

DAY 1

AMANDA

I wasn't always this way. Maybe I inherited it, but I don't know because my parents aren't around to ask. I can't say it exactly feels normal. I remember not having it.

The first time it hit me, I was an angry ten-year-old. My mother was still around then and there was a man who could have been my father. I called him Tom. I don't remember him well. My mother was being mean and I stormed into my room—it was actually some kind of closet, I think, off the apartment's only hallway—and I turned and slammed a different door *from across the room*. *Bang!* The door moved like a hurricane wind had hit it.

From that day on she was afraid of me. What she didn't realize was that it had happened in little ways before that—ways I didn't quite understand but still didn't question. A page of a book would turn on its own as I reached for it; toothpaste would go onto my toothbrush without my squeezing; once, the saltshaker moved across the kitchen table to me—though no

one else saw it because I was eating my mac and cheese alone. It may not have made sense to others, but none of the events surprised me.

It felt natural.

* * *

As an escapee from “Barracks 14,” a so-called “private school” in Maryland, I did not want to ever go back. Not ever.

My closest friend on earth, Jessica, and I had escaped during Hurricane Cally. In truth, Barracks 14 was a cinder block brick of a building among many others on a military base that had been closed for over a decade. Boarding school, seriously? I don’t know what they called us, our so-called instructors, but we called ourselves *Fairlies*, for *fairly human*. Each of us had some sort of strange power. The instructors called them gifts—what a joke! Try telling that to the boy who set his textbook on fire because he became frustrated with his algebra homework; or the girl down the hall who heard people’s thoughts the way the rest of us hear people speak. At Barracks 14, she’d worn a set of noise-canceling earbuds to keep her sane. Gifts of coal, if you ask me.

It seemed like one of those “grass is greener” situations: we Fairlies, uncomfortable with the very “gifts” our instructors wanted so badly to understand. Maybe it was mere curiosity, as they claimed, but it looked more like greed, like a hunger to own this private part of us we didn’t want to share. They were so annoying with their cameras and their questions.

Once inside that military base, we never left. Barracks 14 was a prison, plain and simple. No matter what they called it, it was a place to poke and test us, physically and mentally. It was invasive, scary, sometimes embarrassing, and often abusive. It was a place from which to run.

So Jess and I did just that. One or two others escaped as well. Most have not been so fortunate.

After finding our way to Orlando, Florida, Jess and I were eventually contacted by five kids our age who were nearly as weird we are—and that’s saying something. We all graduated high school last year from different schools in Orlando. The five—two girls and three boys—work for Disney. But not like other interns. The five aren’t Cast Members, food service workers, lighting designers, or character handlers. They are in-park guides. Families hire them to tour around the parks, move to the front of lines, meet characters, or get lunch reservations. The weird part: they’re holograms. Well, not our friends. Our friends are real. But they modeled for Disney so that their *incredibly* lifelike holograms could be used as park guides. Now the Disney Hosts Interactive—so-called “DHI”—guides are among the most requested service in all of Disney.

Things got crazy. This was Disney and, as Jess and I came to find out, stuff in Disney was a lot more real than we’d known. It was a lot more than fairy tales and princesses. Things happened in the parks after dark. Bad things. Our friends—quickly nicknamed the *Kingdom Keepers*—had become part of the effort to stop the Disney villains—the *Overtakers*—who

wanted the good magic replaced by the dark. Jess and I got caught up in that effort.

We'd been hanging around with the Keepers ever since Jess had been taken over—*yes, taken over!*—by Maleficent. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it either—don't worry, you're not alone in that.

* * *

I met Finn Whitman in what I think of as a predetermined moment. And though he did not know it, I did. I'd been expecting him, thanks to an old Disney Imagineer who, I would later come to believe, may have helped with our escape from Barracks 14.

Finn could be annoying and too clever for his own good, but he's also brave, tenacious, irritating, romantic, and heroic. He would never be a jerk. He would never fail to return a text of mine, not ever.

So, when Finn stopped texting me, I knew something was wrong. Very wrong.

I gave it a day. Two. On the third day of silence I rode an hour and a half on a bus to the Walt Disney Pictures studio lot and waited another forty minutes to see a man named Joe Garlington, a highly positioned Disney Imagineer who knew everything that had to do with Finn and the Kingdom Keepers. Jess and I, currently studying with Disney's Imagineers, had every right to meet with Mr. Garlington. Even so, I was intimidated.

We met in a brightly lit conference room. With its fancy black chairs and three conference phones, it had a high-tech feel. One wall, all glass, faced the balcony corridor overlooking the lobby. Joe wore a black Kangol cap over his fuzzy blond hair. He had bright eyes, a big, kind smile, and a gentle voice. He was dressed in a way that made him look like an ad for adventure clothing.

“How’s DSI going?” he said, starting the conversation from the chair next to mine. “I hear good things about both you and Jess.”

“It’s great,” I answered. “Unreal. I can’t believe we’re actually here, that we get paid to do stuff we would pay to do! It’s dreamy.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m also glad you came up here to visit. You know my door’s always open. But honestly, should I be alarmed? It’s a long way to travel—from the park to here in Burbank—for a social visit. So let me start by asking what you need. Is there a complaint or situation I need to deal with?”

“Finn’s not answering my texts.”

“That’s it?” He grinned.

“Have you heard from him?” I asked.

Joe looked out the glass as if there was something there to see. “We’re trying to respect their return to normalcy. The Keepers, I mean. You know that.” He paced. “We’ve offered them opportunities here as well. I’m sure you’re aware of that. They must work that out with their families. We respect that process.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, Amanda. Friendships can be tricky.”

“I want to know why I haven’t heard from him. You know something, don’t you?” I looked him up and down. “I tried Charlie—Charlene—and Willa, too. Nada!”

“I think we should give it another day or two.”

“Give what another day or two?” I demanded, leaning in.

Joe smirked. “Listen, Amanda, the kids went back to Orlando. They probably just need some family time.”

“So Finn’s too busy having fun to text me?” I wasn’t about to cry in front of Joe Garlington, but I felt a lump in my throat the size of a bowling ball. This was not the news I wanted.

“I’m no expert, but sometimes the best approach to these things is to give the other person time.”

“You don’t know anything about Finn and me.”

“True. Do I want to?”

“You’re just asking that to keep me from arguing. You think I’m just being a girl.”

“Better than the alternative. Now that would scare me.”

“Now you’re just being rude.” I paused, and then added, “You know what happens when I get mad.”

“Of course I do, Amanda. Which is why—”

“You’d saying anything to keep me calm.”

“That’s not what I was going to say. You interrupted me.” He pinched his nose, pursed his lips and tested how far back the chair could rock.

“Okay. I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“I’ve lost my train of thought.”

He hadn’t lost his train of thought; he’d lost patience. He appraised me, and when he spoke, his warm voice was breathy.

“Let it be.”

“Let what be?”

“No good will come of this.”

“Then you’re saying there is a ‘this’? I knew it!”

“I said no such thing. You start chasing rainbows, and all you get is exhausted. He’s a boy. Eighteen. Smart. Tired. Home for the first time in many long, grueling weeks. Give it a rest, Amanda. Give Finn a rest.”

“Send me back there. Please.”

“It’s dangerous for you back there. Mrs. Nash . . . we upset her. I upset her. Who knows who she’s notified by now? Maybe there’s a reward out for you.”

“Is there?”

“I said maybe.”

“They can’t put me and Jess on milk cartons. We’re eighteen. They’re not going to put us on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. What are you so afraid they’re going to do?”

“I don’t even know who ‘they’ are. Maybe you do,” Joe said, “and maybe you lived with them long enough to not be afraid of them, but if there was someone out there looking for me who had once confined me to a military base, I’d avoid any chance of contact. *Any* chance.”

I had nothing to say; only memories that kept me quiet.

“You know how much Jess and I appreciate what you’ve done for us.”

“No more than I’d expect you to do for me,” Joe said. “That’s the way the world works, right? Or should work, at least.”

“Yes,” I said. “It should.”

“So we’re on the same side. I guess that’s all I’m saying. Trying to say.”

“I know that.”

“They’re going to sleep most of every day for a while, I imagine. Goof around in the parks when they get the chance. They’ve probably arranged second semester admittance given that we wrecked their summers and delayed their starting college. Maybe their phones are off so no one can follow them, GPS them, reach them. I’m not saying Finn doesn’t want to text you or whatever, but maybe he’s just taking a self-imposed break. Or maybe his parents—maybe all their parents—took their phones away so they can’t contact each other. I can’t pry into their lives. Not anymore. I’ve already done stuff I shouldn’t have done.”

“You had a kingdom to save.”

“I’m a parent, Amanda. I would never let my kids take personal risks for anything other than service to their country. Do you think their parents, their guardians, care about the kingdom? I would imagine their parents are pretty much done with all of that by now.”

I hadn't thought about that. Worse, I knew he was probably right.

Still, I needed to know absolutely. It was Finn, after all.

This was our conversation—as I remembered it. Little did I know how the mind can play tricks on you. How it can distort and misrepresent in order to protect you. The truth was far from what I remembered, what I recalled. It was much harsher and more cruel. More sinister in every way. I would lie, not only to myself, but to others. Those dearest to me. For now, I went with what I knew. I invented a reality, a conversation with Joe, far safer than the one that had really happened.

* * *

By combining Jess's and my money, I had just enough to book a last-minute deal, a red-eye flight to Orlando. With no place to stay, and barely more than bus fare and my phone in my pocket, I ended up on Wanda Kresky's doorstep.

The daughter of Wayne Kresky, the late Disney Legend and creative force behind the DHIs, Wanda was the insider of all insiders. She agreed to put me up, gave me a short lecture about what would have happened if she'd been away on a trip, and lent me fifty dollars that we both knew I was unlikely to repay anytime soon.

"Why would Joe be that way?" I asked across the kitchen counter of her tiny apartment as she fixed me a sandwich.

"Maybe you're reading more into it than was there."

“No one answering their phones? Seriously?”

“Yeah, okay. I don’t know, but I think you’re right. It’s strange. You’ve got to believe he’s protecting them, though, Amanda. I don’t doubt that they want some downtime, that they might even spend time in the park together, but not answering their phones is . . . different.”

“Right?”

“So where do you start? Can I drive you?”

“I don’t want to bother you.”

“I hope you’re kidding.”

“Finn’s house. Finn’s mom. She’s basically one of us at this point.” Finn’s mother had been put under a horrendous spell by the Overtakers, which left her working against her own son. “If anyone’s going to be honest, it’s her.”

“Then that’s where we start.”

* * *

Mrs. Whitman looked pale and sickly. She stepped outside their one-and-half story ranch home instead of asking me to come in. Wanda waited in the car, her head turned toward us. It was dusk, but the heat caused my skin to prickle with sweat. The palm fronds stood motionless, looking plastic. A few red flowers dared to test the heat. They weren’t winning.

We’d already said our hellos and how-are-yous by the time Mrs. Whitman decided to let me in, closing the door quietly behind her.

“I’d heard you’re enjoying it out there,” she said.

“Yes! It’s going great. Thank you! Is Finn home? Could I see him please?”

“He’s . . . no . . . I mean, he’s not here. He’s . . . He’s away . . . trying to work out the whole college thing. We’re so proud of him. He was accepted by four schools! Did he tell you that? Isn’t that wonderful?”

With so much to be happy about, why had she been crying recently? Why was she several shades paler than I’d ever seen her look? Why shut the door so quietly if only Finn’s sister was home? I knew Finn’s room was one of the windows facing the garage; we’d all heard the stories of his best friend, Dillard, or the dreaded Greg Luowski coming and going by climbing up on the roof. I felt so tempted to just run down the length of the house and try to sneak a peak.

But I didn’t have to. A thin rim of light outlined a drawn shade in the window closest to the garage. If it was Finn’s room—and it made sense that it would be—and he was away, why leave the light on?

She caught me looking in that direction.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. I wish you’d—” She caught herself.

“I did. Remember? I called Finn and Philby, Maybeck, Willa, and Charlene. All of them. I left messages for all of them.” I lowered my voice. “You can tell me. You know that. I’m here to help.”

I watched her eyes fill to overflowing, but she managed to hold back the tears.

“I want to help.” I saw no reason not to push. I was only

going to meet with more resistance from the other Keepers' parents. "Mrs. Whitman, of everybody, I thought you . . . I thought I could . . . that we knew each other. We've been through this together. You, me, Finn, the other Keepers. Let me, please let me help."

"I think it's best if you leave now, Amanda. If they call . . . if Finn should call, I'll ask him to get in touch with you."

"That would be nice," I said. "Thank you." Though I felt so foolish playing along with her game, I offered her my phone number. She told me she could remember it, and I didn't doubt she was telling the truth. Mrs. Whitman had been a rocket scientist with NASA. For real.

But when I recited my number, she showed no sign of hearing it. I'd lost her. She'd gone off someplace all her own. We had a short staring contest. I was clearly going to win, so I looked away, back toward the lighted window.

"You might want to save yourself some money," I said.

"How's that?" I'd surprised her. Like shaking her awake.

"Finn left his light on. Seeing how he's away doing his college thing . . ."

"Did he? Oh, how silly of me not to notice. Thank you, Amanda. You're right: what a waste."

"Yeah," I said. "What a waste."

* * *

Maybeck—the Keeper most likely to exaggerate—had once told me about a rumor concerning Mattie Weaver, another

escapee from Barracks 14, who had joined the Kingdom Keepers on the Disney Cruse Line ship, the *Dream*, during its Panama Canal cruise. Jess and I had put her up to it, and Mattie had come through for us in a big way. Her “ability”—as the researchers at Barracks 14 referred to what we thought of as our “weirdness”—was what Mattie called “reading.” Not the reading taught in school, of course. As a child, she’d been petting her godmother’s dog and had sensed he was sick. She went ballistic until her godmother finally agreed to take him to the vet. The dog was diagnosed with a benign tumor on the stomach, *exactly where Mattie had said it was.*

Over the next few months, things only got weirder. Now Mattie wore gloves, long-sleeve shirts, and long pants at all times. If someone tried to touch her, she would move out of reach. Her life outside Barracks 14 was all about hiding from and avoiding people. Of the three of us, I considered her the most likely to voluntarily return to the facility outside Baltimore; at least there she could walk freely down a hallway or attend a lecture. Here in “the real world,” she found herself in an exile of her own choosing. The burden that came with incidental contact—handing a salesperson money, shaking hands, touching a waiter or waitress—was not worth it. She didn’t want to sense illness or grief, desire or addiction. She wanted no part of a stranger’s internal thoughts. As Mattie had explained it to me: priests and psychiatrists have training. The rest of us do not.

Maybeck had told me that Mattie was in Orlando, squatting in the same old church where Jess and I had once lived

in secret, a place so familiar to me I could have reached it blindfolded. Afraid of scaring her away if I came up the stairs, I approached from the roof—one of two possible escape routes from the abandoned apartment. I knocked twice on the window, paused, and then knocked twice more, making my face visible.

Nothing. After a moment, I opened the window and pushed past a faded curtain. The interior was clean but spare—some inverted milk crates, a bed made of couch cushions secured by a rope around their perimeters. A stack of water-warped paperbacks teetered by the bed. A towel, still damp, was hung to dry. I shuddered, knowing what it was like taking cold showers.

Despite the signs, there was no Mattie. I left a note on the pillow, asking her to meet me at a nearby Starbucks. Nine A.M. or nine P.M. I'd be there regardless.

* * *

Later, I would wonder how I could have missed the significance of it all, but miss it I did.

One of the church walls held a dozen photos thumbtacked in the shape of an inverted pyramid. The shots were of the same three people—four, if you counted the driver. Three men and one woman. All adults. To study them, you would think them out of place, each the kind of person who'd stand in the corner alone at a party. The quiet type.

I would eventually realize I should have paid that wall

more attention. Because it turned out that they weren't the silent type. They were the dangerous type instead.

JESS

I wasn't always this way. Maybe I inherited it, but I don't know because my parents aren't around to ask. I can't exactly say it feels normal. I remember not having it.

It started out with little things. I never gave them a second thought. I think my mom knew something was up, but back then I didn't realize it was anything more than my imagination.

Everything changed with the pink bunny. I saw it on the shelves of the gas station after the car broke down and I decided I needed it, that I had to have it. But when I told my mom we had to go back and get it, she wouldn't go. She claimed it wasn't real, that I was making it all up.

I was so angry with her for that. Every morning I reminded her about the bunny. Every morning she'd claim she didn't know what I was talking about. That made me even angrier. My mother, faking confusion to avoid buying me another gift? Why?

I didn't realize that the event at the gas station hadn't happened . . . *yet*.

A few days later, we broke down on a road we'd never taken. It was all new to my mom, but from my car seat, I told her exactly what would happen next. The more it did happen,

the more freaked out she got. When we reached the gas station, she saw the pink bunny, the one I hadn't been able to stop talking about. That was the last straw. My mom ran out of the gas station's mini market, pulling me along behind her. I saw fear in her eyes when she looked at me. She wanted to know how I could possibly have known three days ago what would happen today. But she was afraid to ask.

In that brief exchange, I gained this weird sense of importance. And of guilt, for making my mom afraid. Of excitement. We rode in the tow truck in silence. I couldn't understand how I'd scared her; I only knew that I had. To me, my dreams just seemed to repeat themselves sometimes. I didn't know then how familiar it would become to see fear in people's eyes.

My powers got stronger as I got older; the dreams became more vivid. As I neared the end of elementary school, I woke up screaming every night. It was often the same dream: my parents being dragged off by bad guys while on a trip, me being sent to foster care. The doctors called them night terrors and told my parents they were common in kids my age.

When my parents left on a trip to South America, I begged them not to go. I told them I'd dreamed a hundred times about something awful that was going to happen. Even with my mother's obvious desire to believe me and stay, my father told me I'd be fine for two weeks, and off they went.

Two days after they left, the nightmare stopped abruptly. Hushed phone calls and pitying looks from my sitter followed. When child protective services showed up at the door to take

me away, I was waiting for them. I'd seen them coming. I even knew their names.

Every kid thinks they're "different" or "special," but this was the first time I *knew*. I had dreams like everyone else; the difference was that mine had a tendency to come true. I didn't tell people about them, but eventually they found out and a few years later, I was sent to a place in Baltimore.

* * *

The dreams grew more and more powerful. Sometimes I'd get a break for a few days, a week, even a month. I'd start wondering if they were gone for good—but then they'd come back stronger than ever.

Eight years later, Amanda and I were rooming together in Burbank. One summer night, I had a dream so forceful it made my head throb. I found it hard to hear myself think through the barrage of images in my head. It wasn't a movie of the future playing out in my mind. It was more like a bunch of snapshots being thrown at me and me trying to catch them before they were gone—without getting hit by them.

Habit guided my hand to the journal, pen, and book light tucked between my mattress and the bed frame. Before I even had the light on, before I was fully awake, I had the pen on paper, racing to get the image in my mind down before it disappeared.

I sketched quick, feathery strokes. A thin rectangle became a door opposite a small window with lace curtains. Framed in

the window was an antique lamp. I added the vague outline of a twin bed with a train set on the shelf above it, a couch like something out of a grandmother's house in a movie, and dark, thick lines that became the outlines of three men, menacing in their stance, blocking the main door. Their clothing was identical, standard army fatigues, except for the number 14 embroidered on their shoulders. A number whose significance Amanda and I knew all too well. These men weren't average foot soldiers; they were the "military" from Barracks 14, and I could think of only one reason I would be dreaming about them.

There was light coming through the door on the left, silhouetting the central figure, the object of their pursuit, a girl crouched in the dim light. Her back was turned to me, but I didn't need to see her face.

It wasn't the first time I'd dreamed this scene. The chances of it not coming true were disappointingly slim. My drawing was only a vague sketch, and the girl in it was looking away. But the girl was Amanda. Even if we weren't blood relatives, we considered ourselves sisters. If my dreams told me Amanda was in danger, we *both* had a problem.

Still, I couldn't exactly call her up on a hunch. Amanda was generally accepting of my so-called gift, as she had one of her own, but we both knew I could get it wrong when I was attempting to come to grips with what the dreams represented. I had no evidence the faceless girl was Amanda, only a gut feeling expanding from a pit in my stomach. Calling her in the middle of the night, Eastern time, me being all paranoid,

would only freak her out. Hardly fair. If she'd been across my room in the bed where she belonged, she would have likely flashed me an eye roll and mumbled, "Go back to sleep."

I tried to heed that advice, but the more I thought about my dream—the girl, the uniforms—the more jittery I got. It was like I'd had a triple-shot espresso. And though the barrage of images—"visions" still sounded too strange—had subsided, I felt like my heart was going to burst. My dreams rarely came with an indication of *when* (or even if) they were going to take place. For all I knew, what I'd just seen could be happening right now. Or it might never happen at all.

My stomach was knotted and tight. After everything we'd been through in the past eight years, Amanda was the closest thing I had to family. I missed her. I hoped she was safe.

I knew she'd only gone to Orlando for a few days, a week at most, but in light of the dream, it felt like forever.

Sitting in the dark, empty room, I felt alone in a way I hadn't felt in years. Amanda and I had been together longer than we'd been with anyone else. Amanda-and-Jess, Jess-and-Amanda. The team. Like twins, one and the same, never without the other. While that connection could feel smothering at times, it was also reassuring to know that she was there for me.

Now she was off in Orlando on an adventure of her own. I felt the panic set in. Every wind was Maleficent's chill blast; the trees outside seemed bewitched to grab me from my bed. In my overactive imagination, even the jovial kids downstairs were OTKs plotting evil deeds.

I understood the signs of paranoia. I also knew when I was right.

MATTIE

I wasn't always this way. Maybe I inherited it, but I don't know because my parents aren't around to ask. I can't exactly say it feels normal. I remember not having it.

The first time it happened was strange because everything seemed so . . . normal. My godmother didn't understand, or she didn't want to. At the time I truly thought I was being helpful. We both loved her dog, so why was helping him wrong? Those were the sentiments of a young girl, innocent feelings before things took a turn for the worse. I was running my hands over Rex's glossy fur, and strange thoughts trickled in. The mix of emotions was hard to place, but hidden beneath it, I sensed that something was gravely wrong. Rex peered at me with sad brown eyes, and I realized with a start that they were *his* thoughts. His stomach hurt.

My frantic pleas didn't seem to sway my godmother; she only seemed concerned for me. She didn't believe me when I told her that her dog was sick. I begged and begged until she came to her senses, and sure enough, the vet diagnosed Rex with a benign tumor. It was on his stomach. Until that point, I just assumed I was naturally intuitive. But I could see the way people looked at me when I touched them. Confused and lost, like there was something they needed to remember but

couldn't. It was even worse for me. Sometimes the thoughts were happy, but more often they were filled with pain and greed and lust. Very human things. And I couldn't turn it off. My abilities were only growing, so I made sure to limit all contact. The gloves and long sleeves I could handle, but it was much harder to keep my distance from people.

* * *

Jess and Amanda used to squat in this old building when they first came to Orlando. That's how I knew it would be safe for me to stay for a while. We had been close at Barracks 14. I showed up not too long after I discovered my powers on the pretense that I wanted to be with other kids like me. That much was true, but aside from that, the place was a nightmare. Jess and Amanda helped. They were tightly knit, but they accepted me, and I trusted them.

In the formerly reconstructed attic of the abandoned church, I had tried to arrange what furniture—if you could call it that—there was to make the space comfier. Even so, it was just a bunch of couch cushions and milk crates. When I returned from some errands, I knew right away that someone had been there. I'd been squatting for months, after a harrowing series of adventures on my way back into the United States from Mexico. I'd spent time in Los Angeles, Denver, and St. Louis in between. The attic space had grown to be a part of me. There were no clear signs of disturbance, but something was off.

I scanned the room, and my eyes landed on a small scrap of paper on my makeshift bed. It was in Amanda's hand-writing, which I knew all too well. She wanted to meet, and soon.

Wasting no time, I ran down the stairs to the back door of the former church. The fewer people who saw me, the better.

AMANDA

The difference between paranoia and remaining alert is how you let your fear affect you.

I worked hard to not to cross the line into Paranoiaville, to play it safe, stay aware, and not see danger in every shadow. The working-hard part came without much effort—nothing had come easily for me, ever. But I'd struggled enough to know I didn't want to dwell on it, to celebrate the victories and tolerate the losses. The world was a random place. Abnormality ruled.

Something happening twice was a flag for me. Walking along the sidewalk at a brisk pace at night, a noise to my right could easily be a lizard darting about in the ground cover. Even so, I'd learned techniques of personal safety. Most of them had rubbed off from being around my fellow "inmates" at Barracks 14 or spending time with the Kingdom Keepers. I knew how to use the reflections off vehicles and buildings to see behind me without turning fully around; I could vary my speed in order to distinguish between someone walking at their own pace or copying mine; I knew how to subtly use my phone to take a

photo behind me or in front of me; to cross at a crosswalk, change my mind, and return to the corner I'd just stepped off; to cross at the very end of the permitted time to see who dared challenge traffic to stay with me. Dozens, maybe hundreds of little tricks of timing and posturing that could help me identify possible surveillance. I didn't live this way—that was the definition of paranoia—but I possessed these tools for when they were needed.

Tonight, I was likely being followed. Though I couldn't say for sure. Being sure was another boundary between precaution and paranoia. I didn't freak out, just went through my routine safety checks to find out if I was right or wrong.

I was right. There was someone following me by a block or more—enough distance to make it hard to confirm and harder still to identify. Enough distance to leave the next move up to me. I also knew ways to “lose a tail” as Philby called it—some were common sense, others a little trickier. Losing a tail while also identifying the spy was far more complex, though—easier if one worked with a partner.

Mind whirling, I called Wanda without telling her exactly what I needed. I didn't like the idea of inconveniencing her. Despite what she said to the contrary, I never got around to asking her for help because I could tell she was working late. I fumbled through some lame discussion of dinner, and hung up.

I was going to have to fly solo. I'd gotten so attached to Jess that I suppose the only time I allowed myself to be more than “half a friendship” was when I was with Finn. Of course, then

I was another half of a friendship. I wanted—no, needed—to prove to myself that I was capable of flying solo, thinking for myself and being by myself. You spend too much time around others and you begin to depend on them. That didn't feel so healthy all of a sudden. It made me feel needy. One thing I'd learned growing up was that no matter who claimed you, you had to first claim yourself.

I walked past my intended bus stop and picked up speed. I didn't want to look like I was running, but I needed to reach a different bus line. This particular route briefly ran east, providing me with a shortcut—one stop past the one at which I assumed Mattie would board.

If I hurried, I had a chance.

MATTIE

If Amanda had come to Orlando from Imagineering School, it had to be urgent. My feet carried me quickly, and I made it to the stop just as the bus was pulling up. At the last minute, I quickly slipped off my gloves. It was a necessary task, but I dreaded it all the same.

As I boarded, I made a point to slip so that I could fall onto the driver. He reached out; we touched. A stream of faces flashed in front of my eyes; each passenger who had boarded ahead of me. I thought it would be an inconsequential stream of people I didn't know, but it seemed worth a try. And right as I made a move to pull my hand away, I saw something.

Not a good something.

Panting and out of breath, the Overtaker boy I knew from the cruise ship had boarded the bus. *Louis . . . no, Luowski! Greg Luowski!*

I yanked my hand back, ignoring the dazed look on the driver's face. I would never forget Luowski's piercing green eyes, a trademark of Maleficent's zombified army. She was responsible for the turmoil in Jess's and Amanda's lives, and she wanted to take over the Disney parks. But she was long dead; Finn Whitman and the other Kingdom Keepers had seen to that.

So why were this boy's eyes still that alarming shade of green?

I passed the bus driver and peered over the heads of the other passengers, trying to locate Luowski. Just ahead of me, I could see his strong frame and distinctive red hair. Something told me that I needed to get to him and read him. "Reading" was the term I used for my visions of people's thoughts.

Dropping my shoulder, I muscled through the crowd of bodies. Time was flying, but I wanted to be subtle, so I pretended to stumble and catch his hand. As my powers had grown, I'd learned to narrow down what I was able to read. Upon contact, I immediately honed in on thoughts relating to Finn Whitman.

Finn's face flashed before my eyes, and what I saw wasn't good. It seemed like Luowski spent a lot of time planning his revenge. When I gripped his hand, he tensed, and I knew

that he sensed me. On the Disney *Dream* cruise ship, I had tried to read him; even then, he was aware that something was amiss. Now he was familiar with my abilities. He started to turn, and I ducked into one of the rows and sank down into a seat. He scanned the bus, but he couldn't seem to find me. I knew I would be safe as long as he didn't link me to the sensation; he hadn't seen my face the first time I'd read him, either.

I mulled over what I'd seen for a long time. There was a good chance that this was what Amanda had wanted me to do: to have me spy for her. But why would she be so cryptic? My anger simmered. Was she testing me? If so, it wasn't fair. I'd been through plenty on the ship, certainly enough to prove my trustworthiness.

But what else could she want?

AMANDA

I reached South Lakemont and waited for the 313 bus to the Corners. Boarding came down to timing. And as I was the only one waiting at the stop, my plan was compromised from the start.

"You coming?" the bus driver said.

I'd wanted to wait until the very last moment to board, steal a peek out the window, and catch a glimpse of my pursuer. "Yes, sir." I tried miserably to contain my defeated tone as I boarded and used my elevated position next to the driver to look down Summerfield Road.

“You done sightseeing? I got passengers, you know?”

“Sorry.” I still had my Youth ID pass, which lowered my rate.

I was halfway toward the back door when I spotted Mattie Weaver—first in profile, then I made out her face off the glass of the window. Her eyes told me in no uncertain terms that I did not know her, was not to come anywhere near her. That look of hers rattled me.

MATTIE

Engulfed in my thoughts, I hardly noticed Amanda board the bus. She seemed disheveled and distant, but I knew that I couldn’t reach out to her. Not with Luowski lurking on board.

Amanda was glancing out the window when she caught my reflection. Our eyes met and hers widened in surprise, but I couldn’t acknowledge her. Instead I gave her a sharp look of rebuke to keep her from making contact. It worked. She slipped into a seat across from mine. My whole body tensed. I hoped there wouldn’t be a scene.

When Amanda got off at Mizell Avenue, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. Best for me to stay on board, I decided, since Luowski also remained on board.

We were supposed to meet at Starbucks. I could still make that happen.