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

Part Three

00:31:00

**ISABELLE**

“It was an accident,” I say, but Hogan won’t even meet my eyes.

I know what he’s thinking, the poor guy. That’s why I have to convince him. I know how much Hogan idolized his brother, and how proud Randy was of him. I don’t know exactly what happened that day in the change room. But whatever it was, I know it was a mistake. It had to be.

“Hogan. It wasn’t your fault.”

I tried to tell him that for months after the accident. But he wouldn’t listen. Wouldn't even return my phone calls. It was like a part of him died when his brother did, and he shut everyone out. Even me.

I thought I mattered more than that.

Come to think of it, I’ve thought I mattered more to every guy I’ve fallen for. But I get it now. They all saw me as a trophy. A conquest. Another one of

their awesome achievements: get Isabelle Parks.

Hogan, John, Trevor, and now Darren—the players who played me. Did Coach Dufour, like, make that a part of their spring training? Break records. Break the O-line. Break Isabelle’s heart.

Each time, I thought it was my fault. That I’d done something wrong. Or that I hadn’t been enough. Or gone far enough. And every time a guy shattered my world, Bri came over to patch it together with facials, chick flicks, and two tubs of Chocolate Peanut Butter Häagen-Dazs. When Hogan shut me out. When John dumped me (by text—seriously?!). When Trev and I went on-and-off-again for about four months. After that last messy breakup with Trev, I swore I’d never let any guy EVER hurt me like that again.

Little did I know, the next person to break my heart would be Bri.

The worst part of this whole mess isn’t about Darren. Darren is Darren. A prick. And if I admit the truth to myself, maybe he was a bit of a trophy for me, too. I’d never dated a quarterback before. Honestly, our relationship was temporary, at best.

But Brianne. BRI?

How could she do that to me?

We’d been through so much together. Girl Guides. Training bras. Braces. Boyfriends. I was there for her through her parents’ divorce, and all the times she needed a place to escape this past year when Social Sendees got involved. We were supposed to be each other’s bridesmaids—friends for life.

And yet, she threw it all away on a dare. If that’s what it was. A stupid drunken fling.

Did I mean so little to her, too?

Alice catches my eye. She looks concerned. After my freak-out, I don’t blame her. I feel like I’m having a heart attack, or a panic attack, or some kind of nervous breakdown.

My face is flushed, my head is pounding, and my heart literally aches. I take a few deep breaths and close my eyes. One meltdown today is enough. Mom keeps telling me these are “the best days of my life.” Dear God, if things get any worse than this, I won’t be able to take it.

I look at Alice’s fanny pack. “Got any Tylenol in there?” I’m that desperate. I’d actually take whatever she had.

“Sorry.” She shakes her head as she pulls out a roll of Life Savers and offers it to me. A green candy peeks from the tattered wrapping. Bits of tissue and dog hairs and god-knows-what-else are stuck to it.

Okay. Maybe I’m not that desperate. Besides, I usually only eat the red and orange ones.

Alice holds it out to me and smiles with her big eyes like some kind of demented Twisted Whiskers card. Like she’s offering me her left lung. Like it would literally kill her if I said, Um...no thanks.

So I take the candy. Pop it in my mouth. Try not to gag. Ugh, the things I do for people.

"Look, Hogan,” I say, determined to be heard. He ignored my phone calls and texts back then, but he can’t ignore me now. “I know you must miss your brother. And I think you blame yourself for...for what happened.”

He picks at his cuticles until they bleed. A habit, I guess, judging by the scabs on his other fingers. Just another way to vent a pressure cooker of pain. I know all about that.

"But you have to believe it wasn’t your fault.” I need him to get it.

"What do you know about it, Iz?” He doesn’t look up. "You weren’t there.”

"No,” I say. "But I know you guys were close. I know how much Randy cared about you.”

Hogan lifts his eyes to mine. "Cared? Randy didn’t give a crap about me.”

"What?” I remember the way Randy used to look at Hogan with such pride. Heck, it was Randy who told me Hogan was interested in me. "Don’t be ridiculous. He talked about you all the time.”

"Ya,” Hogan mutters, "trash-talked.”

Ohmigod! Why is he being so hard-headed about this? "At least you had a brother. At least you had fifteen years together.”

Hogan finally looks up, stares at me like what I’m saying isn’t something good. "Yeah. AT LEAST.”

"Seriously,” I say, “I’d give anything to have a sibling.”

Everyone thinks they’ll be happy when they get the next iPhone or trip, or Kate Spade purse. But what if you had all of those things? What if you got whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it—and you were still unhappy? What do you hope for then? On the DREX trip, I realized the people we met there had a richness to their families that I’ve never known. And when I came home and pulled back the curtain on my life and saw the real Oz—I saw the sad truth. All this time, I’ve just been kidding myself. My life is not happy. Or perfect. Or loving. It’s empty.

I don’t expect them to get it. Alice, Hogan, Xander. My life is just too complicated for them.

I look back at Hogan, wiling him, at least, to understand about Randy.

"I partied with those guys a lot, Hogan. Probably more than you.” He doesn’t argue. We both know it’s true. "And yeah, Randy trash-talked about a lot of guys, but never you. When it came to his big little brother, Hulk Hogan- Randy loved to brag.”

00:30:20

**HOGAN**

“It wasn’t your fault.”

All kinds of people said that. The cops. Coach. The team. But it wasn’t true. Because the people that mattered most—they didn’t believe it. Not my mom. Not my dad. Not Randy. Not me.

Mom tried to comfort me. But how could she? How could she be kind to the kid who caused her so much pain? I heard her crying. Missing him. How could I let her hug me and pretend like things were okay? Like she didn’t wish it was Randy in her arms—and not me.

Dad worked more at the office. Avoided his grief, and the cause of it, altogether.

And I...well, I don’t know what I did really. These past thirty-one months, the 939 days since my brother died, they’re all just one long blur.

I quit the team. Quit talking to Izzy. And, after a while, she quit calling. It was better that way. People were so uncomfortable around me. I felt their stares, heard them whisper as I walked past. I was famous now, finally famous. But for all the wrong reasons. Even the teachers seemed to tense just a little when I happened to come to class.

Why bother?

“It is what it is,” Coach said one time when we straddled our bikes at the top of the Gatineau Hills, waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. “It’s a damned tragedy. But punishing yourself for the rest of your life, well, Hogan,” he looked off into the sky, “that’d be a tragedy too.”

He never said anything more after that. Which was just as well. That one sentence gave me a lot to think about as I rode back home.

“When it came to his big little brother, Hulk Hogan—Randy loved to brag,” Izzy says, trying so hard to convince me of something that isn’t true. More than anything, I wish it were. But how could he be proud of the brother that put him in his grave?

I clench my jaw.

“Oh!” Xander says, like he’s just put two and two together. “Hulk Hogan, the wrestler. I get it. Your name is Hogan. Yes, that makes sense now. All this time, I thought you were named after the Incredible Hulk.”

We look at him.

“You know, Dr. Banner and the gamma rays?” Xander says, like we all speak geek. “It’s a Marvel—'”

“I know who he is,” I snap.

“Of course you do. He’s famous now.” Xander rummages in his bag and pulls out the *Marvel Encyclopedia.* Flips to Incredible Hulk’s page, even though I bet he’s got the whole thing memorized. “He appeared in 1962, but for the first five issues the Incredible Hulk was not an immediate success. Probably because he is not typical hero material.” He looks at me. “You know, you might be more like him than you think.”

“Great,” I say. “Thanks.”

Xander continues, like anyone cares. “And—”

“This isn’t the time for trivia,” Alice interrupts. This from the queen of fun facts.

“But don’t you get it?” he continues.

“What?” I ask, sure I’ll be sorry I did.

“For years, he was just the sidekick in a bunch of other heroes’ stories.” Xander flips the page and holds up a two-page spread of the Hulk: torn purple shorts, bulging green arms, boulder-sized fists clenched overhead. A typical teeth-gnashing pose. “And...” Xander continues excitedly, like he’s saying the best for last, “he’s the symbol of subconscious rage.”

Everyone looks at me like I’m going to explode.

I stare back. What’s their problem? Why are they looking at me like that? "What?” I say, defensively.

No one speaks.

Finally, Alice clears her throat. “Um...you do give off a bit of a...hostile vibe.”

"Hostile vibe?” Izzy snorts. "That’s one way to put it. Seriously? You’ve been an angry ass since Randy died.” She pauses. “No offense.”

That I can agree with. That I know to be true. I have felt nothing but anger or numbness since Randy died. Anger at him for pushing me. Anger at myself for taking the bait. Anger at my parents for loving him more. At him, for always being better. And especially, anger that he wasn’t better that day in the change room, in our last match. Even when I win, with Randy, I always lose.

*Oh yeah, Hulkster! When you gonna learn? You can never win against me.*

“You’re right—” The words snag in my throat and I say it louder. “You’re all right. Even Xander...I’ve always felt like I played second best to my brother. Even after he died.” I pause. “Probably more now.”

No one says anything. In the corner, Noah hums.

Xander closes his book and puts it back in his bag. He seems proud of himself for sharing—even though he seems to have no idea what just happened here.

“But the Hulk did eventually get his own successful strip in 1968,” he says, and smiles that weird smile. “And today, he’s one of Marvel’s key characters.”

“Which goes to prove,” Alice adds, directing her statement to *Izzy,* “that even a hero can play the role of supporting cast.”

“Or,” Izzy points out, pulling out her phone as it buzzes, “even a supporting character can become a hero herself.”

Funny how people can see the exact same thing in so many different ways.

**ISABELLE**

BRI: I know you’re not talking to me.

IZZY: I'm not.

BRI: I just thought you’d want to know they’ve identified the shooter.

IZZY: Fine. Just tell me.

BRI: Maxwell Steinberg.

IZZY: Who?

BRI: Exactly. I’ve never heard of the guy. But he goes to St. F.X.

IZZY: What grade?

BRI: Dunno. But they say he’s the one who shot out the atrium displays and set off explosives in the stairwells.

IZZY: Where is he now. What’s his plan?

BRI: That’s the big question, isn’t it?

IZZY: No, Bri.

I have MUCH bigger questions than that.

**ALICE**

"Maxwell Steinberg.” Isabelle looks lip from her phone. "Anybody know him?”

Hogan and I shake our heads.

She glances at Xander’s backpack by his leg. "Got a yearbook in there?”

He hesitates for a second, like he doesn’t want her to see it, then he reaches in his bag and hands the book to her. It’s navy, with the school’s logo embossed in green on its cover, just like every other yearbook. Only on this one, the big X has been colored red and a red circle drawn around it.

Isabelle looks at it in disgust, clearly annoyed that someone had defaced her cover design. "Well, that’s original.” She flips open the cover revealing a blank page—just like mine. I guess he hasn’t asked for signatures either. Because who’s going to sign it? And what would they write, anyway?

*Have a good summer, what’s your name. It was nice NOT knowing you.*

She skips over the grade 12 pages. “He’s not grade 12, I know that. I had to edit all the grad write-ups.” She glares at Xander, like it’s his fault. “I know his name’s not there.”

“Not all grade 12s got grad pictures or did write-ups,” Hogan says, defensively.

“Well, duh. But there’s only five leftovers.” Isabelle keeps flipping, oblivious to the way her casual dismissal of Hogan makes him grit his teeth. “Doddson, French, Garamond, you, and Styles. Steinberg’s not a grade 12.”

She stops at the grade 11 portrait pages and runs her finger down the Ss. “Stanley...Steele...Steepleson...Steinberg. Here. That’s him.”

We lean in over the page and examine the two-by-three black-and-white of some random kid. He’s wearing a superhero T-shirt. Short brown hair. A few pimples. An awkward smile.

“Recognize him?” she asks.

I shake my head. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before. He’s familiar in his averageness. He could be anybody—he looks like everybody. Which, ironically, makes him a nobody.

“If he was on a team or a club or anything noteworthy in the yearbook, I’d probably know about him,” Isabelle says.

“Noteworthy or not,” I add, “if this guy goes to our school and is under the radar, only someone really watching would notice him.”

Xander isn’t looking at the picture. But if anyone saw this guy, it would be him.

“Xander,” I ask, “have you ever taken photographs of this guy?”

Isabelle turns the page towards him. He looks at it, blinks a few times, and then pulls a Nike shoebox from his backpack. The cardboard is worn and frayed at the edges. The end label reads: “Cross-Trainers: Size 5 Boys.” He sets it on his lap and lifts the orange lid. Inside are photos—hundreds of four-by-six black-and-whites. He dumps the box on the tile floor and spreads them around, searching through their glossy rectangles for the one he has in mind.

I pick up a picture.

In it, a teacher, back to us, looms over a student sitting at a desk. The kid, facing the camera, is cringing, clearly on the hook for something.

Xander glances at it as he rummages. “Shame—that’s shame. It’s kind of like guilt.” He picks up another and hands it to me.

In the second shot, taken through the back door windows, a wide-eyed kid stands, mouth agape. You don’t have to see the smashed glass or the slingshot in his hand to know what he’s done.

“Sometimes they’re hard to tell apart,” he says. “Like...uh...this one.” He hands me another.

This one shows the chairs outside the VP’s closed door where two kids sit, their clothes ripped, lips bloodied. One holds a baggie of ice to his forehead.

“This face is shame—sad, sorry, regretful,” Xander says, pointing to the guy with the ice. “He obviously did something, probably started the fight. And he’s been given his punishment. But this guy.” He points at the other one, staring at the door. “See the way he’s worried? But still angry, like, how his chin juts out? That’s guilt. He knows what he did was wrong, but he doesn’t know what is going to happen yet. I bet there’s a third guy in there ratting him out.”

The puddle of pictures spreads as he rummages. Each one a crucial moment captured—a whole story, really, contained in four by six inches.

A close up of Mr. Jinder picking his nose as he marks assignments at his desk.

Some girl cheating off her neighbor’s test.

Some freckle-faced guy jeering and pointing.

Mrs. Tripp lighting up a cigarette in her car.

A scrawny basketball player slumped alone on the bench, chin in hands, elbows on knees, his teammates a blur of legs running by on the court in front of him.

Mrs. Tucker, the librarian, yelling at kids in front of her “Quiet Please” sign.

They are not flattering—but they are real. Almost beautiful in a strange way. Like some modern-day Norman Rockwell painting of dirty-kneed rule- breakers. Meaningful, candid moments of real life. Every image affects me in some way. Stirs me. Each one...emotionally charged. That’s it. Ms. Carter always encourages us to write in an “emotionally charged” way, to capture a moment of something really good or really bad, but full of raw feeling. Isabelle’s yearbook has pictures of those typical high school highs, but Xander and his camera—he has somehow captured the lows.

“Did you...” I pick up a stack and shuffle through them, “did you take all of these?”

A hairline X appears in the bottom right corner of every one. A criss-cross crack. His signature, or a broken lens, perhaps.

“Most are for my Yearbook assignment.” He glances at Isabelle. “I thought if I took a lot, I’d have a better chance of getting what she wanted.”

Isabelle holds up a photo of a grade 7 vomiting all over his lunchbox as the kids around him recoil at the splatter. “Seriously. Like, who wants to keep that memory?” Disgusted, she tosses it back in the pile. “Don’t you get it? No one wants to see this—much less remember it.”

“But it happened,” he argues. “It’s true.”

She sighs. “Why can’t you do more pictures like this one?” She holds up a shot of a girl sitting alone on a swing. She looks sad, to be honest, but it might pass for daydreaming. “Or the good stuff?”

"Why do people only want to remember the good things?” he asks. "That’s only half the story. And Mrs. O’Neill said telling half a story is like *lying.* You need to tell the whole truth.”

Xander picks up another photo and considers it. "Why don’t people want to see pain or sadness? It’s real.” He flips the photo around to show us Hogan, sullen and smoking on the school steps. “Right, Hogan?”

**HOGAN**

It’s me, all right. Smoking on the school steps, alone in a blur of kids coming and going. I’m the only thing in focus. Which is kinda cool. Cigarette in hand, smoke seeping through my lips, clouding my face—but you can still tell it’s me. I look pretty badass.

Xander looks at it. “My grandfather told me, This guy is a rebel. He’s pushing people away, but what he really wants is for someone to care.’ ”

I snatch it from Xander’s hand to rip it up. But something catches my eye and I bring it closer for a better look.

The jean jacket.

“If you really wanted to be alone,” Xander goes, “why are you sitting on the steps?”

“Yeah,” Izzy adds. "Why’d you even come? It wasn’t for school.”

I remember now—the day I wore his jacket. October 16.

I clench my jaw. Take a deep breath. “It was Randy’s anniversary.”

No one says anything.

“My parents went to the cemetery...” I swallow, “but I couldn’t.”

I still haven’t. Haven’t even cried. Not once. What kind of stone-cold bastard doesn’t cry over his own brother?

I keep my eyes on the picture. “So, I came to school. I sat on the steps all morning. Never went to a class. Never even spoke to anyone. But I had nowhere else to go.”

I feel him then, Randy, the weight of him on my chest, his hands locked around my throat like when we were kids.

*Give up, Hulkster? You can’t win.*

It happens whenever I think of him. I stop, take a couple more breaths, and it goes away. But he’ll be back. He always is.

“I wore his jean jacket. I’d lost mine and it was cold that day.” I remember taking it from the closet, the smell of him still on it. The ghost of him in it. Mom had finally given away all his stuff, but she’d forgotten about his jacket. And when I slipped it on, it was like he was there behind me, arms around me just ready to tackle me to the ground.

“What are you looking at in the photo?” Alice asks, leaning in. “What’s in your hand?”

It’s a small square between my fingers, but I know exactly what it is. “My football card. I was looking for my smokes and I found it in his pocket.” I shake my head and toss the picture back on the pile. “Yeah—like he was pointing the finger from the grave.”

“Or maybe,” Alice says, so quiet I can barely hear her, “like Isabelle said, maybe he was just a proud brother.”

“Is that...?” Izzy snatches a picture from the pile on the floor and glares at Xander. “You said you destroyed that picture.”

“I did,” Xander goes. “This one is a different shot.”

“Wilson meant all of them.” She frowns as she looks at it. “You should’ve destroyed them all.”

“But he specifically said: 'Destroy this picture and its negative.’ ” Xander seems confused. “That is not that picture.”

I sneak a look at the photo in her hand: a close-up of a girl sitting at a table, face hidden behind the curtain of hair, X-acto knife in her fingers. Sunlight catches on the tiny triangle blade waiting over her smooth inner arm.

It’s beautiful. And terrible. All at the same time. Dramatic. Just like Izzy.

“We can’t see your face,” I say, trying to help. “It could be anyone.”

She rips it in tiny pieces and throws them in the trash. “Yeah. But it IS me.”

“It’s you, then,” Alice goes. “It’s just one moment.”

“Yes. YES!” Xander looks at her. His eyes light up. “One moment. You see that, you get it, right, Alice?”

Alice blushes.

“Easy for you to say, Alice,” Izzy says. “It’s not your moment that’s exposed. It’s like...I’m naked.”

Normally, I would have made some smartass comment about seeing her naked, but not now. I know what she means. I felt like that when everyone was staring at my picture. Like they were seeing that hidden part that no one should. A part of me that even I had never seen before.

I look at the photos sprawled all over the floor. The hundreds of naked moments Xander saw but everyone else missed. He’s weird, but somehow he seems different to me. Like, I’m seeing him more clearly, too.

“How do you do that?” I ask. “Time it just right, I mean, to catch that moment.”

He looks at me like I’ve said something ridiculous. “I dunno.”

“Is it something you learned in Photography class?” Alice asks.

Xander shrugs. “I just watch.” He picks up his camera and looks through it. Lowers it and adjusts the lens. “They happen all the time. Most people are so caught up in their moment they don’t see all the ones happening around them, I guess.”

It makes sense. I’ve been so busy with my Randy stuff, I had no idea Izzy was so stressed, that she was cutting. Hell, I didn’t even know she’s adopted.

“You’re creeping them.” Izzy waves her hand at the pile of pictures. “Invading privacy.”

Xander shakes his head. “I only see what’s there for everyone to see. The Yearbook classroom door was open. Hogan was sitting on the school steps.” Xander lists the facts like it’s so obvious to him. “If you do something out in the open, why are you upset when people see it? Like Facebook. Or Instagram. You put up pictures of yourself on vacation in your red-and- white-striped bikini. So, why am I a creep for looking at them?”

Izzy crosses her arms over her chest. Rolls her eyes. Her typical answer when she hasn’t got one.

He has a point, though. She always puts up selfies. Pictures of her pouting and posing in different outfits, or lying on her bed, or trying new hairstyles or makeup. As though her hotness depends on getting enough likes.

“Anyone could see these things,” Xander points at his pictures, “if they zoomed in like the Tank does. It all depends on what you focus on.”

**XANDER**

*Writer's Craft Journal*

*Xander Watt*

*February 4,2016*

ASSIGNMENT: Extended Metaphor Poem.

The world makes sense

through my camera lens.

Because film doesn’t lie

like people do.

The Tank

Shows what is.

Frames my vision.

Makes me focus.

Helps me see

reel life.

Truths exposed in black and white.

Where even shades of gray are clear.

And in my solitary darkness,

understanding slowly develops.

But I’ll never know why

optimists claim to know

“the big picture.”

Because it can not exist without

the negative.

00:26:08

**ALICE**

"It’s not on Instagram or whatever...so no one else but us will ever see it,” I say to Isabelle, trying to ease her embarrassment. "Right, Xander?”

He nods soberly, and then, as though having an epiphany, suddenly starts rummaging through his mess of pictures on the floor. "Wait! Wait! I have another one.”

"See?” Isabelle whines.

"It’s not a big deal,” I say, trying to help her keep things in perspective. "It’s just a photograph, so—”

"No, no,” Xander interrupts, excitedly, like he can’t wait to show me. "This one’s of you, Alice.”

Me?

Unease ripples through me at the thought of what he might produce—but wait, this is me. Invisible, boring me. What has he possibly captured that would be of any interest?

"Here.” He pulls one from the pile and hands it to me.

Me. Alone at a long lunch table. Students, a blur around me. I remember that day. Noah was home sick and I had no reason, no excuse to eat in the High Needs room. I even stopped by to eat with Kim or help out with the other students, but they were all gone on a class trip so I went to the caf. The photo catches my uneaten tuna sandwich in my hand, my slumped shoulders, my stare into the emptiness across from me. It catches that moment, the day I realized what had long been true.

I am alone. Completely alone.

Isabelle glances at it. "See? Who wants to see that in a yearbook? Who wants to remember that? It’s just sad.”

And it is. I am. Pitiful, really. My throat tightens.

God, am I going to cry? Here? Now? Over a lunchroom picture? That’s even more pathetic.

I get it now. Why Isabelle and Hogan reacted so strongly. The truth is there in black and white. Literally. But Xander isn’t to blame. All he did was hold up the mirror and show us what we’d rather not see.

And it’s not just that I am by myself for lunch that day—I am alone, more alone than I care to admit. Sure, I have Gran. And Noah. But when Gran

dies, I’ll be Noah’s everything. And I will. I love my brother, I do. But it’s just so...so one-sided. Noah just can’t engage like typical people. He leans in, if he’s calm, when I hug him, but he doesn’t hug me. He doesn’t ask how my day was. He doesn’t care about me. Not really. Sometimes, I wonder if he even knows who I am.

When Gran is gone, I’ll care for Noah like I promised. But who will care about me?

I look back at the photo. I was thinking about my mother that day as I watched other kids eating—or tossing out—the sandwiches their moms made. Wondering what it would’ve been like to have a mom that cared. How ironic that while most teens wish their mom would give them space, what I most want is for mine to give a crap.

She came home for Grampa’s funeral the week before Xander took that photo. I hadn’t seen her in ten years. Had hardly heard from her, aside from a few postcards now and then. She’s a stranger to me. And though I stayed still while Noah rocked and bobbed, I was just as agitated by her presence as Grampa’s absence.

After years of longing for her, I couldn’t wait to see her again. To reconnect. But even as she hugged us, she didn’t look at us with love or even interest. Her eyes held only shame. I overheard her arguing with Gran in the kitchen that night when I was coming back down the stairs to get my journal. I stood there, hand on the railing, needing to hear what, on some level, I already knew.

"They’re your children, Shelly. Your kids.” I heard Gran tapping her spoon on the edge of her teacup like she always did after she stirred things up.

“I can’t, Mom.” My mother’s voice was low. "Things are...complicated right now.”

Gran paused. “You’ve been saying that for nearly fifteen years. Life is complicated, girl. You just do the best you can with what you’ve got. Look at me.”

“That’s why they’re with you. This is the best place for them.” She paused. “Besides, with Dad gone...you’ll be needing their help with the kennels.”

Gran sighed. “I’m getting old, Shelly. I won’t always be here.” She paused. “And what then?”

What then?

I’ve been asking myself that all this past year. Gran is strong. Healthy. She might outlive us all. But what if she doesn’t.

What then?

“Look, Mom,” my mother finally said, “I’ve got my own life to live. One that doesn’t have space for kids with...needs. Needs I just can’t meet.”

I realized a truth on the stairwell that night. I didn't stir love or pride in my mother. Not even a vague concern or detached curiosity, as I might from a kind stranger. That night I had an epiphany and it shook me to the core: the only thing I ever made my mom feel was guilt.

Even now, it wasn’t about her kids. It was about her. We were simply her mistakes. Me and Noah. And the mistake wasn’t leaving us, it was having us in the first place.

Standing in the shadows on the stairs, I promised myself that I would never abandon my family, Noah and Gran, for now they were all the family I had. My mother had given me life, given me a brother, and then given me away. She was weak and irresponsible, selfish, plain and simple.

And I swore that night that I would never be anything like her.

**ISABELLE**

"See?” I say, as he gives Alice her terrible photo.

She looks like she’s going to cry. Obviously she took what I said the wrong way. I meant that the photo was sad—not her. But yeah, now that I look at it again, she is a total Eeyore. Pretty depressing. So is the way she’s just sitting there now, staring at the photo like that droopy donkey, moaning, Oh well... guess I’ve got no one to sit with at lunch.

Some problem.

“At least you’re not doing something secret in the photo,” I say, trying to help out. I mean, come on. Reality check, people. “Even your picture, Hogan. It’s just you guys sitting on the steps or in the caf where everyone can see you anyway. They’re not as bad as my picture. Not by far.”

“It’s not a contest, Iz,” Hogan says. “Why do you always have to make it about you?”

It’s not the first time someone has said that to me. But Hogan says it differently. Like a real question that he wants me to answer. Only, for the first time ever, I don’t have a comeback.

“What?” I say, confused. Because, honestly, it feels like it’s never about me. Not the real me, anyway. “I don’t always make it about me. Do I? I mean, seriously...is that what you guys think?”

The question hangs there between us, growing heavier with each passing second.

“Yeee-ah,” Hogan says, drawing it out like it’s SO obvious.

“Alice?” I ask. Surely, she doesn’t think so. I mean, the girl has clearly idolized me since, like, grade school.

She looks up from her downer zone-out. Blushes a bit. “Ummm...” She looks apologetic, and already I feel myself cringing. “You maybe...sometimes act... a bit like you sort of...”

“Tell her the truth, Alice,” Hogan says. “She asked for it.”

Alice bites her lip and then continues in a gush of words. “You’re just very... egocentric.” She pauses and smiles slightly. “No offense.”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, genuinely confused but thinking I really should be offended.

Alice hesitates and looks at the others.

“Egocentric,” Dictionary Dork chimes in, “self-centered, self-absorbed. Acting like the world revolves around you.”

Then Hogan adds his two cents. “You act like you matter more than everyone else at St. F.X.”

“I’m School Pres-i-dent,” I say, spelling it out for them. Don’t they get it? I do matter more, in a way, because I have way more responsibility than any other student. All they have to worry about is their classes. I’ve got all of that and dances and sports, and running Student Council practically on my own. Anything goes wrong, it’s on me. Any event, I have to plan, emcee, and somehow photograph for the yearbook that I’m, oh yeah, also putting together. “All the extra stuff that happens at St. F.X.—the spirit weeks, planning your freaking prom—do you think all that just...just happens? Do you have any idea how many hours I put into—?”

“You’re doing it again,” Hogan says.

I take a deep breath. “I’m not talking about me. I’m talking about all the stuff, all the work I do...for you.”

“For me?” he asks.

“For all of you.”

Hogan looks around at the other pair. “Hands up,” he smirks, “who’s been to a dance?”

Alice and Xander shake their heads.

“Spirit Week—you guys into that?”

They keep shaking.

“What about you, Noah?” he asks over his shoulder to the guy spazzing out in the corner. “Prom?...Anybody?”

Embarrassed, Alice and Xander look away.

I glare at Hogan. "That doesn’t prove anything except that you’re all a bunch of antisocial loners with, like, zero school spirit.” This time I don’t say “no offense.” Screw them. Let them get offended for a change. My head throbs. I feel another meltdown coming on. The seal has been broken. Already the tears are burning behind my eyes.

“We didn’t mean to upset you, Isabelle,” Alice says.

“It’s just high school,” Hogan adds. “In the big picture, none of this really matters.”

And just like that, he voices what I’ve been fearing all along, what I realized on my trip: all my striving, all my efforts to impress, to succeed, to be perfect —it doesn’t matter. None of it does.

I wasn’t happy before DREX, but I was in denial. I believed I’d be satisfied with the next win, the next party, the perfect relationship, the perfect prom. But if I’m honest, none of those things are enough.

And if that’s not my purpose—then what is?

“At least I’m trying; I’m doing something,” I say, my lip trembling. “What have any of you ever done for your school?”

No one speaks. Xander goes back to his stack of photos. Hogan picks at his nails. Alice tosses her picture back into the pile.

“Whatever.” I cross my arms and lean against the wall. “I was just trying to help—with school activities, with yearbook, with Alice and her stupid picture. It’s like I said—no matter what I do, it’s not enough. I give up.”

“No,” Alice says, “I get it. I do. You are the heart of the school. What would St. F.X. be without Isabelle Parks?”

I think she means it. The heart of the school. My eyes soften a bit. What would this school be without me? But the real question is: who will I be without St. F.X.?

“Oh, here’s Noah’s.” Xander interrupts us with another picture.

It’s Noah in the hallway, being wrestled to the ground by two staff members as Wilson yells into his walkie-talkie. Whatever setting Xander used blurs the chaos but somehow focuses on Noah’s face—on the terror, the confusion, but especially the rage. He looks wild. Insane. Dangerous.

“What the hell is going on there?” Hogan leans in for a closer look.

“He has meltdowns, sometimes,” Alice says, like that explains it. “If he gets... overwhelmed. ”

In the corner, Noah starts tapping his head, muttering to himself, growing more and more restless. He slaps himself hard a few times as he makes this weird squawk. The room feels very small, and I glance at the door, our only exit, wedged shut.

"He’s fine, he’ll be fine,” Alice says. But I’m not sure if she is reassuring me or herself.

**NOAH**

Waves

over the horizon.

I hear them come, watch

them grow from ripple to roar.

I kick.

Spit. Scratch.

Scream.

I fight cresting

white, frothy madness,

but I cannot stop the

crash.

I lose myself

inside the wave.

It swallows me whole.

Drowns me in sights and sounds—

Suffocating.

Out!

I need out.

I need to run.

AWAY!

NOW!

But something, someone,

always holds me here.

Holds me down.

No matter how hard

I cry for

help.

00:22:18

**ALICE**

I’ve seen a thousand meltdowns, each of them distressing in one way or another, but seeing it in one frame, one moment, somehow makes it even harder.

Hogan takes the photo and examines it. "That’s pretty extreme. Does it happen a lot?”

“No,” I say. “That day was the worst one. They called a Secure School because of it.”

“That’s why we had it?” Isabelle looks back, fearful. “Is he...dangerous?”

I don’t know how to answer that. “He isn’t dangerous, well, not really.” It doesn’t sound convincing. “He’s more dangerous to himself, if anything. He could get hurt thrashing around like that. Or hurt someone.”

Isabelle’s eyes widen.

"By accident,” I add quickly.

"Have you ever been hurt?” she asks.

“Not on purpose,” I say, vaguely.

The truth is, I’ve been on the receiving end of Noah’s outbursts a few times. Many times. All my life, really. When he gets frustrated he scratches. Slaps. Bites. Pulls my hair if he can get at it. One time, he even broke my arm when he flipped the table.

“He doesn’t mean it,” I explain. “I should have known better. Should have given him his space.”

Over the years, I learned how to steer clear, just like our dogs do. They sense Noah’s episodes, feel it coming like a thunderstorm and make themselves scarce, hiding out in the basement or under the furniture. Now that Noah is so much bigger than me and Gran, we have locks on our bedroom doors. When Grampa screwed in the bolts last fall, he said the locks were to keep special things safe—I see now, now that he’s gone, he wasn’t talking about my china doll collection. He meant me and Gran.

“How do you handle his...meltdowns?” Isabelle asks. “I mean, you’re pretty scrawny. No offense.”

She’s right. I am small. Slender. Slight. Okay, scrawny.

“I usually try to corral him into his safe zone. He’ll wind down on his foam floor or exercise ball or wrap up in his blankets,” I say, realizing that none of those are options now. “But if it’s really bad, I lock myself in my room and wait him out.”

“Like a lockdown?” Hogan says, and snorts.

But it isn’t funny.

“Yeah...” I choke on the truth of it. “I guess my whole life is a lockdown.”

We sit in silence listening to the click of the switch as Noah flicks the lights on and off.

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click.*

I feel stupid for speaking it—even if it is my reality. My life is a lockdown. What kind of pathetic soul admits that out loud?

“I know what you mean,” Hogan says, interrupting my inner critic.

“Totally,” Isabelle adds.

It surprises me. Do they, really? Only someone living my story would truly know.

I shut everyone out after Randy died,” Hogan says, looking at his picture.

Nobody speaks.

“It’s like...” Isabelle struggles to find the right words. “Like we lock up a part of ourselves out of fear. Fear of being judged. Fear of failing.”

“...or fear of getting hurt,” I say.

“...or of hulling someone else,” Hogan adds.

“...or of always being alone,” Xander says in his robotic way, as he continues to sort through the pile of photos.

Our personalities, our stories are so very different—and yet, our fears feel so similar.

I look around the tiny washroom. The five of us cooped up and locked down. And Noah, humming, moaning, flicking the lights on and off.

*Click-click-click.*

Trapped, as his unspoken fears wind tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

How long do we have, I wonder, before he finally snaps?

00:21:37

**HOGAN**

"Here it is." Xander hands me a photo.

I’m afraid it’s gonna be another Hallmark moment in my loser life. But it isn’t me. It’s the guy from the yearbook, Maxwell what’s-his-name. Same skinny guy, same geeky shirt, same just-try-me expression. Like he wants you to hit him. Same everything, really, except for the guns.

Yes, guns. Two of them, actually.

He’s standing on a bluff, one large rifle slung over his back, the other butted up against his shoulder. It’s not the ammo belt criss-crossing the rifle strap, or even the guns that get me. They’re only paintball guns, painted black to look more realistic. Randy and I often went paintballing when we were young and, as usual, I'd come out covered in yellow, splattered and stained by his many bull’s-eyes. Those paint pellets sting and bruise, but they aren’t dangerous. Not really. Well, not if you’re wearing the gear.

I look back at this guy’s face, uneasy. No, it isn’t about the guns. It’s him. Maxwell. The way he holds his rifle, one eye sighting *down* the black barrel, taking aim at the camera.

At me.

Something twists in my gut as I think how this guy is loose and trigger- happy in our halls where hundreds of students and teachers hide in dark rooms. They don’t know what’s going on. Even the cops don’t. Not really. They might have his name, but they don’t have this picture. They don’t know who they’re dealing with. But I do. I’ve seen that expression before. Randy had it right before he jumped on me. A face that says: you’re gonna get it, bad.

My stomach clenches again. Fear. That’s what that is. A sensation I haven’t felt in such a long time. Not since Randy. I thought I’d already faced the worst. Lived it. Nothing scares you, no threat or consequence works when you have already lost everything. But this guy’s cocky smirk, his dark eyes, winking as he takes aim—it says he’s serious. Something about his expression scares the crap out of me. Not for my sake, but for everyone in this building. For Izzy. For Alice and Noah. And even Xander. I feel afraid, but most of all, I feel helpless.

And that is even worse.

“Ohmigod!” Izzy snatches the photo from my hand and examines it closely. “Are those GUNS?!”

Noah stops bobbing and paces around the small circuit. Hums louder. He’s obviously getting agitated by Izzy’s screeching. We all are.

“Paintball guns,” I say.

Her eyes go wide. “Well, they sure look real.”

“The cops know who he is.” I try to sound calmer than I feel. Like it’s no biggie. "They’ll get him. Don’t worry.”

Alice takes the picture from Izzy and looks closely. Her face pales. She sees his look; she feels it too.

“He saw you, didn't he?” She looks up at Xander. “Maxwell saw you take this picture.”

Xander nods, but doesn’t say anything more.

“Are you, like, totally crazy?” Izzy blurts. “It’s one thing to creep us.” She looks back at the photo and shivers. “But this guy had guns. GUNS! He saw you, Xander. And you just take his picture? Geez, he could have killed you!”

Noah stops circling and begins slapping his head, rocking on his feet like he’s gonna start a race but changes his mind.

Go.

Stop.

Go.

Stop.

Like a never-ending loop of false starts.

**ISABELLE**

Noah is totally spazzing out in the corner, waving his arms, flapping his hands, moaning like he’s in pain. And he’s getting worse. I glance at the stall. I could lock myself in there. I mean, the guy’s own grandfather made panic rooms for them. Obviously, he’s not safe to be around.

Alice jumps up and I think she’s going for the stall. But instead she goes over to Noah.

“You’re okay. Noah. You’re okay,” she says, her voice trying to stay calm. Her hands are up like she’s gentling a wild horse. “We’re going to go to the bus soon. Five minutes. Okay?”

He tilts his head like he’s just heard a strange sound far away and he stops waving to pull at his hair. But the rocking doesn’t stop and his groaning is getting louder.

Why doesn’t she do something? “Can’t you shut him up?”

“You’re the one that set him off,” Hogan says to me.

Alice picks up his broom and offers it to him. “Want to sweep, Noah?”

But as she steps forward, instead of taking it from her, his arms explode outward and he screams.

“YeeEEEEEEEaaargh!”

Total freak-out. Like a tornado of fists and spit as his arms windmill around him like crazy propellers. Alice tries to step back, but there isn’t anywhere else to go. The broom wedges under the sink and Noah’s next swing catches her smack in the face, sending her staggering back, and she falls to the ground.

SNAP!

Ohmigod! Her arm? Her neck?

I rush over to her. “Are you okay?”

Noah is revving up by the second, yelling, fists flailing as he moves towards us. But before I can scream, Hogan comes barreling into him.

**HOGAN**

“Don’t think,” Coach always says, “just act. Trust your gut.” And my gut told me: Shut this guy down.

Whatever it takes.

But as soon as I tackle Noah, drive him to the floor, and squeeze him tight, ready for his worst—he stops. The screaming, the thrashing—it all stops, and he relaxes into me like we’re just two dudes hugging on the bathroom floor.

“You okay?” I ask Alice over my shoulder from where we lie.

Izzy helps her stand. Alice seems fine, a bit shaken up, but okay. The broom handle is in two pieces on the floor.

“Yeah,” she says, looking at her face in the mirror. “I think so.”

“Ohmigod!” Izzy goes. “I thought you broke your neck or something!”

I nod at the red welt on Alice’s cheek. “You’re gonna have a nice shiner there.”

“Yeah.” She tests it with her fingertips and looks in the mirror. “Wouldn’t be the first time. No concussion, though. I should’ve known better. I was too close.” She turns and looks at Noah. But there’s no accusation, no anger, not even fear. Just softness. “It was an accident.” She looks at me, her welt angry but her eyes gentle. “Accidents happen. He didn't mean it. That’s what counts.”

I don’t know if she’s saying it for Noah, or if he even understands, but I do. I get it. For the first time—I hear it.

Noah starts nuzzling the fur on my arm. If he knows he hurt Alice, he’s already forgotten. I wish I could think like him. I wish it were that easy for me.

“I think he likes you, Hogan,” Izzy teases, like it’s a crazy thing. I guess it is, really.

Noah rubs his face against my fur, turning his head in circles and sideways like a cat. I half expect him to start purring. It is the weirdest thing: the Hulk —school badass and loner—in a furry costume, hing on the bathroom floor, bear-hugging this retar—autistic kid. But I don’t mind it. Not at all.

And that is even weirder.

*Click.*

“Okay, Noah.” Alice rests her hand on his. “We’re going to sit now.”

I loosen my grip a bit, but I’m ready for him if he starts freaking again. He doesn’t. In fact, he’s like a different kid, not the twister we had in here a few seconds ago. Alice bends down and picks up the top half of the broom handle. It’s about eight inches long, but the “Noah” tag is still on it, and when he takes it and sits beside her, he seems happy enough to hold it and flick the tag back and forth and back and forth.

Izzy smiles. “Looks like you’ve been replaced, Hogan.”

I run my hand over the back of my head as I sit up. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

It’s out before I know it, and her smile slips off her face. She looks away.

That wasn’t fair. I shouldn’t have said that. I mean, it was just one kiss. Not like we were dating or serious. But I thought she liked me.

What an idiot.

Like me? She hardly even knew me, really, and after Randy’s accident, I stopped trying. What was I thinking, anyway? Me and Isabelle Parks? We didn’t have to break up, because we were never together, not really. I just stopped returning her calls. Deleted her “u doing ok?” texts. Ignored her looks of pity. That wasn’t how I wanted her to look at me anyway, and soon enough, Izzy stopped looking at me at all.

**XANDER**

*Writer's Craft Journal*

*Xander Watt*

*April 4,2016*

ASSIGNMENT: Describe an inciting incident in your life—a pivotal moment when everything changed.

*My Inciting Incident*

I work at Comic Corner part-time. Actually, it started out as a co-op placement last semester. It was Mrs. O’Neill’s idea. She knows I love comics. Especially Star Wars comics. I only ever read Star Wars until I met Maxwell Steinberg. He worked there after school and he would be coming in for his shift as I was leaving.

In the beginning, I didn’t say much to him or anyone, really. There weren’t a lot of customers in the small store. The few that came in only asked me questions I could answer easily, like

* Where can I find *Deadpool* #65?
* Did my *Mighty Avengers* come in?
* Where is the bathroom?

The owner, John Banks, spent a lot of time on his computer and only asked me questions like

* Did you put the posters up?
* Can you move the back issues into the bins?
* Do you want to take your break now?

So, I was free to do what I like best: organize comics. I am very good at organizing things and I know how to handle a comic book correctly. Mrs. O’Neill also thought it would be a good job for me because it would help me with small talk.

**small talk**

/’smoljtok/

noun: polite conversation about unimportant things

I don’t get small talk. It’s basically people asking other people silly questions. It’s talking about things you don’t really care about with people you don’t really care about. It doesn’t make sense. Why would I care if some stranger at the bus stop thinks it’s a nice day?

But it didn’t matter much, because there was not a lot of small talk at Comic Corner. And I liked that just fine.

I noticed a few things the first time I saw Maxwell Steinberg standing at the counter sorting the new stock. First, he was about the same size as me. Second, he had a neat T-shirt with nine heroes on it, all Marvel, not DC. And last, the blue strip on his name tag had only three letters: MAX.

Maybe there was not enough space on the punch tape to spell the full name. But, no. Mine had ALEXANDER and that was nine letters long.

I pointed at his tag. “Isn’t your name Maxwell?”

He looked at me funny. “Only my dad calls me that. And my teachers. And they’re all assholes.”

I considered his logic. If anyone using his real name was therefore an asshole, did that mean they were assholes because they used his name, or that typically all assholes use that name? And why do we call assholes “assholes,” anyway? Because, anatomically speaking, an anus serves a very important purpose.

“Why are you staring at me?” he asked. I hadn’t realized I was staring.

“Everyone needs an asshole,” I finally said, “biologically speaking.”

He shrugged. But he didn't walk away like most people did when I tried small talk.

“So, do you like the name Al-ex-an-der?” The way he said it, I decided that I did not.

“My preference is irrelevant,” I said. “It’s my name.”

He laughed. If there was a joke, once again I’d missed it. Then he grabbed a stack of new comics and headed to the X-Men section. I followed. He moved down the New Releases shelf quickly placing his comics, one after another, in exactly the right places. I realized that he'd organized them first at the desk. By series. Then alphabetically. Then by issue.

I liked that.

“Anyone can change their name,” he pointed at a few of the characters on the covers. “Cyclops, Iceman, Beast, Wolverine. All these characters did.”

I hadn't realized that before. But, come to think of it, he was right.

“How about Al?” he said. “Or Alex?”

I shook my head. “That’s my grandfather’s name.”

When he was finished with his comics, he peeled the blue strip from my name tag and ripped off a third of it. I was going to walk away, like Mrs. O’Neill said I should when I feel anxious. He’d just wrecked my name tag, and John Banks would not like it if I asked him to make another one. I had already asked because the letters were not spaced evenly and John Banks had said no.

But Max only threw part of the strip in the garbage. The other two thirds he stuck back on my name tag.

XANDER.

“There,” he said. “How about that...Xander?”

I let the word bounce around in my head. Xander. Xan-DER. XAN-der.

I liked it. And I don’t usually like change. But this was different. This was more like editing. Like what my English teacher said we should do. It was concise. Better. I smiled at Max.

Then he took a red Sharpie out of his back pocket. He traced over the X in my name and drew a circle around it. He didn’t say anything else. But I knew. We were X-Men, me and Max—maX and Xander.

And I wondered if that meant *we* might be friends, too.

00:18:13

**ALICE**

A head injury. A gash on my leg. A black eye. Today is not my day. Not Noah’s, either. He retreats into his mute aftermath, typical of his meltdowns, but the calm won’t last long. The trigger is still there. He is still stuck in this room. It’s only a matter of time before there’s another outburst. A worse one.

He rolls his hat down over his eyes and taps his head against the stall. Yes, he has to get out of here.

Soon.

“I don’t think Noah can last much longer in here,” I admit.

“Me neither,” Isabelle complains.

I look at the door, considering other options. “I could run with him. Maybe down the back stairs and out the side door.”

I dunno,” Hogan says.

"Do you think it’s just a prank?” Isabelle asks. “I mean, this guy Maxwell, do you think he’s just trying to scare us? Or is he, like...totally crazy?”

Hogan stands and walks to the far corner just under the tiny window. He jumps up the wall and, after a few tries, manages to grab the ledge of the window well. Slowly he drags himself up to peek outside.

"What do you see?” I ask, as he hangs by one hand to open the latch. The glass is too dirty to see through but as the window tilts forward, he peers through the opening underneath.

Hogan pauses for a second, then drops to the ground. “Nothing, really. Just a few cop cars.” He brushes his hands off on his fur. "But I think we oughta sit tight until Wilson says it’s clear.”

I know he saw something but I don’t press him. Whatever it was is bad enough that he doesn’t want to mention it.

I don’t blame him. I’ve read enough about school shootings to know7 that if this isn’t a prank, this Maxwell probably has a plan. Maybe even a list. Xander might be on it. Isabelle, for sure.

But I don't tell them that.

**ISABELLE**

BRI: Update. There’s a second shooter!

IZZY: WTF? TWO?!

BRI: They said they could see another person with a gun on the atrium video, but it’s not clear who.

He bolted before it showed his face.

IZZY: Do they know where he went?

BRI: They think he’s hiding.

No sign of him since the atrium but I heard Maxwell is still setting off firecrackers, keeping the police away.

IZZY: Ya. We heard some. I thought it was gunshots.

BRI: Might be. They said he has a gun.

IZZY: So that second guy, he could be anywhere.

He could be anyone.

**XANDER**

*February 5,2016*

*Social Autopsy*

*Event: X-Men Secrets*

Today Max asked me to help him with a secret. At first, I thought it was for John Banks’ birthday. Maybe even a Daily Queen cake—but I was hoping not the kind with chunky bits. I don’t like things in my ice cream.

Turns out the secret wasn’t cake—but it was something much better. Max told me to meet him by the school dumpster at 9:30 p.m. and to bring my camera. Most importantly, he made me promise not to tell anyone, because it wasn’t just a secret. It was a secret mission.

I’ve read all the *X-Men* comics. They’re my new favorites. But I still wasn’t sure what to wear for a secret mission. A cape? A utility belt? A black unitard? Max never said. The only thing I could find was Grandpa Alex’s old wraparound sunglasses.

Mom was at work. It was easy to sneak out. I wasn’t sure why Max wanted to meet at the school. Everything was closed. And why did he need my camera? I wore my black T-shirt and jeans. My Cyclops glasses. It was so dark with them on, I had to pop out the lenses just to see. I took one of my X-Men stickers and stuck it on the arm of the glasses. A big red X in a circle.

Max laughed when I met him at the dumpster.

“Nice glasses—they belong to Grandpa Alex?”

How did he know?

I wondered if Max had empathie powers, too. I noticed he was not wearing glasses or a utility belt. Just a backpack. But maybe he was more like Wolverine. Maybe his mutant powers only came out when he most needed them.

Mr. Dean, the janitor, exited through the back door and headed for his Honda Civic. He must have been on evenings that week because I had not seen him cleaning up after lunch with Noah Waters the past few days. After he drove away, Max ran for the door. I thought it was locked, but Max had

rigged up a little magnet that swung down when the door opened and wedged in to keep it from locking shut.

“You made that?” I asked. He smiled.

Yes, Max was very smart. I wanted to see how it worked, but he pulled me through the doors into the dark hallway.

I knew we were not supposed to be in there. But I couldn't leave now. Being with Max there in the darkness was like living a panel in a comic, not just reading them. I had to keep going to find out what came next.

I followed him down the dark corridors and up the three flights of stairs to Mr. Quigley’s lab. I had Biology with Mr. Quigley during period 1. Mr. Quigley wore glasses and smelled like cigarettes. He was old and not very interested in teaching us anything other than what was on his next test. At the start of the year, I’d asked a lot questions. I like to know things. How things work. Why. Where he got his facts. I also wanted to tell him what I knew about the subjects. Mr. Quigley did not like my questions or my help. I think he also needs stronger glasses because after a week or two, when he moved me to the back of the class, I don’t think he could see me raising my hand. Luckily, I have an excellent memory. I remembered everything he told us and everything I read in the textbook. Otherwise, I w7ould be failing.

“Did you forget your homework?” I asked Max. Maybe he was in Mr. Quigley’s grade n Biology, period 2.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled out a set of keys. I’d have recognized that E=MC2 lanyard anywhere; those were Mr. Quigley’s keys. But where did Max get them? He unlocked the door and entered. Not wanting to stay in the dark hallway alone, I followed him inside.

We should not have been in the school after hours. We should not have been using Mr. Quigley’s keys. I knew that. But I didn’t know what Max had planned for our mission—and I just had to see.

Turning on the light, Max grabbed Mr. Quigley’s lab coat from the hook. Then he dressed the skeleton with it. Then he unhooked the skeleton and laid it on its back on the long desk.

“Gimme your glasses,” he said. So I did.

Max put them on the skull and then bent one of the skeleton’s legs, so it looked like it was just suntanning on the desk. Then he took a cigarette from his pocket and wedged it between the teeth. Then he closed two fingers of the skeleton’s hand, taped them together like an okay sign.

This did not look like any of the experiments we did in grade 11 Biology.

“Give me that big glass tube thing.” Max nodded at the foot-long glass tube at the end of the counter.

“It’s a graduated cylinder,” I said, trying to be helpful. “It holds one thousand milliliters, but they come in different—”

“Whatever, Einstein. Just get it.” He did not have a happy face. So I handed it to him.

He took a large bottle of Diet Pepsi from his backpack and opened it up.

“Can I have a sip?” I was pretty thirsty from running up the stairs.

But Max didn’t answer. Instead, he filled the cylinder three-quarters full. Then he corked it with a rubber stopper he had rigged with paper clips, string, and four white Mentos candies.

I wondered what he was doing, but then he stepped back and I saw the skeleton wasn’t just wearing Mr. Quigley’s lab coat and sunglasses; it wasn’t just smoking a cigarette as it leaned back against the books. It was jerking off its one thousand milliliter graduated cylinder.

Max laughed and he ran around the desk. He stood beside the skeleton, arm around it, and faced me. “Okay.” He gave me the finger. “Take the picture.”

“What?”

“Take my picture. Why do you think I brought you here, loser?”

I wasn’t sure, really. “Umm...for the sunglasses?”

“Take the damn picture!”

So I did. Even though it was kind of weird.

What kind of mission was this?

Max looked at the clock: 9:42. "The alarm defaults if the door hasn’t locked fifteen minutes after it’s set.” Max jangled the keys. “I just gotta get a few more supplies.” He disappeared through the back door marked “Private.” And once again, I followed.

“We aren’t really supposed to be in here,” I said, as he scoured the shelves in the narrow room. Hundreds of glass bottles and jars stood in meticulously labeled rows. “Unless you’re a Lab Tech. Are you a Lab Tech?”

He snorted as he unlocked the metal cabinet and took out a few jars, delicately placing them into his bag. “With those science suck-ups? Wasting their lunch hours cleaning out test tubes?” He opened another cabinet and took a few brown bottles. “No. Quigley didn’t pick me. But I don’t care. Who wants to be a stupid Lab Rat anyways?”

He closed the cabinets and locked up the supply room before hanging the keys around the skeleton’s neck.

“Come on,” he said. “We gotta hoof it. The alarm is gonna trigger soon.”

“Shouldn’t we...?” I looked at the obscene display on Mr. Quigley’s desk. “I mean, don’t we have to put away the, uh...lab equipment?”

It was Mr. Quigley’s number-one rule. It felt terrible to me that we’d left the stuff out, all over his tests and marking, never mind what inappropriate things that skeleton was doing.

Max laughed again. “Stay if you want, but if you don’t make it out the side door in three minutes, you’ll be explaining all this to the cops.”

He took off, shoes squeaking in the dimly lit hall as he bolted for the stairwell.

And I followed him. Like I’d followed him all evening.

But that’s the thing with Max. I never know when he’s joking or serious. I didn’t understand the mission at all. And by the time he gave me a choice— there wasn’t one, really.

**Observations**

1. The next morning, I was very nervous when I went to the lab, but surprisingly everyone liked Max’s skeleton. In fact, they LOVED it. Even though it was wrong, the whole class thought it was so cool. They took photos and texted and tweeted.

“Who did it?”

“Who’s X?” they asked each other, looking at the Cyclops glasses.

I smiled. Proud. Bringing the glasses was my idea.

1. When Mr. Quigley arrived to class after his hall duty and saw- the skeleton sprawled on his desk, he did not laugh or text or tweet. Mr. Quigley was mad. Like, off the charts, brain-vein-bulging mad. And when he grabbed the skeleton and tipped its graduated cylinder ever so slightly, the string released, and the Mentos hit the Diet Pepsi—and foam exploded, fizzing up and out of the glass tube and all over Mr. Quigley’s purple face. Just the way Max had planned. And the kids all took pictures of it, just as Max had expected. And Max got his revenge, just as he’d hoped.

**Conclusion**

I know that breaking and entering was wrong. Leaving out the science equipment was wrong. And I'm sure whoever donated their skeleton to science did not mean for it to be used for this kind of social experiment.

But in the big picture, which Mrs. O’Neill keeps telling me to look at —it was kind of funny.

I also know that stealing and lying is wrong. That’s even in the Bible.

But since no one has asked me—I am not lying.

And since Max is my friend—I will keep his secret.

And if he asks to go on another secret mission, I might even say yes. And then, I won’t need a Social Autopsy—in fact, I’ll need to start a Mission Log.

00:16:04

**HOGAN**

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Iz shift closer to Alice. Something’s up. She nudges her and tips her phone so Alice can read it. Obviously, they don’t want me knowing, so I pretend like I didn’t see.

There’s stuff I don’t want them knowing—like the dozen cop cars I saw in the parking lot. The yellow police tape holding back reporters. Or the ambulance waiting to deal with whatever might come next.

This is no prank.

"Hogan,” Iz goes. "When you said that some kids wanted to leave school with a bang...what exactly did you mean by that?” For an actress, she’s pretty horrible at acting casual. I guess for someone as dramatic as her, it’s a big leap.

"I dunno. Nothing.” I look

"Oh, just wondering.” Izzy eyes the splintered wooden door I kicked in, the stall door I pounded into place. "Where did you say you were when the shooting happened?”

"I didn’t.”

She looks at Alice. I know where this is going. And it’s bullshit.

"It’s just that...hypothetically,” Alice says, "if there’s more than one shooter, which, statistically, there usually is, the police wall want to question anyone that wasn’t in a classroom at the time of the shooting.”

I glare at them. "Were any of you in class?”

They look away.

"I get it,” I snap. "Of all the crazies in here,” I wave my arm at Noah and Xander, "*hypothetically*, you guys assume it’s me. Nice. Real nice.” I snort and shake my head in disgust.

"Like I said,” Izzy adds, "you are the one with a record. And you do have that...” she pulls in Alice once more, "how did you put it, Alice?”

Alice pauses.

"Alice?” Izzy elbows her.

Alice swallows and mumbles, "A hostile vibe.”

"Hostile?” I blurt. Oh, this is rich. "So, why not Noah?” I point at the guy in the hat who’s banging his head on the stall. "Of all the people in this room,

*statistically*,” I throw the word back at her, "he’s the only one that has freaked out and injured someone today. Who’s to say he didn’t blow out the atrium and then go and hide in a closet? Because, *statistically,* he is the only one among us with a history of causing lockdowns!”

Izzy gasps. "He's right!” She eyeballs Noah.

But Alice isn’t convinced. In fact, she’s pissed. "You’ve got to be joking!” She gets up and stands right in front of me. "You can’t seriously be blaming Noah...for this?”

*Click.*

**XANDER**

*X-MEN MISION LOG*

*NOVEMBER 13,2015*

*OPERATION VOMIT*

I wondered what Max had taken from the lab supply cabinet. But I didn’t have to wonder long. The next week, he told me to meet him outside the caf at lunch. No one had ever asked to meet me for lunch. I was pretty excited. I even brought an extra Twinkie for him.

I didn’t think he was going to show, but he did. Only he didn’t have his lunch. Just a remote, like the one from my new plane. It was based on the Lockheed SR-71 spy plane, just like the X-Men jet. I’d just gotten it for my birthday, and when Max heard, he’d asked if he could borrow it. I did not want to lend it. But #4 on Mrs. O’Neill’s Friendship Checklist says that friends share.

So I did.

I followed him in the side door, up the shadowy stairs, and onto the dark stage. Through the thick navy curtain I could hear the sounds of the kids having lunch in the cafetorium on other side.

My stomach growled. "So, are we going to eat? I brought you a—”

"Take my picture first.” Max picked up a plane, MY plane, resting at his feet.

I was happy to see he’d brought my X-Jet back in one piece. Even if he’d painted our red X symbol on it. That was cool.

I guess.

I took his picture, unsure of why he even wanted me to. He never asked to see them. I tried to show him once and he told me to keep them top secret.

The cafetorium was full of kids, and teachers on duty watching the kids eat. And Principal Wilson watching the teachers watch the kids eat. And while everyone was busy watching each other, Max knelt down just behind the curtain crack and shoved the plane out center stage. Working the remote, he made it do a vertical takeoff, though I could have done one way better, and then he sent the X-Jet out over the crowd.

He should have asked me to fly it. He was not a very good pilot. Plus he’d rigged up little test tubes along the bottom that were weighing it down.

Clearly he had not read the instruction manual I’d given him. I hoped he had not ignored my directions about not tearing up the box, too.

This friendship thing was a lot harder than I’d expected.

By the time a kid noticed the plane, it was halfway across the cafetorium. Everyone looked up laughing as it swooped overhead, and they all started chanting, “X-Jet! X-Jet! X-Jet!”

Principal Wilson shouted for it to land NOW and the room went silent. All except for the drone of the X-Jet now on a collision course with him. It dive- bombed, making him duck as it pulled up at the last second. Kids cheered as the jet rose higher and higher.

“Fire in the hole!” Max said beside me as the near-vertical plane tipped enough to unload the contents of the tubes.

It wasn’t much liquid, really. But as it hit the principal he gasped and retched. Kids around him bolted, pinching their noses, gagging at the smell. I knew even before the stench reached us it was BTA—butyric acid taken from the science lab. It wasn’t dangerous. Like Mr. Quigley said, it’s found in the colon and in body odor and milk and parmesan cheese. But BTA is best known for being in, and smelling like, vomit. Strong vomit. Like burn-your-nose-hairs vomit.

Mr. Wilson ran for the doors, retching like Misty, my neighbor’s cat. But he’d never get away from the smell. Not for days.

“Mission accomplished,” Max said, dropping the remote as he got up to leave. I looked through the curtains, just as my X-Jet smashed into the basketball backboard and dropped. Half of it dangled in the white netting, the rest of it fell in shattered pieces to the floor. Max cheered, as though he'd done it on purpose. As though even that was part of his plan.

It wasn’t, was it?

Did he even have a plan—or was he just figuring it out as he went? But before I could ask, he’d gone.

I won’t lie. I was mad. Almost crying when I saw that plane crash. But as I write this mission log tonight, I’m trying to do what Max says I need to do. Max says I’m too focused on silly things. And maybe he’s right. Sure, the Tank helps me zoom in and focus—but maybe I should think more like Max. He sees the big picture, even if I can’t. He’s got a plan. And if I want to be a part of it, I just have to trust him.

Besides, Cyclops crashed the real X-Jet a bunch of times. And I’ve never seen him cry.

**XANDER**

*X-MEN MISION LOG*

*DECEMBER 11, 2015*

*OPERATION PENII*

Max and I waited in my hiding spot—the corner carrel. I told him it was my secret place where I read my Star Wars graphic novels sometimes. And just like I said she would, Mrs. Tucker turned out the lights and left for lunch at 11:07**.**

We climbed off the desk and Max pulled three tinfoil things out of his backpack. They each had a foot-long silver shaft and three round bulbs at the bottom. He held one up against his crotch and told me to check out his foil dick. Technically, a penis should have only two testicles. I wondered if he knew that. I wondered if, perhaps, he had three.

He told me to take his picture. So I did, even though it was weird. But lots of kids do things other people think is weird—like how Danny obsesses over medieval weapons, or Trisha collects fishing lures, or how I know everything there is to know about Star Wars. Like Mrs. O’Neill says, everyone has unique interests. Maybe genitalia was Max’s thing. He’d done that skeleton thing, and now this. Come to think of it, a lot of kids seemed to enjoy drawing them in our textbooks and on the bathroom stalls. I wondered how long he’d been interested in the art of penises. So I asked him. He just looked at me funny.

"Or is it penii?” I corrected myself.

Max said I was messed up (even though he was the one with three testicles) and asked me for the stickers. My job had been to make a sheet of X-Men stickers. Big, red, circled Xs. Max said every superhero leaves a calling card. All this time, I’d thought it was just the villains. But he didn’t even thank me. He stuck them on the three foil shafts and told me to keep a lookout while he climbed up to put them on the bookshelves. Then he hung strips like flypaper from a few ceiling sprinklers. I looked down the hall for Mrs. Tucker, who I knew would not like Max’s decorating.

After a few seconds, the air reeked of burning plastic or hair. Then Max grabbed my arm and ran for the emergency exit at the back. I tried to tell

him it was alarmed, but the thick black smoke chugging from the silver shafts caught my eye.

“Max, your penii are on fire!” I yelled. But he didn’t seem to care. The strips above them burned like fuses towards the sprinklers. But before I could tell him, the fire alarm sounded, the sprinklers turned on, and Max shoved open the alarmed door and dragged me out behind him. My heart raced as we joined all the kids and teachers filing out of the school. Everyone was freaking out.

“I see smoke.”

“Something's burning.”

“Is there a fire?”

Only Max and I knew the truth. It made me feel smart to know something the other kids didn’t. But I felt kind of sick, too. Those were some serious rules we’d just broken. We stood with the crowds gathered on the football field, shuffling and stomping in the snow. Max shushed me when I told him we could have stayed inside where it was warm, because we knew there wasn’t really a fire, and the school was totally empty so no one would have seen us, and the firemen always took seven minutes.

Then Max smiled and said I was brilliant. I wasn’t sure what I’d said, exactly. All that mattered was how happy it made Max.

Six and a half minutes later, the fire truck came, and firemen ran into the building, axes ready. All because of Max’s three tinfoil penii. I wish he’d told me his plan, though. Because the sprinklers destroyed a lot of the books in the library. Including all of the Star Wars graphic novels.

Maybe I could have done something to save them, if I had known.

00:15:01

**ALICE**

How can Hogan think Noah is the second shooter? Noah? It’s too ridiculous to even contemplate. So ridiculous that I can’t stop myself from venting even more as I stand over him.

“My brother—who cannot even tie his own shoes—somehow masterminded this crazy plan to bring a gun to school and shoot out display cases...and set off explosives...”

I glare at Hogan. But he’s not going to sit there and get yelled at—not even by me. He rises to his full six feet and towers over me.

Isabelle gets between us—though it isn’t quite clear who she’s protecting.

Maybe Hogan is laying blame because he really is involved somehow. I didn’t think so when Isabelle was questioning him. But now, I’m not so sure. After all, he is a thug, a disgruntled student being forced to perform in a pep rally he’d rather avoid. And he does have anger issues. Who knows? Maybe Hogan did have a whole other show in mind. It’s possible. And he was in the hallway right before the explosion went off in the main stairwell.

I poke his furry chest. “For all I know, you tossed that bomb in the stairwell!”

Hogan stares me down. "For all I know, you did. You’re the one out sneaking around the halls during a lockdown.” He turns to Isabelle. “And you’re the one completely losing it.” He groans, and rubs his hands through his hair in frustration. “This is stupid. What even makes you think there is an accomplice?”

“Bri,” Isabelle says. "The security cameras caught someone else running from the atrium.”

“So, let’s say there is some second shooter,” Hogan says. “What makes you so sure it’s me—or even a guy?”

Okay, maybe we are jumping to conclusions. I have to agree with him on that—at least until he says what he says next.

“You’re acting hysterical. Both of you. Typical. Let me guess—you’ve got your periods, right?”

So much for facts and rational thinking.

“Oh you did NOT just say that!” Izzy retorts in her melodramatic way—one that only seems to further support Hogan’s ridiculous theory. “What is it

with you guys? Blame PMS. Yeah, that must be it, because it can’t possibly be the idiot males that are driving us crazy!”

“I’m just saying,” Hogan yells over her, “I could as easily accuse one of you. C’mon, Iz, you’re no poster child for mental health.” He swings his hands up to make air quotes and accidentally knocks the phone from her hand.

“Watch—” she shouts, and fumbles, but the phone falls and hits the floor. Isabelle bends and picks it up, cursing when she sees the shattered screen. “Great, just great.”

I take a deep breath. “Look,” I say, trying to calm everyone down, for Noah’s sake as much my own. He’s ramping up again. “Things are getting out of hand. We don’t have proof. It could have been some guy—”

“Or girl,” Hogan cuts in.

“Or girl,” I continue, “just running away from the danger. We don’t even know for sure that there IS a second shooter—”

“Oh, there is.” Xander is still sitting on the ground, and his monotone can be heard from behind the camera lens.

“Wait...what?” I turn to him. We all do. “What are you saying?”

“There are two shooters, and I can prove it.” He presses the button and takes one last picture. Then he lowers his camera to reach in his backpack. We stare at him expectantly.

Maybe he has a photo of this mysterious second shooter. If anyone saw Maxwell Steinberg’s accomplice, Xander did. He sees everything, or so it seems. But as he pulls his hand out of the bag, it isn’t holding a photo, or a box, or even another camera.

Just a gun. A black one, like the ones in Max’s photo. Xander holds it at arm’s length, pointing it right at us. He closes one eye. And, finger on the trigger, Xander squeezes.

*Click.*

**HOGAN**

I am on him seconds after I see the gun. My body reacts even before my brain registers.

*BANG!*

The shot rings out against the cement walls and it hits me—right in the chest —as I dive in front of the girls. I land face down with a thud. The tile cold and hard against my cheek.

So this is it, I think. This is how I die. On a bathroom floor. Just like Randy.

I’ve pictured it a million times since Randy died. Imagined myself dead a thousand ways. Accidents. Illnesses. Even suicide. Only I never did anything about it.

*Didn’t even have the balls to do that, eh, Hulkster?*

But it’s done now.

Only...

Only, I don’t want it.

I don’t want to die.

I fight for a breath but it isn’t coming. Panic washes over me as I gasp.

*Is this how it felt, Randy?*

"Hogan!” Alice rolls me over onto my back and I look up at the stain on the ceiling tiles. The air vent. The glow around the lights. My chest aches. Alice puts her hand on it, but it won’t help. I’m sure my heart is bleeding out.

But she doesn’t get Izzy to call 9-1-1. She doesn’t start CPR, even though my breath is gone. Instead, she sits back and sighs.

"Holy, Hogan, you scared the hell out of me.” Alice wipes her forehead with the back of her hand and I see yellow on her palm. On her fingers. It leaves a smear on her face.

Is that...is that paint?

Alice helps me sit up and I finally take a deep breath, surprised to discover that I can, surprised to see my fur is splattered with yellow, not red. The gun is on the floor. A paintball pistol. A RAP4, just like Randy and I used to use.

A toy.

I feel like an idiot. A bruised idiot. But it looked so real from the other end of the barrel.

Xander sits in his corner, hands over a gash on his forehead.

“Noah,” Alice explains to me. “He hit him with his broom handle.”

“It isn’t real,” Xander whines as he rubs his skull. “It’s a paintball pistol. He didn’t have to hit me.” He scowls at Noah, who has retreated once again to the far corner, both hands cupping his ears, hat rolled down over his eyes.

“Shut up, Xander,” Izzy says, moving to sit on the red gym bag, where she’s trying to get her phone to work. Glad to see she’s so concerned about me.

“I was just showing you,” Xander continues. “You asked who the shooter was.” He touches his scalp, examines his fingertips. “I’m bleeding! He made me bleed!”

“I’ll show you bleeding.” I get up and grab Xander by the throat. I feel my blood pulsing through my body as I slam his head against the metal stall. “You can’t just go around pointing guns at people, shooting people.” Slam! I push him again. Slam! “Even if it is a paintball gun, you moron.”

Alice grabs my arm and I let go and Xander sinks to the floor. What I really want to do is beat the snot out of him for scaring the girls. The entire school, really. And yes, I admit, for scaring the crap out of me.

“I know. I know.” Xander coughs. “That’s what I told him.”

Who?” Alice asks. “Maxwell?

Xander nods.

“What else do you know?” she says, but her voice isn’t accusing. And I realize, then, what she’s on to. This guy knows all about Maxwell Steinberg and his psycho plans. If anyone can protect us, all the kids at St. F.X., ironically, it’s Xander.

He looks at us, at me and Izzy and Alice and even Noah, like he’s thinking about whether or not he should say it. I move to grab him by the throat again, ready to squeeze it out of him, but Alice cuts in front. Her boldness shocks me. For all she knows, he does have another gun, a real one, in that bag of his. But if she’s concerned about the gun on the floor or the one that might be in his bag, she doesn’t show it. Instead, she squats *down* in front of him. Smiles, like she does, with her eyes. Speaks in her gentle voice.

“It’s okay, Xander,” she says, softly. “It’s going to be okay. Just tell us. Tell us all of it.”

**ISABELLE**

He’s got to be kidding me. “You’ve been sitting there the whole time,” I blurt from across the room, trying to stay as far away from him as possible, “the whole time...and you never told us anything about what you know?”

Xander blinks. “You didn’t ask.”

“Well, we’re asking you now, geek,” Hogan says, his tone a language all its own. One Xander obviously doesn’t speak, because he continues to just sit there, blinking at us like he doesn’t know what the question is.

“It might help,” Alice says, like she’s a translator or something, “if you ask him something specific.”

“What is this guy Maxwell up to?” I say.

“What do you numbnuts have planned?” Hogan squats down and pokes him with his thick finger.

I think of the explosions I heard in the hall. “Is he going to blow up the school?” I look at the paint gun. “Or shoot us as we leave? Or what?”

Who knows what crazy things this guy has come up with.

Xander looks at the floor, trying to avoid Hogan, which is kind of hard considering he pulled him back up to standing and is right up in his face. “I don’t know...he wasn’t supposed to...I thought it was—”

“Well?” Hogan snaps.

Xander stalls. Like how my phone does if I’ve opened too many apps at once.

“Give him a second,” Alice says. “Let him think.”

Whose side is she on, anyway? Let him think? What is there to think about? Either he’s in on it or he isn’t. Why waste time waiting for him to come up with more lies?

“Do you have any more guns?” Hogan pokes him again.

“No, just the—”

“Do you want to hurt us?” I’m still trying to make sense of this whole crazy thing. Is it a prank? Or are we in real danger here?

“No!” Xander looks up in surprise, like I’ve said something crazy. “Why would I want to—?”

“Hello?” I snap. “You brought a gun to school. What? Is it for, like, show- and-tell?”

Hogan picks up the pistol and drops it in the sink out of Xander’s reach.

“It was a mission,” Xander says, like that means anything. “I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt, I—”

“This isn’t some stupid game,” Hogan says, getting up in his face again.

“What happens next?” I ask. If anyone knows something, it’s got to be him. “This is serious, Xander. You’re, like, messing with people’s lives here!”

Xander looks panicked. He should. Maybe he’s finally getting how big of a deal this is.

“Well?!” Hogan yells, throwing up his arms like some big hairy gorilla. “Spit it out!” I half expect him to start pounding his chest like King Kong. But seriously, Xander’s driving us all nuts.

“Stop!” Alice yells, and she gets between Xander and Hogan. All one hundred pounds of her. She puts her hand on Hogan’s chest, like that’s going to stop him. “You have to let him think! Give him time to answer,” she says, sternly. And, surprisingly, Hogan steps off.

Xander slumps to the ground and takes a few deep breaths as Alice moves to sit cross-legged in front of him. Close, but not touching. What is she waiting for? Xander is the key to getting all our answers. About Maxwell. About the shooting. About how the heck we can end this thing. Xander clenches his jaw. Stares at the floor. He seems as confused and scared as we are.

Finally she speaks, soft and steady. "This wasn’t the plan, was it?”

Xander glances up at her with a look of relief. Like someone actually gets it. “No. This was not the plan. Not at all.”

“What was supposed to happen?” she asks gently.

Xander takes another deep breath. “Our next mission.”

“Jumping on the bandwagon?” I snort. “That’s original.”

No one knows who the original guys are. Lots of kids bragged about copy catting those X-morons with pranks of all sizes. Some copycats got caught, thankfully, but I heard that the original X-Men never were. And that they were planning something big for the year end. Just what I needed. Some geeked-out idiots wrecking prom.

Alice glances at the yearbook cover. The red X in a circle. The yellow paint on her fingers.

“The X-Men characters... they’re from comics, right?” she asks.

I want to yell at her to focus. Seriously. Now is not the time to chitchat about his stupid hobby.

“Xavier and Magneto,” he says, reaching for his encyclopedia. He shows her a picture of two characters: some bald guy in a wheelchair and another one in a helmet and cape. Just like those dumb doodles on every boys’ bathroom door.

“Alice,” I say, “we don’t have time-“

She holds up her hand, as if shutting me up. I kid you not.

“X-Men,” she says, to Xander. “Kind of like you guys—you and Maxwell?”

“And the rugby team,” I mutter, crossing my arms, “and about a dozen other wannabes.”

“But you started it,” Alice says, completely ignoring me. “You and Max. You guys are the original X-Men?”

Xander nods, smiles faintly.

Wait...what? That’s not possible. Maxwell? And this guy? These are the masterminding pranksters that have been making my life a living hell? He can’t even finish a sentence.

Hogan leans in, interested now. “So the ping pong balls, the skeleton, the plane, the streaking, all those pranks—that was you?” He almost seems impressed. Shocked, actually.

Xander nods. “Well, it was mainly Max. He did it. I just took the pictures and kept a log.” Xander shuffles through the photos once again and pulls out a bunch. Max with his arm around the skeleton. Max wearing nothing but his cape and helmet. Max holding a bag of ping pong balls. Max and a foil penis. Max shooting paintballs at the grad mural.

Alice almost loses it when she sees that one. “I spent weeks—” She clenches her jaw.

“So you prank people, whatever.” Hogan picks up the gun photo once more. “But is this lockdown just another stunt?”

“I thought it was,” Xander admits. “My job was to hit the security cameras with paint pellets. But when Max started shooting out the display cases, and I saw smoking holes in the walls where there should have been paint splatters, I realized that Max’s gun was real.” He looks down, ashamed. “And that’s when I ran.”

I can’t tell if he’s embarrassed by the prank or the fact that he ran away.

“Wait,” I say. “Why the display cases? It seems kinda lame compared to all the other things you did.”

The tips of his ears redden. “Max did that for me. He told me he’d find a way to get back at Mr. Strickland for kicking me out of Yearbook. For never putting my pictures on display. Max said they were good enough to hang in a gallery.” For a second, he looks almost proud. “He said that my pictures, the ones of him, especially the ones from today’s mission, would be famous.”

“If you call ‘on the six o’clock news’ famous,” Hogan mutters.

So, it was part of Max’s plan to not only do these things, but to keep a record. To be infamous. My stomach twists. This changes things, because it means this mission is much more than just another prank. I look at Hogan. And Alice. They know it too.

Alice leans in a bit closer. “Can you tell us anything about Max’s plan?” Xander frowns.

Clearly he can’t. Or won’t.

I lift my phone. Enough of this messing around. Obviously the cops didn’t hear that shot and aren’t coming to save us. I’m not talking to Bri, but in this case, I’ll make another exception. I need her to tell the cops what we know.

“We should let the police deal with this. That’s their job, right? Let them ask the questions.” I press the start button a few times but the screen stays black. I groan. Mom’s gonna kill me. This is my third one this semester. “Nice, Hogan. You broke my phone. It’s dead.”

“Don’t blame me,” he says. “You’re the one throwing it around.”

I roll my eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure your parents will replace it.” His tone makes it sound like an insult.

Yes, they probably will. After a long lecture. But doesn’t Hogan get it? Don’t any of them understand? That phone is our only link to the outside world. That phone is our only chance of passing on what we’ve figured out about this whole mess. About Xander. And Max. The police might know his name, but not what we know. One text from me would make all the difference.

“I don’t suppose any one of you guys have your cell...or your flip phone on you?” I say, knowing the answer even as I ask.

Ugh! Of all the people to be locked up with.

**XANDER**

*X-MEN MISION LOG*

*APRIL 15, 2016*

*OPERATION LIGHTENING STREAK*

I thought Max would be mad when he found the blue 120-page notebook in my backpack, when he read my journal, when he saw that I’d been writing Mission Logs. I told him that I have to write things down, like how my Social Autopsies help me figure stuff out. I was terrified that he would not invite

me on any more missions. But he wasn’t mad. In fact, he was excited. Said it was a great idea because, "How else will they get how amazing we are?”

I don’t know who they are. But I sure like hearing Max say that we’re amazing. I sure think he is. Like, capital-A Amazing. Max is a genius, I think. Or very close to it. His mind, like mine, doesn’t work like anyone else’s. Only, unlike me, Max never apologizes for being different. Just like how Magneto never apologizes for being Magneto.

The other thing I noticed about Max is that he is always watching. I need the Tank, and chemicals, and lots of time to develop what Max sees and knows instantly. “Opportunities”—that’s what he calls them—a moment to make a difference. Max sees those all the time. Sometimes they look like bad choices, because they are technically against the rules, like breaking into the school at night, or making our own grad mural, or when he blew up a whole garbage can full of ping pong balls during an assembly. That one was my favorite. Though I wasn’t too fond of having to spend hours the night before painting a red X on every ball. Mom is still wondering where her red nail polish went.

But Max has vision. He sees the hidden opportunities that everyone else misses. Like fire drills. And rugby games.

Lots of people were saying the X-Men missions were done by the rugby team —even some of the players started bragging. So, right as the St. F.X. team started to play, this guy came running across the field wearing a purple cape, red Chuck Taylor All Stars, a red metal helmet—and nothing else. All the fans cheered and screamed as he streaked through the game. I knew it was Magneto because of the helmet (worn to protect against telepathic attacks). And I knew it was Max, because that helmet had gone missing from the display shelf in Comic Corner after his shift the day before. I took seventeen pictures as he crossed the field with Coach Dufour and three players in pursuit. Then he jumped the fence and disappeared, but the crowd cheered on.

Max proved three things that day:

1. The rugby players had nothing to do with the X-Men missions.
2. Magneto totally rules!
3. Max is faster than their fastest players. HE should get MVP.

But mostly, it proved what I concluded long ago: Max is brilliant. I never saw that opportunity. It would never have occurred to me to streak across the field. But Max saw it and took it. He is a mastermind.

I wish I could know what Max is thinking, what he’s planning next, but no one knows how his unique mind works. And Max doesn’t even need Magneto’s helmet to keep people out of his head.

So when Mr. Wilson called an assembly two weeks ago and told the whole school that, effective immediately, these pranks would stop or there would be serious consequences—no more sports, no more dances, no more intramurals, or even prom—I wondered if that was the end of our Prank Fridays. Maybe Operation Lightning Streak truly was our last mission. Mr. Wilson demanded names. But no one spoke. No one knew—except for me and Max. My face burned and I couldn’t sit still. What if Mr. Wilson found out? What would happen to us?

But no one said anything, and eventually Mr. Wilson sent us back to class. As we filed out of the cafetorium that day, all the kids were grumbling—but not about Wilson. They were complaining about us!

*Screw these X-Men!*

*Seriously—they're such idiots.*

*It's not our fault they're doing all these dumb pranks.*

*My scholarship depends on placing at the track meet. What if it's canceled? He wouldn't cancel prom—not for real, right?*

*Brotherhood of Morons*

*...so immature...*

*This is my future they're messing with now, stupid losers.*

*Someone should turn them in.*

*Anyone know who they are?*

I didn’t see or hear from Max for a few days. I thought maybe he'd given up on our missions. But not Max. Like I said, he has vision.

He came into Comic Corner on my next shift and he was angry. He blamed Principal Wilson for trying to turn all those fickle humans against him. His eyes were hot, intense, like lasers burning into mine. I wanted to look away. To tell him that maybe we should lie low for a while.

He told me there’s a war coming and asked me if I was sure I was on the right side, quoting it right from the movie we’d seen a hundred times. I knew he had something planned. Something big.

“You in?” he asked. “You loyal to the Brotherhood?”

I swallowed. Gave one, slow nod. I never even blinked. He gave me a list: ping pong balls, electrician’s tape, chemicals, ball bearings, batteries—all kinds of random stuff I could get from Home Depot. I asked if we were doing another ping pong blast.

“Bigger,” he said. “Badder. Operation Resolution. And, trust me, it’s gonna blow their little minds.”

00:11:07

**ALICE**

In my gut, I know Xander didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Not even Hogan. I glance at Hogan standing protectively just over my shoulder, and blush at the thought that someone is looking out for me. Even if I don’t need it.

Xander’s eyes widen at Isabelle’s mention of calling the police. He bites his lip. I can feel him withdrawing into himself at the thought.

Just as well we can’t call them. Not yet. They won’t get any answers, not from him. They won’t even know what to ask, or how. He’d shut down completely. No, it has to be here. Now. I have to find out whatever I can first, and then tell it to the police. They don’t need Xander, really. They need information.

And it seems that only I speak his language. Only I know how to get it.

"What did Max ask you to do to help get ready for today?” I say. The more literal and specific the question, the easier it is for him to answer.

Xander repeats his shopping list—electrician’s tape, wire, ball bearings, ping pong balls.

Hogan says it sounds like the items for the ping pong ball prank. "Maybe he’s doing that one again.”

But why? If anything, Maxwell Steinberg is smart. Innovative. He won’t repeat a past prank any more than an author would rehash a scene. The pranks are like plot points in a story. Each one has to be new and exciting, bigger and better than the last. Each one has to raise the stakes.

"All that effort, just to repeat the ping pong thing?” I shake my head. "It just doesn’t make sense.”

Hogan shrugs. "We’re talking about a nobody whose sole purpose is to play practical jokes on his school. Clearly, this guy doesn’t have a whole lot of sense.”

"Oh, he does,” Xander says, enthusiastically. "Max is a mastermind.”

I chew on the ends of my hair. I’m missing something. But what?

"You mentioned that you kept a log?” I ask.

Xander rummages in the backpack and pulls out a blue notebook with superhero scribbles and stickers all over the front. He pauses, holds it to his chest, as though unsure if he wants it shared.

"Dude, I’m not interested in reading your Dear Diary crap.” Hogan snatches it and flips to the last entry. "All I care about is what Maxwell said about today.”

"He called his last mission ‘Resolution,’ ” Xander says. "But I’ve only listed the ingredients. I never write about the mission until it’s over. Technically, a log is for logging the details after—”

"Wait,” Isabelle says, as though she’s had an epiphany. "Did you say the last mission? So, today is it?”

She seems almost relieved, as though, after this last prank, her problems wall be over.

She sits on the red bag and crosses her long legs in front of her as she continues, "I just thought this Magnerdo—”

"Magneto,” Xander corrects her.

She rolls her eyes. "Mag-NEAT-o would’ve saved his big prank,” she puts air quotes around it, "for the prom next month. I’ve been totally stressing over it ever since these dumb stunts started. And then, when Wilson said he’d cancel everything if there were any more pranks, well, I thought for sure, these X-Men would target prom for their grand finale.”

"Max said people would expect it at prom.” Xander seems proud that Isabelle has proved him right.

Well, I’m just glad you’re not.

Isabelle starts complaining about how much work it takes to plan a prom and how selfish it would have been to prank it. As she rambles on, Hogan scans the list of materials again.

“Matches, ping pong balls, black powder. Typical noisemaker stuff." He looks up. “Cherry bombs?”

Xander nods.

“That must have been what we heard in the stairwells,” Hogan continues. “Loud but not all that dangerous.”

I don’t know anything about them, really. How destructive are they? How dangerous? Maybe a garbage can full of them might cause some damage?

“How many does he have?”

“Just a few,” Xander says. He looks at Isabelle. “The rest are in my gym bag.”

“What?” Isabelle jumps up like she’s been jolted by a live wire. “You brought...” She backs up as far away as she can from the suddenly ominous red gym bag. “You let me...you mean, I’ve been sitting on...on bombs? Ohmigod! OH. MY. GOD.”

“Well, they’re not lit,” Xander says, as though she is being ridiculous.

For once, I don’t think she is. She’s always so overly dramatic, but sitting on a bag of explosives, especially ones made by Xander and Maxwell—to be fair, that truly warrants a big reaction.

“Randy and I made some and shot them off in the backwoods,” Hogan says to Xander. “Nearly blew my hand off. They aren’t as safe as you’d think.” He looks back at the list. “But this other stuff, ball bearings...these chemicals... what’s this for?”

Xander looks down. Fiddles with his laces. “Max was working on some Special Project. I got the stuff, just like he asked. But he wouldn’t let me help. He said it was top secret.” Clearly, being left out of the plans upsets him. “But I don’t know what he made.”

Hogan looks at me, as if for confirmation. I nod. “He’s telling the truth,” I say, sure of it. “He doesn’t know any more than that.” Xander doesn’t lie. I don’t really know him, other than the readings he’s done in Writer’s Craft. X-Men adventures, superhero stuff. I wish I’d paid closer attention. But I do know a few things. For one, he is factual. And literal. And brutally honest. He showed that many times when giving other kids feedback. He has no filter.

Isabelle raises an eyebrow. “So, how did you pay for all the stuff?”

“My mom’s credit card,” Xander mumbles.

“Totally traceable.” She sighs. “Sounds to me like he used you to get what he wanted: pictures of himself, supplies, a scapegoat.” Isabelle glances at the sack of ping pong bombs on the far side of the room. “So, basically, he pulls the prank of the year and you’re left, literally, holding the bag. Nice. I thought you were friends.”

Xander looks away.

“So, why ball bearings?” I ask. They seem pretty specific.

Xander looks up. “I figured that had something to do with Magneto.” He pulls a little silver ball from his jeans front pocket and holds it between his finger and thumb. "The real Magneto can manipulate magnetic fields and control metals, and in *X2: X-Men United* he escapes from his plastic prison using—”

“Small metal balls,” Hogan finishes, his voice serious. “Yeah. I saw the movie.”

“But in the original comic version—”

“Come on,” Isabelle snorts, cutting Xander off. "He’s playing a role. Maxwell is not the real Magneto,” she says. “I mean, how much harm can he do with a few—?”

“Not a few—549 ball bearings.” Xander holds up the little ball. “I kept one.”

“Okay, 549 little silver balls?” she says, dismissively. “What—is he spilling them in the halls to make us trip?”

I take the ball bearing from Xander. Roll it in my palm. Hold it between my fingers.

“It’s a tiny ball of metal,” Isabelle mocks.

“Right,” I say, as it dawns on me. I swallow. “And so is a bullet.”

No one speaks.

“What? So you think he’s firing them from his paintball gun?” Isabelle asks.

“No.” Xander takes back the ball, considers it. “We tried that a few weeks ago. They don’t have much trajectory. Not enough for impact. And today he had a real gun. If he wanted to shoot anyone, he’d use that.” He looks up at us and, realizing what he’s just said, quickly adds, “Not that he wants to shoot anyone. At least, I don’t think he does. He never said...”

Hogan squats by the bag and unzips it. “There’s got to be something else in here...some kind of clue.” He gingerly shifts the stuffed ping pong balls, careful not to upset them. I wish he’d just leave it alone altogether. If he nearly blew7 his hand off with just one, what will a whole bagful do in a small room like this?

“Chain link, locks...and...” Hogan pulls out a spiral notebook, “this.”

I move next to him as he opens it. Blue ballpoint-pen doodles cover the paper, fill the margins. Page after page of them.

Isabelle peeks over. “More dumb comic stuff. Does every guy go through that phase? Is it, like, a puberty thing?”

But these aren’t just doodles. The drawings have an energy about them. The lines are bold. Intense. In some places the explosions he scribbled were etched into the pages until they ripped. I run my fingers along the paper, feeling the braille of the drama from the flip side.

“Is this yours?” I ask Xander. He shakes his head and comes over to join us. All of us are drawn to the notebook like rubber-neckers at a car accident.

And it is like a car accident. Random. Crazy. Messy. Page after page after page of bizarre comic spreads where some caped, masked superhero shoots jagged thunderbolts, laser beams, or dotted lines that all end in big, exploding stars.

"It’s like some effed-up Where’s Waldo?” Hogan says, turning the page to the same story, different setting. "There he is...” He turns the page. "There he is.” Turn. "There he is.” With every flip, the caped character becomes easier to find, usually levitating over all the carnage.

"Looks like Max wastes a lot of time in class,” Isabelle says.

"Well,” Hogan adds, "I doubt he’ll be getting hired by Marvel any time soon.”

"Seriously,” Isabelle agrees. "Like, obsess much?”

"Wait! Wait!” I shout. "Go back!”

Hogan pauses and flips back one page.

And I see my Tree of Knowledge mural, or a crude rendition of its swirling branches and oval leaves. Half of the tree, anyway. The other half is buried under a vicious scribble shooting out from the caped man’s gun. In this version it’s a flamethrower. I grab the notebook from Hogan and flip back through what we’ve seen. And suddenly it clicks.

The mural.

The garbage can.

The airplane.

The sprinklers.

The skeleton.

"These aren’t doodles or random comics,” I say, breathless as I flip back to the beginning, to where a lewd skeleton smokes a cigarette. I look up at the three faces near mine. "Do you know what these are?”

"A waste of time?” Hogan says.

"A geek’s fantasy?” Isabelle adds.

"Better,” I grin. "These are blueprints. Don’t you get it? These are plans, outlines for every X-Men prank. And if we know what he’s planning...”

Hogan smiles back. “Then we know how to stop him.”

**HOGAN**

Alice flips through the pages. “Look, see? There’s the ping pong one. Books and sprinklers—that’s the library. This one has a toilet...” She looks up.

“Mr. Wilson’s washroom,” Xander says. “Not a lot of people knew about that one. Operation Fire-in-the-Hole. Once everyone cleared out for the fire alarm, we climbed through the ceiling into the washroom Wilson keeps locked and rigged his toilet with some sodium. It explodes when water contacts it. I bet it made a huge mess.”

I look at the picture and see it now. A toilet exploding as some guy, probably Wilson, flies bare-assed over the moon.

I smile at Alice, amazed that she somehow figured out how to see the story in the scribbles.

Xander stares wide-eyed at the book. Then he grabs it from Alice and continues flipping, searching for something, growing more and more agitated with every page turn.

"Haven’t you seen this book before?” I say. “I just took it from your bag.”

Xander keeps flipping. "It’s Max’s bag. I grabbed it before I left the atrium. I thought maybe he would abort the mission if he didn’t have all his stuff.”

“Try the last pages—the blueprint for Resolution is probably there,” Alice suggests. But Xander stops flipping and lowers his hands.

“Missing,” he says, so quietly I almost think I imagined it.

Alice takes it from him and keeps searching. “What?” she asks. “Resolution?”

“No. His partner,” Xander says. He looks like he’s gonna cry. “I was with him on every mission and he never drew me once. Not even as a sidekick. Not in any of them.”

“Be thankful,” Izzy says. "The last place you wanna be is in some psycho’s journal.”

“But Isabelle...” Alice says, her voice sounding serious. “You’re in this picture.” She spreads the book wide open before Isabelle, the pages trembling in her hands.

I find Where’s Weirdo? easily in all the explosions, rain, and thunderbolts. But this drawing is different. The ground isn’t ground exactly, but arms, legs, severed heads with Xs for eyes. Pieces in puddles. Each of them named. And with a shaky finger, Alice points to the one marked “Isabelle Parks.”

Izzy whimpers beside me. “Why would he...? I don’t even...I never...”

I try to reassure her. “It’s not just you, Iz. There’s about fifty names. And that one there with the W, the guy from the toilet, he’s in all the pictures.

Probably Wilson.”

“But I don’t even know him,” Izzy’s voice pleads. “Why would he target me?” I shrug. “School president?”

“This is it,” Alice says, anxiously. “Resolution. This is what Maxwell is planning for today.” She bends down and lays the book open on the floor. We all kneel around it trying to make sense of the scribbles.

At the center of the drawing hangs some kind of ball with light or lasers shooting from it in all directions.

“Disco ball?” Izzy says. “No, Disco Day was last month during Spirit Week. Are you sure this is the right page?”

But then I look at the lines coming out of the ball, at the circles at the other end. I’ve seen something like this before. “Wait a second.” I flip back a few pages to a diagram of a garbage can and a load of ping pong balls. It dawns on me then. The explosion. The ball bearings. “It’s not a disco ball—it’s a bomb.”

“Like one of those cherry things...but bigger?” Alice asks.

I wish it was. But that sinking feeling in my stomach tells me I’m onto something. “Remember the ping pong explosion?” I point at the picture. The garbage can surrounded by dashes and dots. I flip back to Resolution. “Well, picture that, but bigger. Way bigger. With ball bearings instead of ping pong balls.”

Alice’s eyes go wide. “With enough force, it would be like firing hundreds of bullets in all directions, all at once.”

We look down at the picture and see exactly that.

“Could he really build something like that?” Izzy asks, skeptically.

“Max can build anything,” Xander says.

“So we know what. But where?” Alice asks. “When? And how is he going to trigger it?”

Xander shrugs. “He didn’t tell me.”

We sit for a minute staring at the drawings, each of us hoping we’ll see some other clue. But nothing comes.

Alice chews on the ends of her hair as she stares through the pages, deep in thought. “If I were Maxwell, I’d want to set this off where I get the biggest impact, right? The most damage.”

“Well, apparently he’s already destroyed our trophy case,” Izzy says.

“Yes...” Alice says, “but it’s not about damaging property.”

Her comment hangs heavy between us. I wonder if that’s it. If Maxwell was planning to cross that line. Pranks are funny, yeah, but the thing is, once you do one, you raise the bar. And with everyone copycatting his little pranks, the next has to be even bigger, even better, even crazier.

How insane is this guy?

I think of the photo. The eyes.

Crazy enough.

“Hello?” Izzy chirps. “We’ve been in a lockdown for over forty-five minutes, hidden away in locked classrooms. How would he get at us even if he wanted to?”

“Think about it,” Alice says, her eyes almost as intense as Max’s. “Where are there no cameras—thanks to Xander? Where can he set up this next prank without being seen? Just like their fire alarm Fridays. And where will crowds of people go when the lockdown ends?”

She’s kinda freaking me out right now. But I wonder if she’s onto something. Izzy’s mouth drops open. She whispers, “The atrium.”

It makes sense. All except the lockdown part. “The lockdown won’t end until they catch Maxwell,” I say.

And just then, the fire alarm goes off.