

CHAOS THEORY INITIATION

A central image of a moth with dark, textured wings and several bright orange spots. The moth is positioned vertically, with its wings spread. The background is a mix of orange and blue splatters, creating a chaotic and textured effect. The text 'CHAOS THEORY INITIATION' is overlaid on the top half of the image in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

AUBREY BALLARD

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PROLOGUE

I was there when the first Chaos occurred...well, the first attack on American soil, at least. I guess that is where I will begin my story. A time that seems so long ago, I refer to that period of my life as *The Before*. Before my naive bubble of reality burst, before I knew about the U.D. and their Kronies, before the world turned upside down, before I lost my family and found myself, before Rome.

It's unnerving to think how "normal" everything seemed back then...when my biggest worry was the Economy test on Monday or what All-Mark outfit to wear to the movies. We were all oblivious to the global anarchy growing right under our noses. Oh sure, we saw clips of destruction on the nightly news and read the ever-increasing death toll as we scrolled the Internet. But that was in Europe or Asia. Not in America, and especially not in Oklahoma City, the center of nothing.

We were not concerned in the least about a Chaos starting in our backyard. We didn't even know it had a name at that time. If there were to be an attack, surely it would happen somewhere of importance: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. I often wonder how different things would have been if I had not been directly involved...if I lived in a different city and was able to watch the whole thing unravel through the safety of the television screen. But I was right in the middle of it all. So, that is where I will start; the day *The Before* ended and my new life began.

CHAPTER 1

CHAOS ONE

“Eve,” my mom called from the other room. “I’m heading to All-Mark to pick up a few things. Want to come?”

I had just sat down to binge watch the last season of *Great American Dream*, my favorite show. I was getting a late start and couldn’t waste a minute if I was going to catch up to my best friend, Natalie. Annoyed, I paused the hologram on host Gavin Starling’s gleaming white smile and trademark purple glasses. “Um, I’m kind of in the middle of something. Ask Connor.”

Mom’s small frame appeared in the doorway. “Your dad is taking him to his indoor soccer tournament. What’s so important anyway?” she asked as she swept her soft brown hair out of her face.

I motioned vigorously toward the television. “Tomorrow is the groundbreaking season twenty premiere! It’s going to be epic! I have to prepare.”

Mom rolled her eyes and put on her white, fuzzy coat. “You can do that later. Come on, it’ll be fun. We’ll grab dinner at the food court before we leave.”

“Every other family doesn’t go on shopping trips together. Why do we have to?” I whined.

I recited Mom’s answer with her. “Well, we aren’t every other family.” It was one of her “go-to” phrases whenever Con or I complained about scheduled family time. The truth was, I actually liked being around them, as long as no one from school found out.

“Don’t you like hanging out with your mom? Aren’t I hip enough for you?” She threw her hands above her head and shimmied her hips in a way that couldn’t be unseen.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her failure. “Actually, you’re too hip for me. But in all seriousness, tomorrow is the premiere! That leaves me with approximately twenty-eight hours to watch the entire last season, behind the scenes footage, and the *Where Are They Now* recap!”

Mom crossed her arms, unmoved and unamused.

“Uuuggghhhh, fine,” I moaned as I dragged myself off our new surround sound couch. I grabbed a coat and threw my long hair into a messy bun as I slunk toward the garage. It wasn’t that I didn’t like going to All-Mark; a mega-store with everything you could ever want. “Your one-stop shop for *All* your consumer needs at a price that hits your financial *Mark*,” according to the advertisements. The problem was that the trip would eat up my entire afternoon. It was utterly impossible for my mom to spend less than five hours in the store. I would need to be on my A-game to hurry her along. Thankfully, All-Mark was only five minutes away. The faster we arrived, the faster we could leave.

As our self-driven car purred quietly through the streets, Mom reviewed her list of items: milk, eggs, socks for

Connor, blah, blah, blah, a new Insta-cook. Suddenly, Mom reached across me and pointed to the highway. “Upper! One point for me!”

I gazed longingly at the shiny black SUV as it passed out of view. Our family always played the “Upper game.” One point for seeing an Upper Class vehicle or person, which was pretty rare in Oklahoma. I had no shot of winning, but that didn’t stop me from gawking out the windows as we took the dedicated exit and joined the mass of excited Saturday shoppers. All-Mark was the highlight of most people’s week.

We pulled into the parking lot and I marveled at the sight of the beautiful building. The entire base level of the four-tier spire was made of the highest-grade projection screens proudly displaying the newest in All-Mark fashion and trending electronic gadgets. The building spiraled upward to the newly constructed addition that sparkled with glass and lights. It seemed like every week, OneGlobal was making the place bigger and better. Despite my initial sentiment, I found my anticipation growing. Going to O.G. establishments almost made me feel like an Upper.

The OKC All-Mark had been established for almost ten years. The government started opening them in major cities twenty years ago and, like most things, it took some time for the trend to reach my boring sector of the country. I vaguely remembered shopping at disgusting old “malls” as a child but I tried to block that from my memory.

Places like All-Mark started after the *Economy Crunch* of 2074 when poverty ravaged the world. My parents were only kids then, but don’t think for one second I didn’t know every detail. The message was preached to us

starting in third grade; the story of how large corporations jeopardized every industry by competing with each other to raise prices. The public suffered from inflation and people barely had enough Credits to eat, let alone afford entertainment and luxuries. These companies destroyed the economy, forcing the government to step in and take over their businesses and standardize everything. There were protests at first, but once everyone realized the government could provide food for their family at a “price that hits your financial mark,” the protesters shut up.

The government was able to afford these provisions from contracts with OneGlobal: the revamped economic and business version of the United Nations. Established in 2075, OneGlobal “provides tax-free trading for countries striving for a better world.” They basically saved the planet. If it wasn’t for the O.G., I’d be living in a cardboard box, drinking dirty water and trying not to die from the common cold.

Plus, they made everything affordable. Before the foundation of OneGlobal, over eighty percent of the country lived below the poverty line. This led to horrible diseases like the Decimus plague which wiped out almost half of the world’s population. Thankfully, OneGlobal developed a cure and allowed every law-abiding citizen the right to health care, cable television, and fast food. They didn’t just save our country; they saved the world. They optimized every aspect of society. I should have known all the details from my eighth grade OneGlobal class, but all you really needed to know to pass was that OneGlobal is amazing. Stay loyal to the O.G. and the O.G. will take care of you.

Anything economic or political bored me to death. I

worked under the philosophy that, if it makes life simpler and I didn't have to worry about it, then *carry on big government!* I would have bet most of the nation felt that way about our world. OneGlobal boosted the American economy so much, why not let them run everyone else's too? Slowly but surely, the O.G. became the chief governing body of the rest of the world. Local businesses had to shut down in the process, but there were news stories every day about how the old mom-and-pop shoe store barely staying afloat now designed sneakers for people across the world. The technological and medical advances were astounding, but what I loved most about OneGlobal is what it did for reality TV!

They took the best show ideas from around the world and combined them into the most amazing, dramatic, and entertaining programs in the history of television. Every person I knew religiously watched *Great American Dream*, where everyday people are able to develop their talent and become superstars! Entertainers, artists, chefs, scientists and even industrialists, were chosen from the normal class, trained in their respective field and given the opportunity to work for OneGlobal. Of course, each week America voted for their favorite and some poor loser is eliminated from the competition. The winner from three seasons earlier became an executive for All-Mark and one time a cook from Oklahoma made it to the semi-finals. She ended up as the head chef for *Burgerz*, the only hamburger chain left in America. My mom had told us stories of her younger days about how there were several different hamburger restaurants. It was hard for me to believe because *Burgerz* was the only place I'd ever

known. Plus, why have lots of options for the same thing when you can just have one that is the best? And it wasn't like OneGlobal controlled our lives. I could still choose between tacos or spaghetti for dinner or decide which All-Mark shirt goes best with which All-Mark skirt.

I really could not understand the problems they were having in Europe. We didn't hear much about it, but occasionally there would be a thirty-second blurb on the evening news about some crazy radicals, the "Universal Defiance," overtaking some government-run building. OneGlobal forces always stopped them within minutes and the anarchists were usually ex-convicts who escaped from some small prison. But nothing like that had ever happened in America and I didn't see why it would. Sure, older people were paranoid that the attacks would cross the ocean, but I wasn't worried in the least. Our country was invincible with OneGlobal leading us forward.

"Brrrr. I hate winter," Mom said as we hurried through the large, glass doors of the south entrance. "Let's start with getting Connor new socks. I swear he goes through at least a pair every week."

The atrium flashed with large holographic advertisements of the weekly specials and clearance items. Interactive video boards previewed the evening's television programs mixed with public service announcements from OneGlobal. "Help yourself and help the world," one of them chimed. "Follow your Department of Compliance. Please report any suspicious behavior and obey all security personnel. Protect OneGlobal so we can protect you." We usually spent thirty minutes in that room alone, but a holographic sneak peek of the *Great American Dream*

premiere reminded me of my mission. I grabbed Mom's arm and made a beeline for the entry tunnel.

The north and south atriums were connected by a long, cement tube lined with vending machines and restrooms on the outer wall and one directional exits from the store on the other. My friends and I nicknamed the area the "echo tube." When All-Mark first opened, the empty area allowed your voice to carry the entire length of the tube. We would stand at opposite ends and see who could make the funniest sounds before security would run us off. When I say "we", I mean my friends would do it while I stood as a lookout. I was always too scared of getting caught.

Our games were put to an end when All-Mark installed a ginormous jumbotron in the middle of the tube, welcoming shopper to the solitary entrance to the actual store. The crystal clear picture and deep, booming sound demanded our attention as we walked toward it in a trance. The three-dimensional screen was the most impressive form of technology I had ever witnessed. I sucked in a breath as a giant, high-definition Gavin Starling illuminated the tube.

"Happy New Year! Are you ready for tonight? Do you have your favorite snacks? Upgraded to that next level sound system? Invited your friends to your virtual watch party? The countdown is on. Only twenty-seven hours and thirty-six minutes until the premiere and, trust me, you do NOT want to miss a single second. See you soon!"

Gavin winked through his glasses and my heart fluttered. "Let's go get those socks!"

After several unnecessary pit stops, we finally made it to the boys' clothing. I was in the middle of recalculating how many episodes I could go through in one night when a deep voice called out my mom's name.

"Angie! Hey, Angie!"

We whirled around to see a large man half jogging, half waddling toward us. He looked like a normal shopper, a fitted black shirt and bulky gray jacket, but the clear earpiece slightly protruding from his right ear suggested a security guard of some sort.

"Dave! It's been forever!" Mom said, smiling as she reached out for his hand. His giant paw engulfed hers. "Dave, this is my daughter, Eve. Eve, Dave and I went to high school together."

"Nice to meet you, Eve," he panted as he shook my hand enthusiastically. "Your mom and I go way back!"

"Oh, high school wasn't *that* long ago," Mom joked. "What's new with you? We're just making a small shopping run."

"I work for All-Mark now," Dave beamed. "Security. Undercover."

"Is that so?" Mom asked, one eyebrow arching.

"Yep." He leaned in as if to tell us a secret and whispered, "I pretend to be a shopper, but I keep an eye out and notify the Department of Compliance, a.k.a. the D.O.C., if I notice anything suspicious."

I couldn't help but smile at the guy's enthusiasm. You would have thought he had achieved his life's dream.

"Fascinating," Mom said, attempting to keep a look of seriousness on her face. "Well, we appreciate you keeping all of us safe. I bet the increasing crowds make your job

more difficult.”

“They don’t make it easy,” he said, giving me a wink. “But, I’m not complaining. More overtime means more Credits. Once they finish the east wing, it won’t feel as crowded. You’re not going to believe how fancy it’s gonna be. All the bells and whistles. They are pushing hard to double my department by next month *and* there’s a chance I could get promoted.”

“Good for you.” Mom said warmly. She was one of the kindest people I knew. She genuinely cared about everyone. “You’ve got to love living in a stable economy. How are Sierra and the kids?”

“Sierra is good, still working in quality assurance. Maddy is in fifth grade now and Mark is in first. Can you believe they are starting Economics in the first grade now? The homework that kid brings home looks like the stuff I did in high school!” Dave chuckled.

“I know what you mean. My son, Connor, is in eighth grade and has homework that I couldn’t even begin to understand. But, I don’t blame them. I’m sure OneGlobal wants the next generation to keep making improvements and finally stop all that craziness that’s going on in Europe.” Mom turned to me. “What do you think, Eve? How’s the homework of a seventeen-year-old?”

“Uh, sure. Brutal,” I agreed, apathetically.

A small beep emitted from Dave’s jacket. “Duty calls. I’ve got to get back to work. It was nice seeing you, Angie. You guys take care.” He turned and huffed away.

“You, too!” Mom called as she returned her focus to the socks. “I could have sworn he had a son your age. Weird that he didn’t mention him.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was Natalie: “ONLY 26 HRS TIL THE PREMIERE!!!! WHAT EPISODE ARE YOU ON?!?!?”

I texted back my sad tale of shopping through emojis. *Ugh, why does my mom always need a shopping buddy?* Natalie didn’t even talk to her parents. Sometimes, I just wanted to be the typical teenager. Deep down, my family meant the most to me, but in situations that interfered with my social life, I didn’t know if I was lucky or cursed.

The rest of the afternoon proceeded with checking off the list one agonizing item at a time. Natalie continually sent me updates on her progress in the G.A.D. binge. I was about ready to throw my phone through the display case in front of me when I recognized the man on the screen. I froze and grabbed my mom’s arm.

“Mom, can I please buy this new album? Please, please, please?” I begged.

“That’s funny,” Mom said as she scrolled through her phone. “I don’t remember seeing new music on my list.”

“Oh, come on. If you insist on me not being on social media while you drag me around All-Mark, the least you can do is buy me this very special album. Please, I’m your favorite daughter.” I gave her my cheesiest smile.

“For one, you’re my only daughter. Two, rules are rules. Three, what’s so special about this very special album?” Mom asked.

Since she asked about the album, I knew I had a shot. I took a deep breath and prepared my argument. “*Pop 2112* was recorded by *two* artists! One of which is my absolute favorite: last year’s winner of *Rock the Mic*, Rembrandt! Usually, the winner only provides music for the year they

were crowned champion then never heard from again. But Rembrandt was so popular they let him contribute to this year's album. And I just love his name. It's so unique, I don't know how he came up with it. Don't you agree?"

Mom rolled her eyes but nodded. I pulled her into a bear hug then scanned the display with my phone. The album loaded automatically. Mom reached over and took one earbud and we danced our way through the aisles.

"Alrighty. I think that does it," Mom said as she scanned her list for the twentieth time. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Eleven restaurants encircled the massive food court in the center of All-Mark. Mom ran off to find the healthiest option, while I took advantage of my alone time by checking my social media as I waited for sushi. A message flashed across the screen that my order was ready. I slid my phone into my back pocket, grabbed my tray, and turned directly into the chest of a guy my age.

"I'm so sorry!" he exclaimed as he bent down to pick up the carnage. He handed me the tray. The roll was contained inside its box, although thoroughly deconstructed.

I bit my lip as I tried to come up with something to say. "It's fine. It will taste the same." My cheeks burned hotly as I avoided eye contact. *Taste the same? That's the best you've got, Eve?* I had zero skill when it came to boys. Thankfully, Connor wasn't present to announce my fumble to the entire food court.

I worked up the courage to look up at my crash victim, but he was gone. I stood motionless until I noticed Mom waving me over to a table in the center of the room. I

dropped my tray on the table and sat down.

"I still don't see why you like that stuff. Is it supposed to look like that?" Mom asked as she wrinkled her nose at my plate.

"Yes, it's the new sushi salad. But you wouldn't know because you never try anything that's remotely out of the box," I quipped.

"Hello, kettle. It's me, pot," Mom retorted.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm willing to try new things...I just like to follow the rules, like a good citizen. Isn't that what you want? Or would you prefer for me to be more like Connor and have to worry what trouble I'll get into next, just counting down the days until I'm labeled Noncompliant."

"Eve, don't joke like that!" Mom hissed. She looked around to see if anyone had heard. "I'm just giving you a hard time. You know how much I appreciate your good behavior. Keep up your Compliance record and you're bound to end up in a rewarding career."

I played with my jumbled food. "Don't get your hopes up"

"Eve, you need to be more positive about yourself." Mom said, dropping her fork as she stared into my soul. "You are a smart, thoughtful, beautiful, young lady with a bright future ahead of you. You'll have a great match and a great career."

I blushed and shoved a piece of sushi in my mouth. I didn't like to talk about my future, mostly because I was nervous about my career path. Aptitude tests weren't until the following senior year, but I always choked on test day. Mom had high hopes, but I was a realist. With my luck,

I'd be scrubbing toilets for the rest of my life.

I collected our dinner trash to take to the waste incinerators when I noticed a man racing toward our table. It was Dave, only he had changed into his full security uniform and looked terrified.

Mom spotted him too, "Dave? Is everything alri—"

"You both need to leave the store now," he whispered, his voice shaking.

Mom darted her eyes from me to him. "Is something wro—"

"I don't have time to explain. Get your things and get out of here!" he interrupted, pointing toward the exit.

I looked around, embarrassed. An elderly couple sitting next to us stopped eating to take in the drama. Dave noticed and moved to block their view. He put a hand on Mom's shoulder and strained in a hushed tone, "You have been in the store too long. Store policy declares this as suspicious behavior and we ask you to take your purchases to the check out immediately."

Mom shook her head, her brows furrowed. "What are you talking about? We've only been here since four this afternoon. We can't possib—"

The elderly woman stood up. "Is something wrong?" Her loud voice only drew more attention.

"Everything is under control. Please remain in your seats." Dave turned back to Mom. "Ma'am! Do not make me call for backup! Do you want the Department of Compliance to get involved?" Many shoppers stopped their meal to watch the drama. Dave looked completely stressed out. Sweat rolled down his temple and off his quivering

jaw. “Angie,” he pleaded. “Please listen to me. Take your daughter, checkout, and go home.”

Mom looked from me to the growing number of onlookers. “Um, okay. We will leave, but I want a good explanation later this evening.”

Relief spread across Dave’s face as we stood and gathered our belongings. “Thanks,” he murmured, then turned to race back in the direction he came from.

“I wonder what that was all about. It wasn’t like we were loitering or in an unauthorized area. I’ve never seen him act like that before. Oh, well,” Mom pondered as we pushed our cart toward the wall of checkout chambers at the front of the store. “You know...when I was little...”

“No! Don’t go there!” I laughed.

“When I was little, we didn’t have these fancy checkout chambers that scan your entire cart. We had to go through each item separately. It took forever. In fact...”

I put my fingers in my ears and pretended to not hear the speech my mom gave *every* time we checked out at All-Mark. I smiled to myself as the shopper in front of us walked into the small room, leaving us next in line. It may have freaked me out a little, but thanks to Dave’s little meltdown, I was almost home free. I could hear the theme song for *Great American Dream* calling my name.

I felt a tap on my shoulder

“Excuse me, miss?” It was the elderly lady from the food court. “What did that security officer want? Why was he acting like that?” There was something like panic in her expression. She seemed nervous and spoke a little too loud.

Mom stepped beside me. “No, I was just telling my

daughter I had no idea what that was about. I—”

The lady interrupted, her pitch rising. “Why did he want you to leave? Is something going on here like the other places?” Other customers began to notice the woman’s theatrics.

“Is something going on?” a woman with two young kids in the adjacent line asked.

“No, nothing is going on!” Mom tried to explain.

The old lady became more hostile. “Something *is* going on and these people were warned. Tell us if we are in danger!” she yelled.

I had heard rumors of elderly people “catching paranoia.” We even had a lesson over it in health class but I had never witnessed it firsthand. The news reported that the attacks in Europe had acted like a triggering agent to set off certain older people. Some even required hospitalization to calm them back down.

People crowded around us and joined the jumbled conversation. I felt like we were on the cusp of a riot. Thankfully, the chamber door in front of us opened and we pushed our cart through the gate. The door closed behind us, silencing the commotion.

“What is going on?” I asked Mom as the automated cashier machine scanned our cart.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said, looking worried. “Those people were acting crazy!”

“Yeah...what was it she said? Something about being in danger?”

“I don’t know, but I say we take Dave’s advice and get out of here. ASAP.” Mom wrung her hands nervously. I’d never seen her look so scared.

The cashier chimed happily overhead. “Two-hundred and fifty-four Credits will be deducted from your account, Mrs. Price. Enjoy your day and thank you for shopping at All-Mark.”

The exit door slid open and we hurried into the echo tube. I immediately sensed something was off. The sound of metal carts being pushed to the exits reverberated off the walls. A palpable tension filled the air as I looked around to see what was different. That’s when I realized why the hall was so quiet. “Mom, look! The jumbotron isn’t working. That’s never happened before. Something isn’t right.”

“Maybe it’s down for maintenance,” Mom replied casually, but she started pushing the cart faster.

I kept her pace while trying to convince myself everything was normal. *Just think, ten minutes from now you will be back at home, watching G.A.D.* I sighed in relief when I saw the familiar glow from the advertisements in the atrium indicating our immediate exit.

We were ten meters from the doors when a loud screech stopped us in our tracks. Glass shards busted through the atmosphere as a body flew through the doors and landed at my feet. The man moaned, rolled onto his side and spit out several teeth. Blood poured down his face as he looked up at me. I held onto Mom for balance as my dinner attempted to make a reappearance. I looked past the man to see hundreds of people flooding the entryway. Instinctively, I grabbed Mom’s arm and ran in the opposite direction. We darted into the nearest restroom and peeked our heads into the hall.

We watched in horror as our cart disappeared when

several explosions took out the rest of the entrance. Smoke filled the area as teenage boys roared through the opening. Some ran screaming into the store while others strolled in, carrying baseball bats and large guns over their shoulders. *I didn't think guns existed in America!* Some wore dingy, tattered clothes while others wore Designer athletic gear. Some wore masks, and others elaborate face paint. One boy carried a large boom box on his shoulder that played some weird type of deafening music.

I covered my ears as Mom pulled me to the ground. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the destruction. Systematically, they demolished every checkout chamber exit and raced into the store. Through the damaged chamber door directly across from me, I could see terrified shoppers scatter as the boys decimated everything in their path, pushing over shelves, smashing TVs, even setting off fireworks and other small bombs. An older boy walked into my line of sight. He carried a megaphone in one hand and a shotgun in the other. His shaved head contrasted his thick beard. He sounded a police siren and all the boys froze in place.

“WHO'S READY FOR A LITTLE CHAOS?” he screamed and fired a gun into the air. “KRONIES... EMERGE!”

Suddenly, hundreds more gushed into the tunnel. Boys fanned out in all directions, completely taking over the store. The noise was deafening. I thought my heart would beat out of my chest.

Mom pulled me deeper into the restroom. I had to yell over the sounds of the store imploding. “They have guns! Real guns! What do we do? We have to call the D.O.C.!” I

patted myself down and realized I had dropped my phone somewhere in the bedlam.

Mom looked as terrified as I felt. Her hands shook as she reached inside her purse and pulled out her phone. “I have no signal. That’s never happened before. We can’t stay in here. If they come in, we’re trapped. It looked like they were all coming from the south and going into the store. Our only chance to make it out is to reach the north entrance before they do. It’s a straight shot down the hall. Stay low and go as fast as you can. No matter what happens, keep running. If we get separated, meet at home. Okay?”

I tried to speak, but no words came. All I could manage was a nod. The lights flickered on and off. Mom grabbed my hand and we edged to the doorway. It appeared that most of the group was inside the store, while a few stragglers hurried inside from the south entrance. The rest of the hall was devoid of life.

Mom pulled me into a bear hug. “On my count. One. Two. Three!”

We raced out of the restroom and toward the opposite end of the store. Mom led the way and pulled me behind her. I couldn’t get my shocked body to work correctly. It felt like I was running through honey. Mom looked back at me to see what my hold up was when a grown man slammed into us. The three of us crashed to the ground. I moaned and pushed myself to a sitting position as the room spun.

The man scrambled to his feet and leaned over us. “Do you want to escape alive?” He appeared not to have showered in some time. His matted beard stuck out in all

directions. His breath reeked as he yelled at us again. "I said do you want to get out of here with your lives?"

"Yes!" Mom yelled back at him as she stood protectively in front of me.

"Then act insane," the man said matter-of-factly.

"What? What do you mean?" Mom breathed. I crouched behind her, terrified.

"Act like you're out of your mind!" The man squatted down and mimicked a chicken. "They sent me in here to warn people...to give them a chance to get out. That's how you escape. You don't get lucky. You make a fool of yourself and if it's good enough they let you go."

I peeled my eyes away from the man to survey the store. I noticed part of the ceiling was missing and more boys repelled down. It sounded like the war movies shown in school about the *Pre-OneGlobal Era*: screams mixed with gunshots and broken glass.

The man turned to leave, but Mom grabbed his sleeve and screamed above the noise. "Don't go! Help us get out!"

He yanked his arm out of her grasp. "I'm just a messenger!" He barked like a dog then ran toward the middle of the store.

I stood in complete shock, as the only person who had some idea of what was going on disappeared from view. The lights flickered and snapped me back to reality.

Mom pushed me in front of her. "Keep going!"

We were halfway down the tube when hundreds of customers came screaming into the hallway from the checkout chambers. I felt Mom's hand rip from my grasp as people flooded in around us. I frantically searched the sea of faces with no sight of her. I spun in a slow circle.

“Mom!” I screamed, as desperation built in the back of my throat. Bodies pushed me in all directions as they rushed toward the exits. Suddenly, someone grabbed the back of my shirt. I turned in relief to see Mom, tears streaming down her cheek.

A loud metallic pop directly above us halted our reunion. I looked up to see the jumbotron sway dangerously from side to side. I stood in horror as the screen screeched ominously.

“Eve! Run!” Mom cried as the last cables holding the screen gave way. All I could do was close my eyes and brace for impact. A force slammed into my shoulders and threw me backward. A thunderous crash filled my ears as I gasped to replace the air that had left my lungs. I rolled to my side to see the smashed jumbotron just centimeters in front of me.

“Mom!” I shrieked, as I struggled to my feet. Frantically, I scanned the wall of debris. *Don't panic. She can't be under there. She's fine. She has to be.* The shattered screen stretched all the way from the checkout chambers to the outer cement wall. There was no way to get to the other side. I would have to go into the store to find her.

“Eve?”

I froze as my heart skipped a beat. *Was that Mom?* I ran toward my name and climbed up the side of the debris to a tiny crack between the wall and screen.

“Eve? Are you okay?” I could barely hear her over all the noise.

“Mom!” I yelled back. “I'm okay! Wait right there. I'll find a way to get to you!”

“No! Go home! There is a hole I can climb through over

here to get outside. Get out of here and run home. I will meet you there.”

I bit my lip as I weighed my options. Half of me wanted to follow my mom’s advice and get out of the store as fast as possible. The other half wanted to fight my way to my mom and make sure we were both safe. After what felt like an eternity, I decided to follow Mom’s instructions. *Who knows if I could even make it to the other side?*

“Okay, I’m leaving. I’ll meet you at home.” I turned around and immediately froze. A boy with a clown mask stood below me. He wore a vest and tie, with no shirt and faded jeans. His head cocked to the side and a shotgun slung lazily over one shoulder.

“Well, Dupe, that was a close one. Now, let’s get you down from there before you mess up that pretty face,” he said as he stepped closer and reached for my hand. I had no choice but to let him help me climb down the pile. Once at the bottom, he offered me his arm like he would escort me to prom. I hesitated.

“I don’t have all night, sweetheart.”

I gulped as I slowly slid my trembling arm into his. He interlaced his fingers with mine. Never in a million years did I picture my first time holding hands with a boy to be in the middle of a terror attack.

“See, this isn’t so bad,” the clown chided. “Too bad normal rules aren’t in play or this could have been a great evening for us.” He walked me all the way to the north atrium. I could see the cars in the parking lot, past the shattered advertising displays. The clown abruptly dropped my hand. “You’re so close! You may just make it out of here.” He pointed the gun at my face. “Or maybe not.”

The smelly man's words raced through my memory. *Act crazy.* I had no idea if it would work, but it was my only option. I started my own version of a ballet routine and did a pirouette. I slowly backed away, right into a trashcan. The receptacle and I both tumbled to the ground.

The clown let out a mirthless chuckle. "I see one of our informants has told you a little about us. Keep dancing, sweetheart."

I slowly stood to my feet as the clown watched, never lowering his gun. I spun and weaved my way through the broken glass to the exit. In the atrium, two young boys that looked to be about Connor's age sat perched on top of a cracked monitor. They eerily stared at me as I twirled through the exit.

"Thanks for shopping at All-Mark," I heard one of them say.

Tears streamed down my face when I stepped into the parking lot. I'd never been so happy to leave All-Mark in my life. *I made it out!* Freedom had never tasted so sweet. The brisk evening breeze seemed to kiss me on the cheek. From where I stood, everything looked completely normal, except for the five school buses crashed into the other entrance of the building. *I need to find Mom.* I sprinted toward the area where we were separated. I reached the middle of the building when I realized there was no hole in the wall. I ran my hands across the solid structure in disbelief. *What? Mom said there was a hole. What if she's still inside?* It was suddenly more difficult to breathe as a new batch of tears filled my eyes. My heart tore as I debated running back inside to find Mom or running home to safety. A loud squeal interrupted my thoughts. I turned to

see a beat up, old car screech to a halt right in front of me.

The car windows rolled down as the driver smiled at me. The bright lights of the parking lot cast a shadow across his face as he took a drag from what appeared to be...a cigarette? *Those haven't existed for decades.* He looked me up and down. "Need a ride?" he asked. I could tell from the deepness of his voice he was several years older than me.

Two guys in the back of the car started laughing. One of them stuck his head out of the window and yelled, "Looks like you're almost home free, Dupe. But that's where we come in. The cleanup crew!"

I closed my eyes. *Act insane.* I tried to cluck like a chicken but I was so terrified my voice wouldn't come to me. I weakly flapped my elbows up and down but all I could do was focus on the sound of the rattling engine. *This is it. This is how I am going to die.*

"Nice try, but we don't have the best reputation of following the rules," the deep voice said. "Sick her, boys."

My legs finally gave out as I sank to the ground, covering my tear-stricken face in my hands. I heard the car doors open and I peeked through my trembling fingers. All three boys jerked from my vision as another car plowed into theirs. Both vehicles skidded to a stop in the next row. An angry middle-aged man jumped out of the second car.

He turned toward me. "Don't just sit there. Run!"

For the first time that night, my body responded appropriately. I ran. I ran and ran and didn't stop until I reached my front porch.