

Samuel crawled towards the Frisbee, stalking his prey. He approached the bright red disc, teeth bared in a fierce snarl. My calls of, "Come here, boy!", "You can do it!", and finally "Hurry up!" were ignored as Samuel pounced on the Frisbee, just to find himself sprawled on the freshly mowed grass. My brother, Andrew, stifled a giggle, but his face immediately turned solemn as Samuel struggled up and trotted back towards me with the Frisbee clenched between his teeth. "You're the best dog ever," I exclaimed, bending down to rub Samuel behind the ears, not paying attention to the sudden sway of the grass behind me. A figure slid up gently, hidden, the little noise it was making merging with the whistle of the autumn breeze. And after I stood up, the last things I remember were Andrew's frantic screams and Samuel's barks ringing in my ears as I collapsed to the ground.

"Hey, are you all right?" The boy's worried face was shadowed in the light as he bent down to replace the bandage on my left knee. I strained to sit up, but the boy stopped me with a gentle hand. "Don't sit. You need to rest a little longer." I guess there was something in those few words that had a great impact on me, because I immediately found myself flat on the bed again, unaware of how I had gotten there. The boy stared down at me, his look expressing something else that I couldn't quite understand either.

This was getting too crazy. What was going on? Where was I, anyway? Maybe I should know that first. And what had happened before this? I forced myself to look at my rescuer, or captor, or whatever he was. After a few silent moments, "Where the heck am I?" were the words that burst out of my mouth, not at all what I was intending to say. The boy reeled back in shock, nearly dropping the candle he was holding, as if he had forgotten that I could speak.

"Well, first, you should probably know how you got here," the boy replied as soon as he had recovered from my harsh words. His voice was quieter, not as emotional as before. "You remember the gigantic snake? The one that was behind you when you were petting your dog?" This wasn't at all what I was expecting to hear. "You were watching me? At the park? And that thing was a *snake*!?" I'd never gotten over the 1<sup>st</sup> time I was bitten by a snake, and I've been afraid of them ever since.

The boy's expression became even more troubled. "Um... yeah," he replied, glancing down at the wooden floor. "It was slithering up behind you, like you were its food. Maybe thought you were a mouse, 'cause its huge fangs were visible, its mouth was wide open. I think it tried to attack you; I don't know, because I turned away at the last moment. When I turned back, your brother was running for help, and your dog was chasing after him. I picked you up and brought you here. But the strangest thing was that the snake that attacked you didn't have scales like a normal snake. It had something more like... more like..." The words trailed off, bit by bit. I couldn't stand it anymore. I needed to know what was going on – I hoped I wasn't going mad! "Like what?" I queried.

The answer was barely a whisper. "Like a flowing velvet cloak, with a large circular symbol on the back. I couldn't quite make it out."

It was my turn to be stunned. What was so scary about a snake wearing a cloak? I mean, well, most animals don't wear clothes – but what was so weird about this snake, except for the cloak, of course?

My thoughts were interrupted by an order from the boy. "You'd better go home now," he said. "I don't want your parents worrying. To get out of here, go out that door." He pointed towards a wall that seemed blank at first sight. Upon closer examination, I realized that some faint cracks

on the wall outlined the shape of a roughly carved door. “You’ll find yourself on a path. Continue all the way to the end. It’s the one that doesn’t have as many thorns and branches blocking the way. You’ll know where you are when you reach the end. Find your way home, and tell no one about what happened, not even your parents. Stay safe.” Before I could say another word, the boy set down his candle, gave me a slight nod, and disappeared into the dark shadows without another word.

I decided that there wasn’t any way to ask this strange kid any more questions. Rolling down my pants leg, I got up from the bed. However, as I limped towards the hidden door, I couldn’t help but think. Who was my rescuer, and what was he watching me in the park for?

"Lexi, where have you been? Andrew’s not telling us anything." (My dad.)

"We’ve been so worried!" (My mom.)

"Wexi, can you play Monopoly with me?" (Andrew.)

"Arf!" (That was Samuel.)

My family practically attacked me as I walked into the front door of our house, covered in bruises and scratches and dripping wet (it had started to rain on my walk home). Inside, I was aching to tell my family what had happened. Then I remembered what the boy had said to me: “Tell no one about what happened.” There had been a particularly clear emphasis on the words *no one*. After considering for a while, I made up my mind. I couldn’t say anything about the incident, even though I didn’t know anything about what was going on. Instead, I’d have to tell lies to my parents and friends. A lot of lies.

I turned to my parents and shrugged. “There was a guy with a gun at the park. Andrew and I were both really scared, so we ran and hid while Samuel ran off in another direction. But I wasn’t watching Andrew very closely, and he ran off to go find Samuel. Andrew came home after he found Sam, so I couldn’t find him when I searched the park – didn’t you, Andrew?” There were plenty of obvious flaws in that lie. That wasn’t what I was worried about, though. Looking at Andrew, I saw him nod slowly to our parents. Relieved, I turned around and headed for the stairs. “I’m going to go to bed – tomorrow’s the first day of school, and I don’t want to fall asleep in class.” My mom and dad seemed to believe these lies, but I couldn’t help notice the unpleasant glare that Andrew gave me as I sprinted up the stairs towards my room.

A throbbing pain in my leg woke me up around 6:30 the next morning. I sprung out of bed, hopping around awkwardly until the pain ceased and I found the courage to look down. What I saw sent a tiny flicker of fear through me. The left leg of my pajama pants was soaked with still-wet blood; however, I didn’t know then that the blood wasn’t the worst part of my wound. After slipping out of my pjs, removing the bandage on my leg, and changing into a pair of shorts, I limped down the hall and into the bathroom. Applying some antiseptic to a huge cotton ball, I dabbed it on my knee.

It was nearly 7:00 when I finally managed to rub all of the blood off. What I saw under the blood almost made me scream. I hadn’t gotten any old scrape or cut, like one that I might have obtained from cutting myself on a knife. Instead, an odd scab with some weird shapes on it covered most of my knee. I stared at the mysterious markings for what seemed like forever, totally immersed in trying to figure out what they were and how they had gotten there, until a call from my mom shook me back into the real world.

"Lexi! It’s seven-ten! You’re going to be late for school!"

I jumped at the sudden order, instinctively glancing at the grandfather clock in the hallway to see if my mom was telling the truth. She was – it just happened to be 7:13, not 7:10. Oh no. I *so* didn't want to be late. School started at 8:00, and I didn't want my new teachers to get a bad impression of me, especially my science teacher. My best friend's older sister, Jessie, was a year older than me, and she had mentioned that the 8<sup>th</sup> graders' Life Science teacher was the meanest teacher on the planet – apparently she assigned two hours of homework every night, and her students had to clean up the room spick-and-span before they could go to lunch, and she would do *anything* to make sure that all of her classes passed the Science CRT. I knew that I was supposed to take Life Science this year, and I really hoped Jessie was exaggerating when she told me that.

Dashing down the hall (and nearly knocking down the grandfather clock on the way), I yanked open my closet door and leapt into the pile of clothes inside, digging through the clutter for my favorite shirt. I found the purple t-shirt buried underneath my collection of bobble heads, exactly where I had left it a couple weeks before. I slipped on a white tank top underneath the t-shirt, and then I threw on the first pair of pants that I could find – a dark blue pair of cut-off jeans with a lilac flower embroidered on the left leg. Then, I grabbed a brush from my dresser and sprinted down the stairs, dragging the brush through my tangled brown hair at the same time. I had no idea what happened then. Unexpectedly, I was sprawled face first on the carpet, the brush stuck awkwardly in my hair, my legs perched clumsily on the stairs behind me.

"Be more careful, Lexi! Don't hurt yourself; you know that we can't afford to take you to the hospital at this time of day!"

Completely ignoring my mom, I focused my attention on getting up from the floor and then trying to untangle the golden brush from the disorder of my hair. After several failed attempts, I sat down on the bottom step of the stairs and gave the brush a hard tug, pulling out quite a bit of hair with it.

This was definitely not going to be the best day of my life. First the blood in the morning, then having to hurry to school, and then pulling out some of my hair with my favorite brush. I sighed, trying to forget those unfortunate events, and dragged myself into the kitchen. My breakfast, a large plate of scrambled eggs and toast, was waiting for me on the table. Somehow, the sight of food immediately wiped my head of all my other thoughts, and I sat down at the table and devoured the food.

My mom stuck her head out the car window and planted a kiss on my cheek. "Have fun, Lexi, and don't hurt yourself again." I had gotten a carpet burn following my slip on the stairs, and a Band-Aid covered most of my right elbow. Because of that, I wasn't at all in a good mood, so I faked a large smile and said, "See you after school, Mom." She smiled and drove away, leaving me on Kings Middle School's grassy lawn with my new green backpack and tons of kids running around trying to find their friends. Glancing down at my watch, I saw that it was 7:47. Perfect, just in time.

"Hey, Lexi!" I jumped at the sound of my friend Jacie's voice. My mood immediately swung higher, and I attacked Jacie with a gigantic hug.

Jacie dodged my bag as I let her go. "Whoa, Lexi, be more careful with that backpack of yours! Did'ya have a good summer?"

"Sort of," I replied. "Stupid summer homework. I would've had none, except Mr. Landers assigned us all of that research for History. I forgot about it until last week... Anyways, I don't

even get why we had to do that. We're getting completely new teachers this year, in almost every subject!"

Jacie nodded. "Sounds like I got a lot more homework than you did. Science, History, even math! So glad I finished it. So, now that you're finally here, do you want to go find out what homerooms we're in?"

Ouch. Homeroom. I had never enjoyed the concept of a homeroom in middle school, especially since my homeroom teacher last year, Mrs. Watson, was this short old lady with white hair and glasses – she sort of looked like my grandmother. She never let us off of work like the other homeroom teachers would, even when it was the day before break. On average, I'd estimate that my homeroom got three times more homework than Jacie's homeroom. Turning back to Jacie, I nodded. "Sure, let's go find out."

If Jacie sensed my phony enthusiasm, she didn't say anything about it. Instead, she dropped the subject of homeroom as we walked towards the cafeteria to get our schedules.

"What are you going to do if you don't get into the same Algebra class as Colton and me?" Jacie smirked and elbowed me in the side.

"Ummm..." I wasn't quite sure what to say. Jacie and I had been in the same math class since we became friends, and I didn't like to think about us being in different classes. As for Colton, well, he was the guy I had a crush on. I'd be pretty disappointed if I wasn't in the same math class as either of them, but I didn't want to think about that.

Inside the cafeteria, Jacie and I walked up to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders' booth. "Can I help you girls?" One of the assistants at the table grinned widely at Jacie and me. I didn't recognize her – maybe she was one of the new teachers. Her breath smelled strongly of *way* too much coffee. I opened my mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. I managed to stammer, "Um, yeah. We're here to get our... um... schedules."

Jacie gave me a crazy look that probably meant "What the heck are you doing?" At the same time, the woman shoved a pad of paper towards me and reached across the table to get a pen. "What are your names?"

Once again, I found myself at a loss for words. Why in the world did this woman make me feel so nervous? I didn't realize that my face was contoured into one of those weird expressions until Jacie nudged me in the side. "This is Jacie Bennett," I said, pointing to Jacie, "and I'm Alexandra Roberts. Lexi, for short."

The woman gave another grin that smelled like coffee. "Hold on a minute." She got up from her chair, pulled out a large cardboard box from under the table, and flipped through it. After a couple of minutes, she extracted two manila folders. One had my name on the front and the other had Jacie's name. "Inside these files are your schedules, a map of the school, and all those forms that you and your parents have to fill out and return to your homeroom by Friday." The woman paused, spotting the puzzled look on Jacie's face. "Yes, I know you already filled these out last year, but the office wants to make sure that the information they have on file is accurate – just in case someone gets in trouble and needs to call their parents." The woman looked directly at me when she said the word *trouble*. Her eyes were harsh, but her mouth was curved in a sly smile. I suddenly had the idea that the woman knew something I didn't or wasn't supposed to know, and the thought alarmed me. Grabbing the file folder with my name on it and stuffing it into my backpack, I ran off into towards the cafeteria door. Jacie called after me, but I ignored her and shoved my way further into the crowd of students in the cafeteria. I just wanted to get as far away from that woman as possible, and I had no intentions of stopping – until I ran face first into

a boy. "Sorry," I apologized. "I didn't mean to..." I caught a glimpse of the boy's face, and my voice faltered. "What are you doing here?" I nearly shouted. "I thought-"

The boy clapped a hand over my mouth. "Not now, Lexi!" Instead of shutting my mouth, though, I continued to chatter as the boy put his hands on my shoulders and steered me away from the main cafeteria entrance towards the courtyard. "How did you know my name? Who are you?" All I got was a glare in return, especially when I asked the last question, which wasn't the reply I was expecting. Frustrated, I decided to remain silent until I was asked to talk.

When we were outside in the courtyard, the boy sat down on one of the picnic benches and motioned for me to sit beside him. I decided to obey him and plunked myself down on the bench, crossing my arms across my chest. The boy looked at me peculiarly, and then he began to talk. "You are Lexi Roberts, aren't you?" he inquired.

I was caught speechless again. It still bothered me that the boy knew my name and I didn't know his, and I wasn't quite sure how to answer his question. I must've said something really stupid, like "Huh?", because the boy laughed.

"That's OK if you're nervous, or confused, or whatever," he said, winking. "I know you want to know who I am."

It seemed as if the boy had voiced my exact thoughts. "Yeah," I said, thankful that I wouldn't have to ask for his name again. "Could you please tell me so that I don't have to worry about who you are 24/7?"

The boy laughed again. "OK, I'll tell you. I think it's time you knew anyways. My name's Daniel Rousseau, and I'm in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, like you."

Well, those words were a pretty big relief. But I still wanted to know more. Without thinking, I blurted out, "Why were you in the park watching me? I mean, how could you have known that an enormous snake was going to attack me?"

My words were met with a long silence. Finally, Daniel spoke. "It'll take me a really long time to explain everything, Lexi." He sighed, and then continued. "Well, I have been following you around. That's how I learned your name, and it's also why I just *happened* to be there when you were hurt. I'm not scouting you just out of curiosity, though. I'm supposed to protect you from your parents' experiments."

Another awkward silence. This time, I broke the tension. "Protecting me from *what*!?"

Daniel blushed. I could tell that he was worried that I would misinterpret his answer. "You'll learn sometime later. As for now, well, just please don't mention this to anyone else? If you keep that promise, I might show you soon. I-"

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the start of the school day. Daniel jumped up from the picnic bench and literally ran back into the cafeteria, leaving me to ponder his words again. What had he said? Something that belonged to my mom and dad that was supposed to be after me? I shrugged to myself and followed the rush of kids back into the building, most of who were trying to get a good seat in the gymnasium for the orientation. Better not to think about this – and just forget about it forever, right? I thought. Little did I know that I was wrong.

The rest of my school day almost went smoothly. I was satisfied with my new schedule (which I finally remembered to look at in homeroom), and Colton and Jacie were in my math class. Daniel was also in my math, Life Science, and French classes, but he didn't bother speaking to me for the rest of the day. I could feel the anxiety between the two of us, though. And I think that

anxiety got to me incredibly well, because I found myself worrying about our vague conversation earlier that day.

I think Jacie knew something was wrong. She noticed that I was unusually quiet at times; sometimes, I would refuse to talk, even when asked to answer a question. “What’s up?” she would ask. But I would flatly shake my head and turn away. She continued to press me to say something, whether “You want to sit together at lunch?” or “That was awesome!” or even “Hey!” At the end of the day, though, she was pretty disappointed - I had barely spoken all day. “Well, Lexi, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” she told me at the end of the day. Patting me on the back, she hurried over to her bus line, trying to look happy. However, I could see that she really was upset because of the way she shuffled her feet along the sidewalk.

“Lexi!” I almost yelled in shock; Daniel had snuck up silently behind me and yanked on my backpack strap.

I couldn’t keep my surprise from showing as I faced Daniel – I knew there was something in my expression that revealed it, but I didn’t know what that was. Daniel, however, pretended not to notice. “Are you riding the bus, or is your mom or dad picking you up?”

Well, of course, I couldn’t help thinking, Why do you care? But I decided not to say anything of the sort. “Um, I’m riding the bus – why?”

Daniel shrugged. “I just wanted to know. You know, just in case, well-” He stopped mid sentence. “Actually, you *don’t* know yet. But I’m suspecting that you’ll find out soon, and I probably won’t even have to tell you.”

As always, I was confused with his words. “What do you mean?” And as always, Daniel was gone before I could get the answer I wanted.

The visions came that night, after I had slumped into my bed after my exhausting day. There was a street in front of me; it was extremely dark, and most of the street lights were dim. The only strong light came from the aura of a small oil lamp flickering inside one of the houses on the street. And then I noticed that I could see in the darkness, and I knew that I had become something other than myself – I was in something else’s body. I was connected to its thoughts. I could grasp that this being’s lifelong job was to capture things silently, so silently that its prey wouldn’t know it was coming until it was too late. Then I realized that somehow, even though I still had control over my own thoughts, something – or somebody – else was controlling my movements. I watched from the creature’s eyes as that invisible force steered me towards the house with the lamp, shadowed deeply in the gloominess.

A small, dreary residence, the house looked as if nothing had occupied it for generations. But because I could feel the creature’s thoughts, I knew that that impression was false. Someone lived in the house, but not a soul seemed to care. At the least, the occasional traveler on the road would turn and stare at the lamp in the window, then shake his head and continue along his path. There was an obvious fear lingering in each traveler’s eyes; each one was different. It seemed as if no one, other than the being whose body I occupied, would dare to look at the house for more than a few seconds. I knew why that was from reading the creature’s thoughts, and the idea frightened me as I related those ideas to what Daniel had mentioned earlier in the courtyard.

A jolt shook my body as the creature suddenly came to a stop. Glancing up, I saw that I had a clear view of the house’s front door. It looked as if it had been used many times, and it was probably just as desolate as the house it opened into. Then my vision blurred for a split second,

and when I could see clearly again, the creature was slithering in a bedroom, noiselessly approaching a person lying in a lavish canopy bed.

Several ideas pummeled my brain as the being prepared to do its duty; none of the ideas suggested that anything pleasant was going to happen on this murky night. I tried to scream a warning to the human in the bed, but I knew it was no good. She wouldn't be able to hear me, for I couldn't control the movements of the creature whose body I was occupying. I could see that the creature was preparing to strike, and all I could do was watch and shout soundless alarms inside my own head.

All I remember from the next few minutes was seeing the human shriek – though too late – in fury as she got a glimpse of the monster. It wrapped itself around her body, and she continued to scream as her life was slowly crushed out of her. Oddly, I could feel the woman's emotions too, and my steady breathing became strangled as I gasped along with the woman. And then I woke up with a start; I was sitting up in my bed, sweating heavily and panting for air, as my whole body shook in terror. I now knew what was after me – and I had a startling suspicion that Daniel was somehow associated with each and every one of the strange things that had happened to me in the past few days.