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| Shooter  Caroline Pignat | This is not a drill  PART FOUR  A lockdown catches five grade 12 students by surprise and throws them together in an unlocked boys’ washroom. |

Part Four

**NOAH**

**Fire Drill Social Story**

When the FIRE ALARM sounds



the kids leave the classroom go  
outside through EXIT A



to line up for attendance in the  
BACK FIELD.



CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Stop!

Roll down the dark

But it keeps CLANG-CLANG-CLANGING-ING-ING-ING

ING my ears, ING my eyes, ING my head.

Exploding sounds and colors.

No matter how I hit.

“...just a fire alarm!”

Alice’s voice sounds so far away.

Why won’t she get me?

Why won’t she make it stop?

Fire alarm?

No.No.No.No.

This isn’t right.

Exit A. Exit A.

The field.

The field.

Kim is waiting for me at the back field.

00:07:20

**ALICE**

Everyone cowers and covers their ears at the piercing ring of the fire alarm. My heart thuds in my chest. The bell continues its clanging as I crawl over to Noah, who shrieks and punches at his head trying to make it all stop.

“What do we do?” Isabelle yells.

“We just ignore it, right?” Hogan suggests. “Isn’t that the rule?”

“Unless you smell something burning,” Isabelle adds.

“Yes...but...maybe it’s a trick,” I say. “If we’re right about the blueprint, he wants us to gather in the atrium.”

“Or maybe he really has set the school on fire.” Isabelle eyes the bag of cherry bombs.

A tendril of smoke snakes its way under the wooden door, then disappears out the window. It’s just your imagination. Your overactive imagination. It’s not real. Terrified, I look at Hogan. I can tell by his expression he saw the smoke too.

“That’s it!” he says, heading for the door. “If it’s a trap, we have to warn everyone. And if it’s not, we can’t stay here. We’re getting the hell out! Now!”

He slams his fists against the metal door he wedged in to keep Maxwell out. Stuck like a tabletop between the wooden door and the side of the pedestal sink, it doesn’t budge. He lifts his foot and slams it hard. Two, three times.

A tremor of realization ripples through me—what kept us safe might keep us trapped. Might cost our lives.

Undeterred, Hogan pummels with his fists like a boxer with a bag. He pounds at the door for what feels like forever as we stand and watch him grow redder, angrier, sweatier, his knuckles red raw, bruised, and bloodied from the metal. Then, breathless, he stops and unzips the mascot costume, shedding his second skin and dumping it in a heap on the floor. Flexed and sweaty, in nothing but his purple boxers, he looks like the Incredible Hulk himself, his thick fists smashing left and right and left and right. The metal dents but doesn’t move. Hogan tries kicking it. Kneeing it. Wrenching it. Tries everything he can to get it out. To get us out.

“There’s always the cherry bombs.” Xander kneels by the bag. “We could blast it—”

“NO!” Isabelle and I shout in unison.

“Soak them in the sink,” Hogan orders. And Xander does. He saturates every one of them. The last thing we need in a fire is to be gathered around a powder keg.

More smoke seeps through the cracks. There is no rationalizing it away. Something is burning outside this room.

The smoke, the yelling, the clang-clang-clang of that damn alarm—all of it is too much for Noah who, hat over his face, furiously slams his head over and over and over in a vain attempt to make it all stop. For a moment, I feel as though all of our efforts are just as futile. We are all freaking out in our own ways: me trying to swaddle my brother in Hogan’s abandoned fur; Isabelle back to turning her phone on and off and on and off in the hopes that it might miraculously reboot; Hogan hammering at a jammed metal door that won’t budge; Xander in a panic as he rummages through the wet bag. It just seems so hopeless.

“What are you looking for, Xander?” I yell over the piercing alarm and the thunder of Hogan’s pummeling.

“The trigger,” he says. “A detonation would need some kind of detonator.” He digs around a bit and then slumps back on his heels. “Nothing.”

“Maybe it’s the same trigger as the ping pong one,” Isabelle says, looking up from her phone.

“No.” Xander checks the side pockets. “That was liquid nitrogen. Enough to blast light balls out of an open garbage can, but not enough to shoot metal.

Well, not with enough velocity to pierce skin.”

Isabelle blanches, no doubt recalling the comic version of herself in Max’s book.

The pounding stops. Breathless, Hogan bends over and drops to one knee. Sweat runs down his face and he wipes it on his slick biceps. He looks defeated. No, worse than that. Crushed.

“I can’t...” he heaves, his reddened eyes watery from the sting of smoke. “I should never have...”

I leave Noah for a moment and go to him. "Let me help.”

It seems a ridiculous offer. As if someone as strong as Hogan would ever want my help. “All of us.” I wave everyone over. “Maybe...maybe if we all push together, this stupid thing will give.”

Setting down their camera and phone, Xander and Isabelle join me next to Hogan, our hands gripping the edge of the dented metal.

“On three,” Hogan says, and on his cue we grit our teeth and shove upwards.

The door shifts forward a fraction and sticks again.

“What about Noah?” Hogan asks.

I am not sure. Noah is really agitated, but before I can say no, Hogan slips Noah’s arms in the sleeves of the fisher costume and eventually coaxes him over. “Push hard, Noah,” he says. “We’re going to open the door and we need your help, okay?”

Mimicking us, Noah takes his hands away from his ears long enough to grip the edge while Hogan squats below, wedging himself underneath the metal door. He counts, and on three we all push again, shoving upwards with all we have left. This has to work. It has to. Shouldering the metal, Hogan drives his legs, roaring and red-faced with the force of his thrust. The door moves an inch. Then gives a little more.

“It’s working!” I yell, just as everyone is about to quit. “Keep going!” And with another great heave, the metal screeches free.

We fling the wooden door open and tumble out into the hall. There isn’t a lot of smoke, but what there is snakes down the hallway, sucked towards the open bathroom window. Xander runs back inside and returns wearing his camera.

“This way!” Isabelle says, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards the nearest exit. It’s the route we always take during drills in Ms. Carter’s class. Back stairs. Down three floors. Exit to the back field. Simple enough. But when we reach the door and she shoves on the handle, it jams.

“Let me try,” Hogan says, ramming it with his shoulder. He lifts his foot and slams it against the handles twice. “It must be locked or something.”

“Forget it. Let’s try the other one,” Isabelle yells. There are stairs at the end of every hall, and she takes off running for the next ones with Xander close on her heels. Hogan starts forward and, after a few steps, looks back for us.

“Come on.” I grab Noah’s free hand. In the other, he grips his broken broom handle. There is less than a foot of it left, but I hope it gives him some

comfort. Just like his furry sleeves and the cape of costume that flaps behind him as we start to run towards the source of the smoke.

**ISABELLE**

I hit the west stairwell doors first and press on the bar. It gives a bit, but just like the others, these doors don’t open. Looking through the window, I notice something just as Xander runs past me, around the corner, and disappears into the smoky hall.

"It’s chained,” I say to Hogan and Alice as they arrive.

"What?!” Alice gasps.

"That must have been what we heard,” Hogan says. "And there was more chain in the bag. Maxwell must have been sneaking around and chaining the doors.”

The smoke is thicker here but not as bad as down the hall by the main stairs. "I don’t think *we* should go any farther,” I say. Xander ran that way, so he must be stupider than I thought. “That’s heading into the fire.”

“It won’t matter,” Alice says. “I’ll bet the other stairwells are locked too.”

I whimper. “Ohmigod, is that it? Is he trying to burn us alive?” My eyes sting, and I don’t know if it’s from smoke or fear.

Noah coughs.

“The smoke is getting worse,” Hogan says. I think he’s right. It’s not just a haze, it’s a cloud gathering overhead. “So what’s the plan, guys? We can’t just stay here.”

“Get everyone the hell out.” I try a few classrooms but, of course, they are locked. “Guys!” I bang on the doors. “Forget the lockdown! There’s a fire!” But they won’t come out. Not even if it’s me. Not until they see the smoke for themselves, and it might be too late by then.

Xander comes barreling around the corner, lost in a black cloud like he’s on fire himself. I scream, and Hogan slams him to the ground and starts swatting at his clothes, trying to put him out.

“Stop! Stop!” Xander yells.

The two of them sit up, breathless, and we see he’s not on fire. In fact, he’s not even singed.

Alice bends over the smoking tinfoil something or other that Xander dropped as he fell. “Smoke bombs?” she says.

Hogan helps Xander to his feet.

“Yes,” Xander pants. “They’re in several corners. And all the corner stairwell doors are locked, just like the others.”

I feel my shoulders relax a bit. “So there’s no fire? That’s a relief.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Alice says. “It’s all part of his plan.”

We all look at her, hoping she’s figured it out.

“Don’t you get it?” she says. “It’s just like the Friday fire drills. He clears the halls, only this time, he used a lockdown. Then, when he has everything ready, he sets off the alarms.”

“But why the smoke?” Hogan asks, as the black spewing from the foil forms a dark cloud above us. “Why bother with that? He could’ve just pulled the alarm himself.”

I see where Alice is going with this. "Because,” I say, “we wouldn’t leave the rooms unless we saw smoke. This was the only way to end the lockdown other than having the principal come release us room by room.”

And, as if on cue, or probably because of Xander’s smoke bomb still billowing on the floor, Ms. Carter’s door opens and the class heads for the far stairs. Another class joins them, the panic increasing as they realize their closest exit is blocked.

They run for the door behind us. A few girls freak out. “It’s locked too!” Panic sparks and spreads like fire, as the growing crowd rushes down the main hall.

Alice nods. “He chained doors to corral everyone down the main stairwell—” I hop on her train of thought. “Straight into the—”

“Atrium.” Hogan finishes.

The panicked crowds spill from the third floor into the only open stairwell. Hands over their ears, smoke in their eyes.

“Stop! There’s no fire! It’s a trap!” we yell, grabbing at random students. But they are so freaked out, they just shake us off as they run past.

There’s no way to stop them.

Black smoke hangs overhead like some dark brainstorm. We can’t stay here.

All we can do is follow. Running scared, running full tilt towards some kind of Resolution.

Just the way Maxwell Steinberg planned.

00:06:12

**HOGAN**

“We have to let Mr. Wilson know!” Izzy yells as we reach the main landing. She looks through the windows at the atrium and the main office below, where already a crowd clogs around the front doors. We join the hundreds of kids filling the stairwell. The stairs split and loop back, meeting at each landing.

“Yo, Hogan!” Trev yells at me as he comes down the far side. His expression says, What the hell? He’s trying to make a joke of me in my underwear. Of this whole situation. But I can tell he’s freaked out. The smoke. The lockdown. The chains. Some kids are in a full-out panic. Even more so when they see me barreling through.

“Move!” I yell, shoving them aside. “Get out of my way!”

And they try to, man, they desperately try to steer clear when they see the Hulk coming at them, sweaty, yelling, and rampaging in his boxers. But every flight is packed tight, railing to railing, as the mass moves slowly downward. They’ve got nowhere else to go.

“MOVE IT!” I wade downstream through the current of gawkers. My recurring nightmares—I am at school practically naked and no matter how I run, how hard I try, I get nowhere.

Izzy’s following close in the wake behind me. She yells something, but I can’t hear her in the screaming and ringing. I look for Alice and Noah as we round the second floor but they’re lost in the crowd.

But then, I see Xander coming down on the other side behind Trev. Xander stops when we reach the landing. He yells across at me, something about an opportunity. Then he turns and cuts sideways, fighting his way through to disappear through the second-floor doors.

Where the hell is he going? For a second, I wonder if maybe he’s remembered something. A clue.

*Or maybe he’s turned back to the dark side. Once a bad guy...always a bad guy. Don’t kid yourself‘ Hulkster.*

No, I’m no hero. Not even close. But I have a job to do. Find Wilson. Tell him what we know: it’s not a fire; it’s a bomb.

So, I shove harder through the crowd, pushing against that little voice inside that wonders if maybe we got the whole thing wrong.

Terrified that we might be right.

**ALICE**

The crowds tear us apart and sweep me away. From Hogan and Isabelle. From Xander. From Noah.

“Noah! NOAH!” I scream as his hand is pulled from my grasp. I see his fur arms flail a few times, and then the crowd swallows him. I push back towards the surging mob, desperate to get to where I last saw him, but the wave of bodies sweeps me along and I can’t escape. My only hope is that he can’t either. That he, like me, is just a bit of flotsam carried in the current.

You’ll find him at the bottom. In the atrium. He’s fine. He’ll be fine.

I say it like a mantra. I stumble as we hit the landing but the tightly packed bodies keep me from falling. God help anyone that does—they’ll be trampled for sure.

He won’t fall. He’s fine. He’ll be fine.

I will find Noah.

Hogan and Isabelle will find Mr. Wilson and tell the police. Someone will stop Resolution.

We have to.

Because anything else is unthinkable.

**NOAH**

*Look, sire, the herd is on the move.*

*Odd.*

*Mufasa! Quick! Stampede in the gorge—SIMBAS down there!*

The wildebeests keep running, running, running.

Spilling into the canyon.

*Zazu, help me!*

Alice!

Where is Alice?

Why won’t she stop the movie?

Stop! Stop!

Make it stop.

I don’t like this part.

*Hold on, Simba!*

Skip ahead.

Skip. Skip ahead.

Make it Hakuna Matata.

But no matter how hard I hit It plays on.

And I am caught up with the wildebeests.

**XANDER**

*May 12, 2016*

*Social Autopsy #84*

*Event: Max’s Secret*

I should be writing a Mission Log, but Max told me this one was Top Secret. And since I don’t really understand what just happened, I thought I’d do a Social Autopsy instead.

I gave Max all the supplies I’d got, just like he asked. He never even said thanks (and it took a long time to count 550 ball bearings at Home Depot).

He wouldn't let me help him. He didn’t even let me come in his garage.

“I thought we were a team,” I said.

And he laughed.

"Go home, Xander,” he said, like I was a little kid, when actually I am a whole grade older. "Go back to your comics.”

So I did.

I don’t know why Max didn’t want me around. I wasn’t going to tell anyone. I wouldn’t spoil the Top Secret surprise. Didn’t he know that?

Maybe I needed to prove it to him. Maybe I had to earn his trust, like Mrs. O’Neill says. After all, #2 on the Friendship Checklist says: friends do kind things for each other.

What would Max really like? What one thing would he most want?

Actually, I could think of two. I saw them on the poster in his garage that listed Stan Lee’s top 100 comics. Max said he had read them all...all except for two:

* *X-Men* #1
* *The Corning of the Avengers #1*

Max said he’d never get his hands on those. They were first issues. Even John Banks didn’t have copies, and Comic Corner had almost everything.

But I knew exactly where they were.

I ran all the way back to Max’s house and burst into the garage through the side door. Max was soldering the Magneto helmet. All the other stuff I’d brought was spread all over his bench, along with the remote for my X-Jet. The one he’d destroyed.

I asked him why he kept the remote. He looked up at me. I didn’t even need a photo to recognize his face was angry. So I handed him the paper bag.

Max gave me a dirty look, but then he looked inside it and said, “Holy crap!”

At first, I did not know if that was good or bad. “Crap” is like that.

Then he pulled out the first issues of X-Men and Avengers and got really excited. It made me happy to see Max happy. Mrs. O’Neill was right. Again.

“You like them?” I asked, even though I knew he did. I wanted him to say it.

“Like them? This is fricken’ awesome!” He slipped one out of the sleeve and started flipping through it. It’s okay to do that. Just not in the store.

“They were my dad’s...but I want you to have them.”

I’d debated it all the way to Max’s house. What if Dad came home? What if he wanted them? But the look on Max’s face told me I’d made the right decision. It had been six years. Dad wasn’t coming for the comics.

Or for me.

Max asked if I was sure, said they were worth a fortune. And I realized that even if my dad didn’t want something, it didn’t make it any less valuable. Or any less important to someone else. So I pointed to the poster on the wall over his workbench: ‘Too Comics to Read Before You Die,” and I told him,

“Now you can finish.”

I hate leaving things incomplete. Like sandwiches. Or Lego Death Stars. Or books. No matter how much I hate something, I have to get to the end.

Max didn’t say anything. He just stared at me. Like, more staring than Mrs. O’Neill would find appropriate. He seemed sad, and I wondered if I had made a mistake. Maybe he didn’t want the comics. Maybe I’d just made things even worse.

I turned to go.

Max asked me if I wanted to finish. His voice sounded strange, like he had something stuck in his throat, and he said, “You with me to the end, X- Man?”

I nodded so hard I thought my head might rattle.

He picked up a red gym bag. It said "FitLife” on the side in white letters. My mom has one too. She got it free for joining the gym, and she didn’t even have to go to keep it. It hangs, empty, in our hall closet. But this one was heavy. It was full of something.

“Cherry bombs, paint guns, the usual,” he said as he gave it to me. Then he turned back to the workbench. “I’ll be bringing our secret weapon. The Special F.X.”

Our secret weapon? I couldn’t believe it. We were doing it. Me and Max.

Together.

“Just bring that to the atrium tomorrow at 1:15. Right at the start of period 4,” he said over his shoulder as he went back to his soldering. “I’m relying on you.”

I told him I would. I’d do anything he asked just to be a part of anything he did.

“We’ll see, X-Man,” he said, as I left him in the smoke and shadows. “We’ll see.”

00:05:50

**ISABELLE**

The atrium is packed with students and teachers. I don’t have to hear the buzz about chains on the front doors or being trapped to know what’s going on. Alice is right. This has been Maxwell’s plan all along.

Hogan drives through the crowd like a snowplow. I try to keep up, but people keep pulling on my arms.

“Isabelle what’s going on?”

“Isabelle, what should we...?”

“Isabelle, where do we...?”

Faceless hands grasp at me as I try to run, but can’t. I lose sight of Hogan. The space is closing in behind.

“Isabelle! Izzy!” People keep calling my name. Pulling at my arms. My shoulders.

“Just stay calm!” I screech as I drive forward. I have to get to Mr. Wilson. Now. “Everyone—just STAY calm! Everything is going to be all right!”

But they don’t believe me. How could they?

I don’t believe it myself.

**HOGAN**

Wilson is standing just outside the main office. Beside him is Officer Scott, the cop assigned to our school and, unfortunately, the same cop that arrested me for stealing the bike. By the time I reach them, my heart is pounding from the effort of pushing through the crowds. I can barely catch my breath.

“Hogan?” Wilson’s eyes go wide as he looks at me half-crazed and half- naked. “What the hell are you—?”

“It’s not a fire!” I gasp. “It’s not a prank!”

Officer Scott moves to intercept me. “Easy, Hogan. Easy.”

I shrug him off and push for Wilson. He has to listen. Why won’t he listen?

“Maxwell—” I gasp. “He’s trying to—”

A look passes between the men, one I know all too well—suspicion. Scott grabs me, then, wrenches my arms back in some cop-hold. I could break free. Easily. But I don’t.

"What do you know about Maxwell?” Scott asks.

“There’s a bomb!” I say. “Maxwell is driving everyone into the atrium because that’s where he’s set a bomb!”

Officer Scott radios to dispatch, but he keeps a firm grip on my wrist.

Wilson gets on his walkie-talkie. “Mr. Dean, I need those bolt cutters at the front doors, NOW!” He yells to a few nearby teachers. “Mr. Miller. Get Ms. Beckman and take the students through the staff room exit.”

The two teachers start herding kids two by two, like Noah’s ark, through the door and hall leading to the staff room. There’s no way all 1,500 of us wall get through before Maxwell rains down his next surprise.

“We’re running out of time!” I say.

“Just tell me, son. Tell me where it is,” Wilson says to me.

I look up at the ceiling where the Doves of Peace hang from the skylight. Six huge sculptures of flying birds hang level with the second-floor windows that ring the atrium. Some art class made them as a remembrance for every student who’s died since our school opened. One for Randy, too, I suppose.

I’d avoided seeing it all this time.

I look away, not wanting to think about how many doves we’ll need if we don’t find that bomb.

I’d hoped Resolution would be more obvious. That we’d get to the atrium and see some big package on the picnic tables, some huge disco bomb just hanging there, like in his drawing. Hell, I could find Where’s Weirdo? in every one of his pages. Why couldn’t I see it now? Surely, he is here somewhere, too. Unless—hope sparks inside me—unless he’s already been caught.

“Did the cops catch him? Maxwell?” I blurt.

“Look, Hogan.” Scott moves in front of my face. He means business. “No more messing around. You are going to tell us. Right now. Where did you guys plant the bomb?”

I look away.

*He thinks you're in on it. That you told him outta guilt. And that you're withholding outta shame. Ohhh yeah, Hogan! Your loser rep just keeps getting better and better!*

But I don’t blame them for thinking that. Why wouldn’t they?

“Hogan,” Wilson says, “this isn’t just another prank. Not this time. We’re talking life and death here.” He waves his walkie-talkie at the mob of kids. “Look at them. Look!”

I scan the crowd of terrified faces. Girls crying and hugging each other. Trembling grade 7 and 8s. And Alice, like a bug-eyed grade 7 herself, lost and alone in the middle of it as she screams Noah’s name.

“You don’t want to see them hurt, do you?”

I shake my head. Of course not.

“Just tell me where it is,” he goes, “and everything will be okay.” But it won’t. Because I can’t.

**ALICE**

“Noah! NOAH!” I scream until I’m hoarse. I’ll never find him this way. Not in this mayhem.

I scan the wired crowd and spot Hogan talking to Mr. Wilson over on the side. At least Mr. Wilson knows now. We did our job. It’s out of our hands. Finally.

But Hogan doesn’t seem relieved. In fact, he looks almost defeated.

I push my way towards him. Maybe he’s seen Noah. Maybe he’ll help me find him. But the truth is, I just want to be near him. By him. To knowthat even in this crowd of hundreds, a thousand frantic people...we aren’t alone.

The mob opens for a second, just as Officer Scott steps up in Hogan’s face and Hogan slouches. In a flash, I see the whole story, read it in the slump of his shoulders. They blame Hogan. Of course they do. He is involved, but not in the way they think. He knows way more than an outsider should, so, naturally, they assume he is in on it. That he is the unknown second shooter. Heck, I even accused him of it—why wouldn’t they?

I push through the crowd, eager to reach them and set things right. Hogan won’t do it—not to save himself, anyway. Because, if I know anything about Hogan King, it’s the story he tells himself—that he has to suffer, because he deserves it.

**ISABELLE**

In the thick of the crowd, I spot Hogan on the far side. He’s talking to Wilson. Seconds later, the fire alarm stops and everyone cheers.

It’s over. Thank God, it’s over. But my stomach sinks when I see Mr. Wilson’s shocked expression. He hasn’t turned it off. It isn’t over. Clearly, this is another part of Maxwell’s plan.

"Hail Mutants!”

The voice comes over the P.A. and echoes through the atrium. I glance through the window into the office. Empty. No one is at the phone used to make our announcements.

From one of the second-floor windows a beam of light projects an image on the opposite wall. A huge head fills the space meant for our grad mural, the one we painted over—whiting out the vandalism, our way of “taking it back.” With the flick of a switch, he’s stolen it from us again.

A red helmet blocks most of the face, its sides cutting in like metal sideburns around his smirk and framing the eyes in a frown: Magneto. I look at the eyes, those eyes: Maxwell. Names I’d never heard until thirty minutes ago. Names I’ll never forget.

Everyone turns to watch, jostles closer for a better view. Just like he hoped. This is it. It’s happening.

Only I don’t know what to do but stand and watch.

The shot pulls back to show him in his purple cape, standing, hands on hips like some villain. So cliché. A bedsheet hangs behind him, painted with that damned circled red X. Some kids whistle and clap. Others heckle. They don’t get it. They’re so relieved to see him, to realize it’s not a real fire. They just assume it’s another prank.

“I have accomplished mission after mission,” Max continues, “and still you doubt—no, you slander the Brotherhood! For that, you have been punished. I have locked you down. I’ve smoked you out,” he says, raising a fist. “I am a god among insects. Do not doubt my powers.”

Mr. Dean passes by me and slows to watch the video that seems to have mesmerized everyone.

“Hurry!” I shout, snapped out of my trance by the sight of two bolt cutters in his hands. I grab his second pair and push past the students towards the doors. “We’re running out of time. Cut them, NOW!”

Fortunately, the video has pulled most of the crowd away from the exit. Otherwise, I doubt I’d have been to able get close enough to cut the chains. I start on one of the thick chain links looped around the handles, but it’s harder than I thought. The blades bite into the dull metal and stick.

“But first,” Max’s voice echoes from the atrium, “let me reveal my true identity.”

The crowd goes wild. Fans or not, they want to know who he is. After months of guessing names, and debating clues, all those conspiracy theorists who accused the rugby team, some dropout, rival schools, or even Mr. Boyle, the disgruntled supply teacher, now they will finally get their answer. The crowd roars and I glance back to see Maxwell remove his helmet. The roar subsides into murmuring. Clearly, they are as unimpressed as we were when we first saw Maxwell’s face in the yearbook.

“Who the hell is that?” someone yells.

“That’s the guy?”

“Wait...he’s not the rugby captain.”

“It just another copycat!” someone calls out.

People boo and the crowd turns. This isn’t who they want. He can’t possibly be the infamous Magneto, the mastermind behind all those crazy pranks. This guy? Not in a million years.

“We are all mutants, really,” Maxwell’s recorded voice continues. I wonder where he really is. If he hasn’t already lit the fuse to the bomb, all this booing and jeering wall totally push him over the edge.

I squeeze the bolt cutters’ arms but I haven’t the strength to make it cut through the links.

“Try the locks,” Mr. Dean suggests from the far end of the doors as he snaps one loose and unravels the chain. It falls to the ground with a clank. But there are still two more locks to go. Maxwell knew what he was doing. Probably knew how long it would take to cut through three locks on each of the three sets of doors. But maybe, just maybe he didn’t know there’d be two of us cutting.

A quick glance at the bottom of the video tells me time is running out. The video has thirty seconds left, if that. And I wonder if that means that’s all we have, too.

“Hurry, Mr. Dean—something really bad is going to happen at the end, I just know it. We have to get everyone out!”

“Soon you humans who think you are superior will learn,” Maxwell’s voice says. “The hard way.”

Then the screen goes black.

00:04:10

**HOGAN**

The video stops and something buzzes past our heads.

Wilson curses. “Not that goddammed plane again.”

Only it’s not a plane—this one’s a drone. Four arms, each with a propeller. The flying X hovers so *we* can all get a good look. I remember the drawing and see the barrel of the gun duct-taped underneath. A paintgun, I think, but I can’t be sure.

“Get down!” I yell, as it swoops low over the crowd, but no one listens.

A few hands grasp for it as it skims overhead. One guy even climbs up on his buddy’s shoulders to catch it, eager to be the guy that took it down.

But it takes him down first.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

Point blank. Three direct hits. The guy falls back into the crowd grasping at the red that splatters across his chest.

People scream.

“It’s a paintball gun!” I yell, now that I know for sure. But what they see and hear tells them different. Shooting. Red smears. Hysteria.

The drone circles around for another pass and sweeps, rapid-firing as it rims the panicked crowd scrambling below. A dozen people on the outer edges cry out and fall, and the place erupts. Hundreds of them, sure they’re in a war zone, rush the exits, like a manic school of fish trying to escape the shark. Some make it to the staff room door, or the front door that Mr. Dean unlocked. But the mob clogs the exits, pressing Izzy and the old janitor up against the still-chained doors, and in the madness, no one seems to be getting out.

About ten cops come running from the far hall at the sound of gunfire. They appear on the other side as Officer Scott joins with them, yelling instructions no one hears.

I grab Wilson’s arm. “It’s only paint.” Not that it won’t sting or bruise. It might even take out an eye. But it won’t kill them. At least, the drone won’t. But knowing Maxwell, it’s just a distraction from what he’s got planned next.

“Look for Maxwell!” I shout. “He’s here somewhere—he has to be. That drone is remote-controlled. If we find him, maybe we can stop him.”

Wilson doesn’t ask how I know this or why. At this point, I’m all he’s got. He nods and runs to the cops.

The crowd panics, crushing up against the picnic tables scattered throughout the atrium—nerd-feeders, I call them, because they attract a flock of geeks every spare and lunch. I hate the atrium. And not just because of the nerds, or those doves of the dead. It’s the windows. Three stories of them ringing the space—it always makes me feel like I’m in a fishbowl.

Of course! The windows! What better way to watch his sick plan unfold?

I scan the glass.

Come on, Maxwell. I know you’re watching. Show yourself, you coward.

But all the windows are dark. Their blinds still closed from lockdown.

All but one.

A flicker of movement catches my eye. Second floor, right above the mural. Right across from the projector.

Gotcha!

I meet Officer Scott’s eyes across the atrium and point up at the room as I bolt for the stairs.

“It’s him! It’s Magneto!” people scream. Only they’re not pointing at the second-floor window.

The crowd backs away from the empty stairwell in front of me, where a guy staggers forward, a dark shadow against the sunlight streaming in through the stairwell windows. Something on his head keeps me from seeing his face. Even his body is lost in the outline of his cloak.

Four officers burst from the crowd behind me, guns drawn.

“Stop! This is the police. Do not move!” Their voices echo in the sudden, terrified silence.

But the guy, ignoring them, takes a step and stops. Starts and stops. He slowly raises one hand.

My mind races. Maybe it is Maxwell. Maybe that second-floor shadow was Xander. Maybe the turncoat turned again.

“On the floor!” a policeman shouts, the others edging closer. “On the floor, NOW!”

But the guy doesn’t listen. It’s like the cops are not even there.

Maybe this final showdown is all part of Maxwell’s plan. I watch his hand rise from the shadow of his cape. I know he’s gripping something, even before I see it clearly.

A gun?

The trigger?

The bomb?

“Drop it!” the cop yells. “This is your last warning. DROP YOUR WEAPON!” But the guy doesn’t. He lifts that hand until it catches the light.

Everything freezes, like one of Xander’s photographs, and I see it all in stark black-and-white:

the weapon—

its foot-long shaft—

a rectangle at one end.

And I bolt. I run at him full tilt. Because it isn’t Maxwell or Xander. And that isn’t a weapon. Or a trigger. Or a gun. Just a broken piece of broom handle, labeled with the one word I hear Alice scream as I hit him. As a gun fires—

“NOOOOOAH!”

**ALICE**

Hogan, running full tilt, collides with my brother just as the shot explodes, and both of them fall to the ground. Neither moves.

My God, what if...? What if...?

My mind goes numb. This is not a story I want to imagine. Not a reality I can even contemplate.

“NOAH!” I scream again. His body lies motionless in the skewed rectangle of light that spills into the atrium. The mangy fur of his cloak. The bright orange of his hat still covering his face. The dust winking in the shaft of sunlight. Numb-brained, my eyes absorb it all, record every vivid detail.

I have to get to him. To Hogan, deathly still on the other side. I elbow my way through the stunned bystanders.

Gun still drawn, an officer circles them, kicking away the weapon, and it slides towards me as I approach. The broom handle, the stupid broom handle that might have cost their lives. Two other officers roughly roll Noah over onto his stomach, kneel on him, and wrench his arms behind his back to secure them in handcuffs. Finally, one of them yanks off Noah’s hat and I start to cry.

Noah. Poor Noah, with his hair plastered to his sweaty head, his face streaked with tears, and his eyes, wide and wild in the sunlight’s glare. He is terrified. More terrified than I’ve ever seen him.

And he is alive, thank God. He’s alive. I shove my way through the crowd eager to reach him.

Another officer moves towards Hogan, kneels by him and checks his pulse. Even as he presses, I feel mine stop. He unclips his radio and requests paramedics. But through it all, Hogan never moves.

"Hogan!” I yell, veering towards him. I fall to my knees beside where he lies on his back. His eyes are closed. A hole five inches below his collarbone bubbles and oozes a dark red that puddles beside him. Blood—not paint. "Oh my God—Hogan?”

"Here.” The officer takes my hand, presses it against the wound that pulses hot and slick. I want to pull away. To run away. I want to be sick. "Keep the pressure on it,” he says to me. “Can you do that?”

I nod. Swallow, but my mouth is dry. “Is he going to be all—?”

“YEAAaAAARrgggh!!” Noah thrashes and snarls like a wild animal as the officers wrestle him to his feet. His face is grimaced, his neck bulging with effort.

“Stop!” I cry. “You’re hurting him!” But I can’t get up. I can’t leave Hogan. I can’t help Noah.

“Wait! No!” Isabelle pushes and shoves through the stunned crowd to Noah’s side. "He’s autistic; he’s autistic. He doesn’t understand!”

The officer seems confused. The furry suit, the hat, the dramatic entrance. Surely, this guy is in on it.

“He’s innocent!” she says, her eyes frantic. "We have to get everyone out. NOW!”

Isabelle is right. The danger is far from over. Many students made it through the one open door on the other side of the atrium. Maybe even Xander. But hundreds more still press at the exit or gather around us for a better look, at Hogan—oh God, Hogan!

“It’s going to be okay,” I say to him, to myself, to Noah. To anyone that might be listening. “You’re going to be okay.”

I glance around the atrium knowing that the bomb could be hidden anywhere, could explode at any moment. Could kill every one of us. Hope and time are running out. Seeping through my fingers, like Hogan’s blood.

And I just can’t stop it.

**HOGAN**

My chest is on fire. My legs numb.

Oh my God—I’ve been shot!

The thudding in my ears slows.

Am I dying?

For the second time today, I ask myself that same question. Only this time, I am shot. I am bleeding. I am injured. I don’t know how bad.

*You look like hell, Hulkster.*

It’s Randy.

He is sitting beside me, glinting in and out of the shaft of sunlight like he is only dust. He smiles. But this time, it isn’t mocking. He seems glad to see me.

Randy? My mouth doesn’t move. Am I dying?

*Randy shrugs. It's up to you.*

I’m sorry, I say. I’m so sorry about everything.

*I know. He nods slowly. It was an accident. It wasn't your fault.*

And though the burning in my chest continues, the heavy weight has lifted. He flickers.

What’s it like where you are? I ask. Are you okay?

*It's like a winning touchdown that lasts forever. He smiles and flickers again. Don't worry about me, I'm good. We're good. And I'll be waiting for you, whenever it's time. But I'd say you got a few more plays to go, Hulkster. You're going to—*

“—be okay,” Alice says next to me. Her voice pulls me like a lifeline. And my mind reaches for it, my heart holds onto it with whatever I’ve got left.

I look back. Randy is gone, but through the beam of sunlight I see the birds. His bird. And I see something else. A guy. Shimmying from a second-floor window across the wire that secures the big white bird to the wall. He’s on the wire scrunching and stretching, inching along it like a caterpillar. Making his way to the center of the flock where a red ball dangles.

I grip Alice’s hand.

00:00:58

**ISABELLE**

The police don’t let Noah go, but they seem to ease up on him.

Hogan is sprawled on the floor. Alice is beside him, holding his hand. She has her other hand pressed tight against his chest. There’s blood—a lot of blood. It’s spilling through her fingers. Puddling on the floor. But I make myself kneel down beside them.

“Guys, we have to get out of here.”

“He can’t move until the paramedics come,” Alice says. And I can tell she means that she won’t either.

He’s lost a lot of blood. How much is too much?

Hogan mumbles as he stares off, eyes glazed.

"Just relax,” I say, but he lets go of Alice’s hand and slowly points up at the Doves of Peace, where something among the large birds catches my eye.

“Xander?”

It is. He has somehow made it across the wire and he’s straddling one of the birds high overhead. A good thirty feet in the air.

What the hell is he doing?

The flying X is not shooting any more—maybe it’s out of paint bullets—but it’s buzzing him, diving and clipping at Xander’s head. He ducks and swats at it, slipping sideways on the bird as he loses his grip. The sculpture sways dangerously.

“Careful!” I shout.

The plane buzzes by again. I may not know what Xander’s up to, but whatever it is, clearly Maxwell is trying to stop him. Then I see it: a red shape among the birds. It’s hanging on a long wire just out of Xander’s reach. It’s the Magneto helmet from the video.

The bomb!

But can Xander get to it? In time? And even if he does, does he know how to defuse it?

I look across the atrium. Hundreds of students cram the exit. All of them, all of us, right beneath a bomb that could go off any second. Could fire hundreds of bullets. In all directions. Could kill us all.

Alice and Hogan meet my eyes and we look back up at Xander Watt—the only one who can save us.

Xander pumps his legs, swinging the bird back and forth. The Tank, still around his neck, clatters against the wire. He’s going to kill himself before he gets anywhere near that helmet. I worked on a dove back in grade 10 Art class. Randy King’s. They are just fiberglass frames covered with papier- mâché, secured to the ceiling and walls with wire. Wire meant to bear the weight of one bird. Not a person. Especially not one swinging from it.

I expect each swing to be the last. The one where the sculpture splits, the wire snaps, or the bolts just rip right out of the wall. Total disaster—for Xander. For all of us.

But on the next pump, Xander springs off the bird and lunges for the helmet. The left cable of his bird snaps as he leaves and the bird drops, swooping towards the right wall. Even as the dove plunges, I hope it will pull up at that last second. But it rams the wall, hard, its head breaking into splinters, before it crashes to the floor.

Xander hangs from the helmet’s wire, spinning high above the atrium like a circus performer while the drone attacks.

But this isn’t a show. There’s no net. And that isn’t a helmet. It’s a bomb.

Worst of all, time is running out.

“Forget the drone!” I yell up at him from where I kneel.

“Focus, Xander,” Alice shouts. “You can do it!”

Ignoring the drone, Xander rolls upwards, and wraps his feet around the wire. Dangling by his legs, he starts yanking at the front of the helmet. He’s tugging, tearing, trying to pull something from the eye sockets. Then, with one final heave, it comes free—

—and so does he.

The wire securing the helmet to the ceiling snaps and Xander drops. Thirty feet. Three seconds, if that, but it all happens in slo-mo:

His right arm windmilling—

his legs kicking as he tries to tread air—

the Tank floating just above him, strap slack as it falls—

and tucked like a football in the crook of his left arm: Magneto’s helmet

red metal shining as it passes through the ray of light—

the bomb drops—

and Xander falls—

—just like the dove.

Alice throws herself over Hogan, covering their heads with her arm. But I just watch it all fall. Horrified. I wait for it to explode.

There is no blast. Just a sickening—CRACK!—as Xander hits.

He lies, not ten feet away, on the atrium floor beside the broken dove. His legs splayed. Head turned away. He doesn’t move. No one does. The Tank is shattered beside him. Its film unspools, exposing its brown guts. All of his pictures, his stupid pictures, dying in the light. He has that damn helmet still gripped in his arm. Through the ragged hole torn in its face falls a thin stream of ball bearings.

*Click.*

*Click.*

They hit the marble floor. Each one the sound of a life spared. Xander’s right hand still holds whatever he ripped from the helmet. Wires. A digital display.

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click.*

The small, silver balls glint in the light and then roll into darkness, as I watch the red numbers count down.

00:03

00:02

00:01

On the second floor, in the room above the mural, a light flashes as one final shot rings out.

Then all is silent.

May 14, 2016

**‘On a rampage,’ say peers**

*By Todd Ryder Staff Writer*

BIRCHTOWN—A 17-year-old student involved in yesterday’s shooting at St. Francis Xavier High School has "always had anger issues,” classmates said.

Multiple sources confirm this ex-linebacker was well known for his temper, arrests for drug use and theft, and antisocial behavior.

One 14-year-old student said she’s “not surprised the cops shot him,” while countless others stated that “the Hulk,” as he is commonly known, was “naked and on a rampage” through the school only moments before the “police took him down as he attacked one of the high-needs kids.”

One grade 9 student reported seeing four seniors fleeing him on the third floor as they escaped the boys’ washroom, where he may have held them captive.

In interviews, students agreed that they thought the incident at the school was “just another X-Men prank,” an ongoing tradition this year at St. Francis Xavier. Whether “the Hulk” is the mastermind behind these X-Men stunts of false alarms, vandalism, and social disturbances remains to be seen. But parents, students, and administration all agree that it had escalated far beyond mere high school pranks.

“It’s those damn video games,” said one mother. Others blame heavy metal music, violent comics, and lack of funding for certain medications. Whatever the influence, one thing remains certain: the school community demands action.

“I don’t care if he’s under age. He’s taken it to the next level,” said one concerned parent. “It’s time the justice system does the same. And if they don’t, I will. Someone has got to teach this kid a lesson.”

Speculations persist concerning the teenager’s involvement in a previous altercation at the school in 2014 that resulted in the death of his brother. Charges in that case were not laid.

Last night, masked paintballers vandalized the teen’s home. His parents were unavailable for comment.

Regional Police also refused to comment on either the student’s previous arrests or their investigation into this shooting.

Several students were admitted to hospital with injuries sustained during the attack. *Two* remain in critical condition, and one is confirmed dead.

**ISABELLE**

The school shuts down for a week—and so do I. After filling out police reports and interview after interview at the station, I got into my bed and stayed there. They’d interviewed me for hours. Separated us, so we’d keep our stories straight, I suppose. But it was only me and Alice. Noah doesn’t speak. And Hogan and Xander—who knows if they will speak again?

I stay in bed—but I don’t remember sleeping. I’m just replaying those scenes. That day. Those sixty minutes.

Was it only sixty minutes?

Images loop through my mind, like a slideshow of Xander’s demented photos: Xander—sprawled on the atrium floor. Hogan’s blood all over Alice’s hands. Noah freaking out. Smoke. Chains. Ambulance lights. And all the while the alarm still ringing in my ears. At least, until...BANG! the gun explodes—and I wake again.

My parents let me be, at first. One day rolls into another. I don’t eat or shower or care.

"Fresh air,” my mother says, finally barging in and pulling open the curtains. Sunlight burns my eyes. "That’s what you need.” She moves to the clutter on my desk. Pins a ribbon back on my bulletin board. Starts picking up my pencils. Organizing. Obsessing. Fixing.

I don’t speak. She’ll never get it. Never get me.

My mother stops rearranging my pen caddy and instead sits on the bed beside me. She looks around at the mess that is my room and sighs.

I close my eyes—just waiting for her to tell me I’d feel better if I took a shower or cleaned my room.

"Do you want another Tylenol?” She rests the back of her hand against my forehead but there’s no fever. “Why don’t you call Brianne?” She pauses. “Her mom said she was in the office when it happened. She’s probably upset.”

“Who cares?” I mumble.

My mother looks around the room, unsure of what to do or say next. She never comes in here. I can tell she feels uncomfortable.

“Can I get you anything?” she asks, because she has no idea how to help. For a moment, I wonder if a real mom would know. If Teresa, my DREX mom, would know. My mother doesn’t do well with this kind of nurturing—these kinds of needs.

“Juice...or toast or something...” She trails off into that awkward silence again.

If I wanted a ride or a new phone, if I needed money for school, she’d be all over that. But I don’t even know what I need. So how can I ask for it?

“Is it...Darren?” she asks, her voice unusually gentle.

My eyes fill up. I look away.

“Did you guys have a fight?”

And then I see those pictures again—Darren and Bri. My Darren. My Bri. I feel sick.

“He cheated on me,” I say, my voice low. "With Bri.” I wasn’t planning on thinking about it ever again. Least of all by telling her. The last thing I need is a pep talk about other fish, better friends, and new beginnings at Queen’s —a place she still thinks I am going.

I close my eyes and rest my forearm across them, not wanting to see her disappointment in me as I add, “...And I didn’t get into Queen’s.”

Hot tears seep out and roll back into my ears.

But instead of trying to cheer me up, or push me forward, instead of trying to pick me up and dust me off, instead of completely freaking out over my scars—which I just realize she has now seen—my mother does the one thing I never expected. She lies beside me. She wraps me in her arms. She kisses the top of my head, greasy hair and all. But she doesn’t say a word.

We lie like that—and I cry. Like, snot-sobbing ugly-cry, until there’s nothing left. And my mom cries too. But she never lets go. She just holds me tight, tight enough so that I can finally let go.

And that great big breath I’ve been holding for so long, years really—the one that makes my heart ache and shoulders tense, the one that makes my arms bleed—at last, it’s released.

**NOAH**

RIIINNNG!

The lunch bell sings four seconds long.

Kids get up and go.

And Mr. Dean and me

Sweep side to side.

All the way across.

And back.

Across.

And back.

Clearing crumbs and crusts

Spreading

quiet

clean

Like soft, flannel sheets. Swish.

Swish.

Swish.

On the shiny square tiles.

It’s nice.

**ALICE**

They let us back in after a week. The police wanted to be sure there were no other Maxwell surprises left behind. They say they got them all. But that doesn’t help me. I still jump every time a locker slams. Panic in the crowds and stairwells and bathroom stalls. And even though I know they cleaned up the broken dove, and ball bearings, and...blood, I avoid the atrium altogether. A cold has settled in my gut, a trembling knot that ties me up and holds me hostage. Even now.

Fear.

It wakes me in the night. Hunts me in the day. I can’t even write any more. It’s as if my imagination has been poisoned—my greatest gift has become my worst enemy, conjuring threats and dangers everywhere. Every noise. Every person. Every story.

I envy Noah. Being back in school, back in his routine, is exactly what he needs. Noah lives in the moment, and probably doesn’t even remember those ones I’ll never forget.

Stories about Hogan spread far and wide and, of course, the media ran with them. Journalism is supposed to be based on fact—not rumors. But the reporters were too lazy, the sources too eager to gossip, and the readers too gullible. Some even blamed Mr. and Mrs. King for “what their son has done.” That isn’t journalism, at least not the kind of journalism Ms. Carter taught us. It’s gossip. Sensationalism. Hysterical fiction.

Vandals struck the Kings’ home with paint guns in retaliation. Worst of all, I heard it wasn't just kids. And by the time the official news release came from the police station—the one accusing Maxwell Steinberg and praising Hogan King as the hero who got us out, who alerted the principal, and who saved my brother—the King home had already been vandalized three times.

It shocks me how easily people believe the worst, how quick they are to point fingers and lay blame, and, sadly, how silent when at last they learn the truth.

Gran brought the Kings some baking that first week. Bite-sized support iced with butter cream. Typical Gran. I am glad she did, though. Because I wanted, I needed to hear how Hogan was doing. Not gossip or rumors. I needed to know he was going to be okay. His parents told Gran that he was out of the woods. The wound was healing and he’d need physio, but he’d be fine. I cried when she told me.

But Gran also baked for Ms. Steinberg. That, I still have a hard time with. I feel betrayed, in a way. I’m mad that she did it. Mad about a lot of things, I think, as we take the truck together to do Pet Therapy at the children’s hospital.

“Why did you bake for Ms. Steinberg? This whole mess—it’s all her son’s fault,” I finally say. “He tried to kill us, Gran.”

Did she need reminding?

“Alice May Waters,” Gran warns, and I know by her tone I'll not be getting any sympathy from her. “Don’t tell me you’ve been swept up in their hate. You’re a pitchfork away from joining the angry mob we saw on the news.”

Once Maxwell was named in that police report, most people blamed his mom. Expert after expert and every neighbor interviewed on *The National's* coverage was adamant that Maxwell’s broken home life was the real problem. His mom’s single parenting, her low income and lack of education, her drinking and boyfriends. They splattered all the dirt they could find on that family and, like those readers and viewers, I agreed.

“Ms. Steinberg needs understanding, now more than ever,” Gran says. “No, she’s not perfect. What family is?” She shakes her head. “I can just imagine what those ‘experts’ and ‘neighbors’ might have to say about ours!”

Gran is right. Like the saying goes: “Don’t judge a book by the chapter you walk into.” But I seem to do it all the time with people. I read a little bit of their lives and think I know7 them. Or worse yet, judge them entirely by the cover. We all do it, I guess. We buy into whatever story makes us feel better about our own. Make Maxwell a monster. Point fingers at the school system, or the medical system, or the family that failed him. Blame someone else. That way, we remain blameless.

But we’re not. Not really. Because, the more I think about it, the more I realize that every one of us is a part of Maxwell’s story. Even me.

“I know you’re not a hateful person,” Gran says, her voice softer now. “You’re still scared. Understandably so.”

She knows me so well. “I just want to crawl under my comforter and stay there for a while,” I admit. “A long while.”

“I know, love.” Her hand reaches over and pats mine. “I felt the same after your grandfather passed. Couldn’t imagine a life without him. Just the thought of trying to run the farm alone terrified me. And look at me now, driving the truck!”

I smile. Grampa always drove. All those years, I never even thought Gran could. She had a license, but she'd lost her nerve—so we took driver’s ed together.

“If you face your fears, they lose their power,” she explains. “I know you’re afraid, Alice. But that’s why I make you go to school. And do your chores. And volunteer.”

“But I’ve already got my mandatory volunteer hours,” I argue. “Couldn’t we have missed this, at least?”

“Mandatory volunteering? Now there’s an oxymoron,” Gran teases. “Besides, playing with the dogs is no work for you. And wee Ben would never forgive you for missing Pet Day.”

I laugh. Ben sure wouldn't. His mom said the dog visits are the highlight of his week.

“Trust me,” Gran says, “the best healing comes through helping others.”

When we get to the hospital, I leave Gran and Noah with their dogs and head for the wing I’m visiting today. Buster squirms in my arms. For a puppy, he sure is a handful. But I know the patients enjoy the puppies the most.

As usual, the kids are waiting in the playroom for us. The regulars know our schedule, and as soon as we arrive, the room explodes in squeals and barks. And then I see him.

Hogan.

He sits on a small plastic chair across from the TV, holding a game controller in his left hand. A giant in Lilliput. He’s playing against Ben, a regular here back for more chemo. But Ben bails on him and the game to chase after Buster. Hogan is wearing a muscle shirt and PJ bottoms, a sling over his right arm, and a growing smile. But it isn’t directed at Buster. Or Ben. Or the kids playing and laughing. It’s aimed in my direction. I think.

I look behind, just to be sure, but there’s no one there.

And that chill I’ve carried these past days, that cold knot of fear in my gut, just loosens and melts away. Warmth spreads up my chest and across my cheeks. Hogan is okay. He’s doing better.

Best of all, Hogan King is smiling. A great big grin.

And it’s for me.

**HOGAN**

"Hey,” I go.

"Hey.” She sits in Ben’s empty chair.

There’s an awkward pause and we blurt out together, "How’s your—?”

She smiles. “You first.”

“How’s Noah?”

“Good, now that he’s back in his routine. Great, actually.” She pauses. “What about you? How’s your...?” She looks at my chest. “How’s your gunshot?”

I snort. “Gunshot. I know, it sounds crazy, doesn’t it?” I glance at the bandage. "The doctors hope I’ll get full use of my arm when it heals, but I’ll have a scar—a bullet wound.” I smirk. “As if I wasn’t badass before. I’m, like, a neck tattoo away from full-on thug.”

“As if.” She looks right at me.

“Yeah, well the newspapers—”

“Who cares what they said? You can’t believe everything you read, you know.”

I laugh. “One more reason to avoid reading.”

Buster comes and flops on my feet. I bend down and pet him. His ears are like velvet flaps. He leans against me and licks my hand.

“He likes you,” Alice says.

“I always wanted a dog but we could never have one because my brother has allergies.”

Had allergies.

“Speaking of brothers,” she pauses, “I never thanked you for saying Noah. If you hadn’t been there...”

I shrug, unsure of what to say, because it wasn’t even like I chose to save him. It just sorta happened.

“You’re a hero, Hogan.”

I look up at her. “A lot of people would disagree with you about that.”

“Well...” her eyes glisten a bit, “fun fact...you’re my hero.” She blushes and looks away, but I hope it’s not for long. Because maybe if she keeps looking at me like that, maybe I might believe it someday too.

Xander, he’s the real hero. I think of him hang in the ICU up on the third floor. He still hasn’t woken up. I wonder if he will. I wonder what will happen to him when he does.

I’ve been thinking about him a lot these past two weeks in here. There’s not much else to do. Xander...he’s not “the bad guy”—or “the good guy,” really. He’s both. Kind of like me, I guess. Neither of us wanted to hurt anyone. We just got carried along and caught up and then, suddenly, things went too far. And people got hurt.

Just like Randy.

I don’t know what I saw that day in the atrium. Maybe it was Randy. Or maybe it was some adrenaline-shock-concussion-hallucination thing. All I do know is that since then, whenever I think of Randy, I feel him with me. Beside me. Not pressing down on my chest like he used to. Come to think of it, that probably never was Randy. Anxiety, maybe? Or guilt? I can’t explain it, really. All I know is that things feel different now.

Maybe it’s just the bullet hole. Or the guy I saved. Or the way his sister looks at me.

But whatever it is, it’s healing.

And it’s good.

**ISABELLE**

The school had been reopened for a week and a half before I felt ready to go back. It was the last place I wanted to be, and I’d been avoiding Bri, Darren, everyone really. Even Alice. At least until Ms. Carter paired us up for peer editing of our final assignments for Writer’s Craft.

Great. Just great. I drag myself over and sit across from her. So awkward. I don’t know where to look or what to say. Red-faced, I shift in my seat.

“Ummm...we can just trade stories,” Alice says, “and e-mail our feedback...if you want. We don’t have to talk. I mean, I don’t expect you to...just because we were...” She pauses and searches for the right words. “I get it. We’re not real-real friends.”

And I see how it looks to her. My avoidance since I came back to school. She’s taking it personally.

“No. That’s not it at all,” I say. “Seeing you just reminds me of that whole horrible experience that I’d rather forget. No offense.”

She looks at me skeptically.

“My meltdown...the picture...” I think of all the embarrassing things that came up that day.

Alice nods. “What happens in the men’s room stays in the men’s room.”

She still doesn’t get it. “You’re a trigger,” I say. “Seeing you brings it all back.”

It makes sense, right? I saw something like that on an episode of *Dr. Phil.* She frowns. “That’s ridiculous!”

Ms. Carter looks over at us.

Alice leans in and whispers, “I see Noah every day. And Hogan every other day.”

“Hogan?”

She blushes a bit. “He’s out of the hospital now. Gran is helping him get his co-op hours at the kennel. So he can graduate.”

“Are you...are you guys...dating?”

The pink spreads over her cheeks. Hogan and Alice? OMG. They totally are. Or will be.

“No,” she says, her eyes betraying her hopes. “We’re just friends.”

“Real-real friends?” I tease.

And I realize that maybe we do have something more in common than the lockdown. Not that I want to, like, hang out with her or anything.

“Look, Isabelle. I know you’re probably still freaked out by everything that happened. I know I sure am. But my Gran told me that you have to take it back.” Her jaw is set in determination. “Take back the school. The atrium. We have to face the fear—whatever it is—or we’ll be locked down forever.”

And I realize that maybe this quirky girl with her oddball ways is right. Maybe she’s on to something. And if someone like her can find the courage —maybe I can too.

“Girls,” Ms. Carter interrupts, “you’re supposed to be peer editing each other’s stories.”

“We are, miss,” I lie without thinking, but then I realize it’s the truth. I smile at Alice. “We, like, totally are.”

**ALICE**

Up to my arms in soapy water, I lean over the sink full of dishes and peer out the kitchen window. I should be studying for my final exams, which start on Monday, but I can’t concentrate. Hogan and Noah are out back trying to train the pups. I love watching them together. Hogan only needed a few more co-op hours to get his credit and, since we needed the help, Gran offered him a placement with our kennels. Even with his arm in a sling and a bullet wound to the chest he can still heft a huge bag of kibble from the truck and lug it, with the puppies and Noah trailing at his heels, over to the shed.

“It kind of defeats the purpose of having someone else with Noah if you’re still gawking out the window after him. He’s fine. They’re fine,” Gran teases as she picks up the tea towel to dry.

“I’m not. I just...” I busy myself with the pot-scrubber. “We’ll miss having Hogan around when his hours are done. I mean, Noah will...and the dogs.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Gran says, knowingly.

Red-faced, I take a handful of bubbles and blow7 it at her. She laughs.

"Hogan!” she calls out the window. “Come in for a snack.”

“Gran!” I scold her. “Don’t—I just—”

“What, the boy can’t come in for a rest and a glass of lemonade?” She puts down the tea towel and goes to the fridge. "Well, aren’t you the taskmaster? And the poor boy fresh out of hospital with his arm still in a sling.”

“All right, all right,” I mutter, with a smirk. That Gran. She reads me like a book.

“I had a call,” she says, serious now as she sets the lemonade and cookies on the table, “from Mrs. Goodwin yesterday. About your options for next year.”

“I already told you, Gran, I’m not going to UBC.” And I’m not. The more I picture it, me living on the other side of the country, the less desirable it seems. I said Noah needs me, but the truth is, I need him. And Gran, too.

“No,” she continues, “not UBC, Carleton University, in town. They have a Creative Writing Program. It’s not far, about forty-five minutes on the highway. You could live at home and—”

“And leave you and Noah to do all the work on the farm?” I say. It’s a ridiculous idea.

Hogan and Noah come clattering in to the kitchen and sit at the table. Terrified that Gran will say something to embarrass me, I pick up a saucer,

suddenly greatly interested in my scrubbing.

“Well, I won’t be alone,” Gran says, pouring Noah’s drink. “Hogan will be here.”

I stop and turn to look at them, oblivious to the soapy bubbles I’m dripping on the floor. "But your co-op here ends in a few weeks.”

He grins. "And my job here starts after that.”

"Really?” I say, my smile widening. I can’t help it. "Really? You’re working... here?”

“Well,” Gran says, “only if I need the help. I mean, there’s no sense in hiring on if you’re going to be home just loafing about.”

“Are you serious?” I say, my mind already skipping ahead. “But can we afford-?”

“Your grandfather took care of all that,” she says. “Don’t worry about the money.”

My imagination races, looking for all the reasons it won’t work. And finding none. "Then...yes! Yes!”

Hogan smiles at me.

“We have one condition, though,” Gran says. “You have to dedicate your first novel to us—me, Noah, and Hogan.”

And I throw my arms around her, suds and all.

**ISABELLE**

My shoes squeak on the hospital floor as I head for his room. This is the last place I thought I’d be—the last person I’d visit. To be honest, I’m not really sure why I came. I only know that I had to. That small voice inside me whispered—and, thanks to Alice, I listened.

He sits in a wheelchair at the table in his room playing Lego or something. He seems surprised to see me.

“Isabelle Parks.” He announces me like some footman at a ball. But we are alone in the room.

“Xander Watt,” I mimic. I sit across from him as he continues to sift through the bazillion gray pieces.

Fun.

“So...” I say, “how are you, like, feeling?” Stupid question.

He shrugs. Stupid answer.

He doesn’t ask me why I’m here or what I want. Instead, he pushes a pile of gray Lego towards me and points at the diagram. “Can you help me find this one?” His finger taps the drawing of some cube-shaped piece. It looks exactly like every other one. So, I start rummaging too. I never liked Lego. All the tiny bits. Hours building something just to take it apart. All that work —and nothing to show for it?

What’s the point?

“What are you making?” I ask, like I care.

“Lego Death Star,” he says, like it matters.

We sift in silence for a few minutes and then he says, in his oddball way, “My dad left me when I was nine.”

I focus on the pieces, unsure of what exactly I should say to that.

“We were supposed to finish this together.” After a few moments he continues. "But I’ve decided to do it myself. Maybe I don’t need him after all.”

I don’t reply. But I don’t really think he expects me to.

After a pause, I clear my throat and mimic his detached tone. “My birth mother left me in a box on the roadside.”

A fact. One I’ve never told anyone. Still, it’s just a fact. That’s all. Just information. It’s not a definition of who I am. Unless I let it be.

“Are you retconning too?” He looks up at me, suddenly interested.

“What?” I’ve no idea what he’s talking about.

“Retroactive Continuity? It is when comic book writers change or rearrange a character’s early life.”

Oh, comics. Yay.

He keeps talking. “I know that changing up a backstory seems illogical and wrong because, well, the facts are true. What happened, happened. But sometimes it’s not about the facts, it’s about seeing the character’s past in a new light—to make the story ahead even better.”

I pull out my new iPhone to check the time. I should probably go.

“So, I have decided to retcon.” He picks up a piece, examines it, and tosses it back in the box. Picks up another. “The stuff with Max. Maybe even all the way back to when Dad left.”

And I realize that he’s not still talking about his dumb comics. “Are you talking about yourself? Like, revising your life?”

Is that even possible?

I notice it then, the cube-shaped piece. I pluck it out of the box and hold it up. “Is this it?” I can’t believe I found it—in all that gray mess. I’m amazed I found the key piece.

“If you could retcon, what would you change?” he asks.

“I’d go back to China," I say, without thinking. And suddenly, it all becomes clear. China. “I think I need to see where I came from before I can know where I’m going next.”

The wish rings true somewhere deep inside me, like the surfacing of a long- forgotten secret.

"Who knows?” I add. ‘T might even take a year or two and volunteer in the orphanage or something.”

He nods.

Then, remembering why I came, I pick up the camera hanging around my neck. Swiping my thumb over the switch, I turn it on as I raise it and look through the viewfinder. His shocked face fills the frame.

“Say CHEE-eese,” I say, in my Yearbook Editor way.

He doesn’t, in his Xander way.

*Click.*

If that didn’t totally freak him out, now he gets even more awkward when I pull my seat over beside his wheelchair. His face gets all red. I take the strap off my neck and flip the camera around to show him the display.

“See? You can edit right on the camera.” I press a few buttons and change the look. “Crop. Filters. Adjust the light. Or you can shoot black-and-white, if that’s still your thing.”

I hold it out. He looks at it, at me, back at the camera.

“I figured,” I explain, “since your Tank got wrecked...”

He blinks. Repeatedly. He doesn’t get it.

“My parents bought me a better one for graduation,” I say. It surprised me, especially when Dad said it was Mom’s idea—that she wanted to get me something special to help me follow my heart. That she knew how much I loved photography.

Maybe she knows me better than I thought.

“Anyway,” I put it in his hands, “I don’t need this, so it’s yours. If you want it.”

Xander slowly lifts the camera. Looks through the viewfinder. Tests the zoom.

I smile. “Hey, here’s something your Tank couldn’t do. Press this.” I push the timer button. “Hold it about here.” He does as instructed, holding it at arm’s length with the lens facing down at us side by side.

**3**

**2**

**1**

*Click.*

Xander turns it around to see the display. A black-and-white shot of us. Optimal selfie angle, of course. My hair is perfect. My pose, cute. My smile, wide. But I hardly notice any of that. All I see is the look on Xander’s face. The wonder in his eyes. The small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

He looks like a kid at Christmas.

**XANDER**

June 10,2016

Dear Max,

It’s been nearly a month since the lockdown. Four weeks since I’ve seen you. Four weeks that I’ve been stuck in this hospital waiting to see if my legs will work again. I have to use a wheelchair, just like Professor Xavier (it is not half as awesome as it sounds). But the doctor says I have an 80 percent chance of full recovery. He says that the body has amazing regenerative powers. (All this time, I had a superpower and didn't know it!)

I asked Mrs. O’Neill if everything broken might eventually heal, like a bone. She said that anything is possible. Actually, it was her idea to write you. She thought it might help.

I won’t be going back to school this year. I gave the police all my logs and photos of our missions. And von know how good I am at remembering all the details. They know everything now. I know I vowed to you that I’d keep our X-Men Missions secret, but I can’t keep that promise any more. I am sorry, Max.

What you did was wrong. And even if I never did anything but hold the camera or buy the stuff, what I did—not telling anyone, not listening to that little voice inside me that said we shouldn’t—I get it now, that was wrong too.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about you and me and Mrs. O’Neill’s Friendship Checklist. Yes, we had common interests, but the more I think about it, you were usually laughing at me, not with me. You often lied to me about your real plans and used me to get stuff. I thought we were friends, probably because you were the only one I ever had. But after doing a Social Autopsy, I must conclude, Max, that you did not see me as a friend.

Realizing this made me feel hurt and frustrated and just plain stupid. But Mrs. O’Neill helped me see what I had not noticed: I was always a good friend to you. I admired you. I helped you. I shared with you (remember my jet that I never got back?). I even gave you my dad's comics because I knew it would make you happy. I liked hanging out with you, Max. We had some good times. I’ll miss that.

You taught me a lot of stuff, too, mainly about Marvel. Now, I love Marvel mutants. I totally relate to them. No, I cannot shoot laser beams from my eyes or adamantium claws from my knuckles—though that would be cool! I can’t manipulate the weather, fire, or ice, or control minds or metal. But I know what it feels like to be different.

I think we both know what that’s like.

I noticed something else, Max. In all the Marvel comics, the mutants start out hating what makes them different. But as they evolve they realize what it takes to raise a storm, read a mind, or even take a stand when no one else will.

Courage.

It takes courage to risk being different—but I think it’s worth it. It’s so worth it. Because what makes us different is what makes us powerful. And what we choose to do with that powder can make us heroes.

And I choose to be a hero, Max.

I’m glad we met. Despite the ending, I’m still glad our stories mixed like a crossover series. Remember when you first told me about crossovers? I hated the idea of characters from one comic appearing in another. The Avengers should not be in a battle with the X-Men. Characters should stay in their own worlds where they belong. (Honestly, I don’t even like it when my foods touch.) But then you showed me the A vs. X series...and I loved it! Almost as much as my Star Wars comics. You were right. It’s good to mix things up sometimes. I think that if a character gets too comfortable the story gets predictable and boring. Other characters bring tension and conflict, problems and drama, lots of drama—but like Ms. Carter and Stan THE MAN Lee say, that’s the key to a great story.

Maybe it’s also the key to a great life.

I’m not sure when I’ll be able to deliver your letter. I’ve seen the newspapers. I’ve read the horrible things the press is saying about you and your home life. But even if no one else cared about you—I did.

You mattered to me, Max. And I just wanted to let you know.

Your friend,

Xander



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