concern. Dax handed them over to Finn.

He smelled them and looked at their shape and size before shrugging and passing them to Emelie.