

THE
ANOMALOUS
Secret

SNEAK PEEK #1

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1. Fresh Start

Sage Hansen was still human. She struggled with human thoughts, and heaven knows she felt all the overwhelming emotions of a human teenage girl. Then why couldn't the people who discovered the truth about her treat her like one?

Sure, she had abilities that could bring powerful men to their knees, but still, how was that her fault? She didn't ask to have her genes modified by a science experiment. It was an accident. She and her twin brother, Jayden, shouldn't have been playing hide-and-seek while their father was trying to work. He even held up a finger of authority to their faces and told them not to leave his office. But they were only four years old, and Jayden had taken her teddy bear and ran with it. What else was she

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supposed to do?

Sage sighed in the back seat of her parents' minivan as she glanced at her brother sitting by the other window. She watched as he played some strategy game on his tablet. Even though he didn't listen that night, she never blamed him for what happened. After all, what four-year-old listens? What four-year-old sits still when the parent isn't looking? He was being a regular kid, and she was only following along, trying to save her teddy bear. It wasn't supposed to have been such a big deal.

But it was, and it changed their lives forever.

Sage looked out the window at the shops and boutiques of her new town. It was somewhere in Texas, and the town was neither small nor large, but sort of in between. Personally, she preferred small towns, but it wasn't practical for a family like hers. They were better off in a place where they could blend in. Cities were ideal, but her mother knew someone in Texas. Which probably explained how her mother had found a job even before finding a house to rent. They had been living in a motel for a week, but not anymore. Sage looked forward to having her own room again.

Sage rolled down the window and the November breeze instantly cooled the inside of the van. Everyone shivered except for Jayden—he never got cold. She sucked in a deep breath, but the air was too dry for her taste. Although by then, she'd lived in so many different

places, she'd learned to adapt.

Sage rolled the window back up when she noticed her little brother Hunter, who was napping next to Jayden, curled up into a ball. Her attention shifted to her own reflection on the window once it closed. Her short red hair and fair skin stood out like a hazard cone in a deserted street. She didn't mind the attention; it was just that they needed to be cautious. After all, they'd been living in hiding ever since she could remember, and her and Jayden's fiery red hair made it almost impossible to go unnoticed.

Why couldn't she just turn invisible? That would've been an awesome ability to have. Although, being able to alter memories, create illusions, and cause limited mind control was a pretty amazing ability, too. It came in handy mostly when she lived in the city and felt like escaping to a quieter place. A place where she could think, and dream, and be herself.

It also came in handy the time she was kidnapped by the "trackers." That was what Sage started to call the men who kept trying to capture her family. When she first asked her mother about them, she was told it was because they'd heard about their abilities and were "curious." She didn't see any harm in that at first, but she was also ten at the time. It wasn't until she was twelve and strapped to a chair with a bunch of wires attached to her body that she realized how far they were willing to take their curiosity. If she hadn't manipulated their

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minds, who knows what they would have done to her. By the time Jayden found her, the men stood in a daze while their minds were in a world of horror. Grizzly bears and lions had them surrounded. She wanted them to feel like the prey for once.

She turned her attention to her iPod and closed her eyes. The techno song that had been playing came to an end, but the love song that started next brought memories of Jason Stuart.

Sage's heart twisted in her chest and she pulled off her earphones as if they were on fire. She looked out the window again, blinking back tears. She'd cried so much in the past week, she couldn't help but wonder how in the world she still had any tears left to shed.

She suppressed her emotions by focusing on the road. It was a one lane highway with trees on both sides, though the leaves weren't as green as the ones she'd seen back east. Her stepfather, Larry, slowed the van, then pulled onto a dirt road leading through the woods.

Sage sat up and watched, intrigued, for another five minutes. It was nothing but a rocky, narrow road, and she wondered for a split second if they'd gotten lost. The van eventually came out in a clearing, and she saw what was going to be their new home.

"We're here," Larry announced, parking the minivan in front of a two-story wooden cabin.

"What?" Jayden leaned forward, not even trying to

mask his disappointment. "It's made out of wood?"

"That's right. And we're also surrounded by trees." Larry gave Jayden a serious look through the rearview mirror. "So, no playing with fire, understood?"

Jayden stared at Larry as if he'd just been grounded for life. Jayden didn't *play* with fire, he *controlled* it. But Larry wouldn't know the difference if it hit him in the face. It wasn't entirely his fault, though. He just didn't understand because he didn't have any ability of his own. He was normal.

"What's the point of living far from civilization if I can't even be myself in my own home?" Jayden murmured, shoving his tablet into his backpack.

"There should be a large lake somewhere behind the house," their mother said in her caring tone. "I'm sure you'll be fine so long as you stay near the water, honey."

"How many rooms?" Sage asked, mesmerized by the house. The structure was unique, with logs just slightly uneven. It had so much character. She couldn't wait to sketch it.

"Three rooms and an attic," her mother replied. "But the attic isn't cleared out yet."

Jayden's jaw dropped again. "Are you kidding? Does that mean I'm sharing a room with Hunter?"

"Cool!" Little Hunter's face was plastered against the window, his spiky black hair glistening in the sun. "Can we put a swing on that tree, Dad?"

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“Let’s just make the best of it, okay?” their mother pleaded as she dug into her purse, looking for the new house key.

“As soon as I clear the attic, you’ll have your own room,” Larry promised, stepping out of the van and walking around to the trunk.

“Why can’t Sage get the attic?” Jayden whined. “It’s her fault we got caught this time.”

Sage shot a glare at her brother. Not only was that insensitive, but it was *so* uncalled for. How many times did they have to move because of a mistake *he* had made?

What he was really upset about was he didn’t want to leave Florida. The swim team had finally made it to the finals, and for the first time he was picked as the lead swimmer. So, yeah, it sucked, but there was no need to kick when she was already down.

“Jayden, help me with the luggage, please?” Larry called out as he started toward the front door.

Jayden let out an exasperated sigh. “Thanks a lot, *Jason*.”

Sage felt a stab in her heart and a jolt of burning anger. *He did not just say that*. She sucked him into her mind, into a fantasy world, and they were suddenly standing in front of a roller coaster ride. Jayden’s eyes widened in panic, seeing he was afraid of heights.

“Sage, don’t—”

She pushed him into the seat and locked him down.

He gawked at the high drop ahead while Sage's lips lifted into a vengeful smile. "Enjoy the ride," she said as the cart began to move.

"Sage, you're gonna pay for this!" Jayden yelled, but then the cart dropped and he squealed like a girl.

Sage removed herself from the fantasy world and returned to the van, only to find her mother staring at her.

"He started it." Sage jumped out of the car, leaving her brother sitting there, spaced out in a daze. She thought about snapping him back so he could help Larry, but one more round on that high roller coaster ride would sure teach him to keep his mouth shut.

Hunter's clumsy little body slammed on Sage's side as he ran past her and slowed to a walk next to his father. "Can I have the attic, Dad?"

Larry laughed as he balanced the luggage he was carrying.

"What's so funny?" Hunter asked, doubt creeping into his voice. "Are there bugs in the attic? Is that why you're laughing? Never mind." His little shoulders sagged as his voice deflated. "I don't want the attic anymore."

"I didn't think so, buddy." Larry pushed the front door open, and the smell of woodshop slapped them in the face. Hunter's expression twisted in disgust, but Sage smiled despite her aching heart. She loved the musky smell of wood. It reminded her of nature, and she always felt a sense of comfort outdoors.

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She rushed up the stairs, carrying only her things. After she entered one of the rooms, she closed the door and pressed her back against the wood. Finally, they had found a home after searching for months.

She took a deep breath, dropped her bags on the floor, and collapsed on her new bed. It smelled new like it had just been pulled out of its wrapper. Most of the furnished homes they'd rented were drenched in air-freshener only to mask that it had been used. The good thing about renting a furnished home was that they never had to carry much with them. They couldn't afford to be bogged down by a moving truck while on the run.

A light knock came from the door and her mother poked her head inside. "Honey?"

Sage sighed. "All right. I just snapped him back."

"Thank you."

Sage closed her eyes, giving in to the heavy weight in her heart, but then felt her mother sit at the foot of her bed. She sucked in a breath, bracing herself for what she knew was coming.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Sage placed the pillow over her face, wanting so desperately to escape. But retreating into a fantasy world and shunning her mother out would've been too rude. After all, her mother was just trying to help.

"Not really," Sage finally responded, her voice muffled from the pillow being pressed over her face. "I just want

to forget about it... all of it.”

“I know you do, honey, but escaping reality isn’t going to help you get through it.” Her mother touched her leg and she felt an instant calm wash over her. That was her mother’s ability. She was able to spread a feeling of tranquility, no matter how anxious or angry a person felt. It was the same when she played and taught music. It had a way of soothing one’s emotions almost miraculously.

Her mother had gotten her ability from Sage’s father. He had been there that night, and his genes were also altered. He had no idea being intimate with his wife would’ve changed her DNA.

Sage threw her pillow to the side and stared blankly at the ceiling. “I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it yet.”

Her mother rubbed her leg comfortingly. “That’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Sage’s heart sank, weighed down by the tsunami of emotions that came with memories of Jason. Her eyes began to water and she pressed them shut, trying to suppress the tears. “I really messed up this time, Mom.”

“We all make mistakes, sweetheart.” Her mother smiled as if that was just a normal part of life. “But it’s how we handle our mistakes that matters most.”

Sage sighed, her aching heart pulling her under. “I don’t know how to get through this.”

Her mother reached for her hand and squeezed it

lightly. "The right thing to do isn't always the easiest."

"What does that mean?"

"Escaping might seem appealing most of the time, especially if you don't know how to deal with a certain issue. But the problem doesn't go away just because you do. No matter how long you're gone, the problem will still be here when you get back."

Sage thought about it for a long time. "I just want to be normal."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm working on that." Her mother offered a soft smile. "We just gotta look out for one another in the meantime."

Sage nodded. "Thanks, Mom."

"Anytime." Her mother patted her leg. "Now, enjoy the rest of the day because you start school tomorrow."

Sage jolted upward, the feeling of sadness suddenly masked over. "But tomorrow is Friday. Why can't we just wait until Monday?"

"Hunter is starting tomorrow. So, if he has to go, you're all going." Her mother gave her the *this-is-nonnegotiable* look, then smiled to soften the blow as she pulled the door open. "Besides, I have a really good feeling about this place. I think it just might be our last *fresh start*."

2. First Day Again

The next morning, Sage skipped downstairs with her flowery backpack. She reached for a bottle of water from the fridge while her mother got Hunter's lunch ready.

"Where's Larry?" Sage asked, looking around.

"Up in the attic." Her mother let out an exasperated sigh. "The sooner he gets that cleared out, the sooner there will be peace again."

Jayden and Hunter had been arguing upstairs in their room the whole time. She got so used to tuning them out, she'd stopped hearing their bickering.

"I am not sleeping by the closet!" Hunter protested.

"Gosh, you're such a crybaby!" Jayden must've shoved Hunter aside because there was a loud thud, and the lights flickered in the kitchen.

“That’s *my* bed!”

“Get off, Hunter.”

“Mom!” Hunter yelled. By the sound of his voice, she could tell he was on the verge of crying.

Their mother zipped up the lunch box and sighed. “I am going to kill your brother.”

On their way out the door, the lights flickered again. They turned around only to find Hunter pressing his back against the stair railing. The lights flickered a third time and his cheeks flushed.

“Are you nervous about your first day of school, sweetheart?” their mother asked, and Hunter gripped the handle of his backpack as his eyes began to water.

“No,” he said, but when the lights flickered again, they knew he was lying.

Unlike Sage and Jayden, Hunter didn’t know how to fully control his ability yet. Because of their mother’s altered DNA, he had been born with the ability to manipulate electricity. In theory it sounded pretty cool, but in reality—and with his anxiety issues—it just meant learning to duck before a lightbulb exploded.

Sage put an arm around her little brother’s trembling shoulders. “You’ll be fine, kiddo. Both of our schools are on the same grounds.” She nudged him encouragingly. “If you get too nervous, just go to the office and call for me.”

He glanced up at his sister with eyes full of tears. “You would really come?”

“Even if I have to kick that steel door down.”

Hunter laughed, despite himself. “It’s not like you have super strength.”

“Then, I’ll *melt* the door down,” Jayden chimed in with a cunning grin as if he was already melting the door in his head.

Hunter’s eyes grew wide, as did his smile. “You would do that?”

“Yeah, now let’s go.” Jayden turned around and walked out the door. The lights stopped flickering and Hunter sucked in a bold breath. He looked renewed as he rushed after Jayden, who by then was already in the van.

Their mother shook her head as she reached for her keys. “Now why can’t your brother be that sweet all the time?”

“Because that wouldn’t be Jayden.” Sage rolled her eyes. “Hey, Mom. Why don’t you just use your ability to calm Hunter down?”

“If I do that every time, he’s never gonna learn to control his ability on his own.”

She remembered her mother’s motto: *The right thing to do wasn’t always the easiest*. It made sense. “Do you think Hunter’s gonna be okay today?” Sage asked, feeling nervous as well.

“Oh, yeah.” Her mother gave an unconcerned shrug. “He’ll be fine. You will all be fine.”

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Sage followed Jayden as he led the way across the track that lapped the football field. As they crossed, it swarmed with students from gym class. First period had already started. Their uniform, she noticed, was a white T-shirt with lime green shorts. She was already dreading how her skinny knees and pale skin would look with that bright neon color.

Once inside, she took a deep breath. Despite the anxiety of the first day, there was a strange comfort in the way schools shared general similarities. They all smelled the same, and for most part, looked alike—squared buildings, lockers embedded on the walls, white tile floors, and event posters plastered all over. This time of year, Thanksgiving decorations covered the walls.

As they walked down the deserted hallway, the classroom doors were the same shade of green as the lockers, so when they finally came across a dark silver door, it wasn't hard to figure out that it was the main office.

Jayden pulled the door open, but instead of letting his sister go first, he walked in ahead. Sage rolled her eyes as she followed behind him. One day, she thought, he would learn to hold the door open for a girl.

For a split second, she found herself wondering if their father would have taught Jayden to do that had he still been around.

No.

She immediately pushed the thought away. She had enough on her mind already. She didn't need any more distractions. She let out a breath, trying to keep her focus before ringing the bell on the counter.

"Why, hello there." An older woman, probably in her fifties, stepped forward with a polite smile. "How can I help you, dear?"

"My brother and I are new here." Sage pointed at Jayden, who was standing in front of the information board, holding the straps of his backpack. "Where do we get our schedules?"

"Ah, of course." The woman picked up a sheet of paper and scanned through it quickly. "Sage and Jayden... Hansen, is it? Seniors?"

Sage nodded and the woman looked at the computer. "Just give me one minute and I'll print out your schedules."

"Thanks."

"A bird? Are you kidding?" Jayden looked at Sage then pointed to the information board, looking disgusted. "*This* is our mascot?"

"Looks like a lapwing."

"It's a bird!" Jayden looked like he was about to suffocate. He plopped on the seat, dejected. "Just kill me now."

Sage knew how much he preferred being a *shark*, es-

pecially how it sounded during the swim meets. Lapwing just wasn't going to be the same.

"Don't let their small size fool you. Lapwings are courageous," she added. "Did you know they will stand up to an elephant to defend their young?"

"I don't care."

"Here you go, darling." The lady handed two sheets of paper to Sage. "Have a good first day now, ya hear."

Sage smiled politely on her way out the door. "We'll try."

After leaving the office, they went their separate ways. Sage's first class was on one end of the building while Jayden's was on the opposite direction. By the time she reached the stairs, she turned around and saw her brother looking at her from the end of the hall. She gave him a reassuring nod. Though he didn't *look* anxious, she knew he felt it. He was really good at masking his emotions. So good, in fact, that she sometimes wondered if it was another special ability of his. He sucked in a breath before disappearing from sight.

He'll be fine, she thought, assuring herself. *What's the worst that could happen on the first day?*

Sage made a point to get to her history class with a whole minute to spare. She hated walking in when everyone

was already seated. It was the perfect angle to stare at the new kid.

She quickly made her way to the teacher's desk, holding out her schedule. Mr. Finn looked up from his pile of homework that still needed to be graded and sighed. He didn't seem too pleased to have yet another paper to grade. He looked overwhelmed. There were beads of sweat forming on his forehead and even his color was growing paler by the second.

He reached for Sage's schedule, signed it without as much as a hello, and returned his attention to grading the papers. No welcoming chitchat or making Sage stand in front of the class. She liked him already.

On her way to her next class, she decided to stop by her locker and drop off her history book. No need to carry that monster around all day. She walked at a slower pace than most of the students, and kept bumping into many of them, shuffling through her backpack trying to decipher her locker combination. The secretary wrote it down at the top of the schedule but her handwriting was indiscernible.

"Watch out!"

Sage swung around, startled. Two guys racing down the hall ran past her. One of them hit her shoulder so hard, she dropped her books as well as her opened backpack.

"Ouch!"

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“My bad!” The brown-haired senior yelled with only a quick glance over his shoulder. His friend started to laugh so hard, it slowed him down just enough for the brown hair guy to speed up and take the lead.

Sage huffed as she got on her knees to collect her things. The one time she didn’t want to be invisible, it was as if she were. No one cared that they were stepping on her notebook or her makeup. “Hey! That’s my hand, you idiot!”

“Here,” a soft voice snuck up behind her and she turned around.

Ashley held out a hairbrush. She wore a short, checkered skirt with a white blouse, and her light blonde hair was thin as air and clipped back at the top.

“Is this yours?” Ashley asked kindly.

“Thanks.”

Ashley gathered more of Sage’s things and dropped them inside her backpack for her.

“Ashley, get up from that filthy floor.” A girl with black hair pulled to a high ponytail towered over them with her arms crossed.

Ashley flashed a quick smile then got to her feet. “I was just helping—”

“Right now is not the time for charity,” the snob replied. “We’re late, and I need something from your locker.”

“She was just being *nice*,” Sage blurted out as she got

back on her feet. “If you don’t know what that word means, you should look it up.”

The snob stepped in front of Sage with eyes so narrow she could have been shooting lasers. “Was I talking to you?”

Sage rolled her eyes. “You are such a stereotype.”

“Whatever.” She turned on her heels and walked away.

Once she was out of sight, Ashley’s gawk turned into a wide smile. “That... was... awesome!” Ashley reached for Sage’s history book and handed it back to her. “Here.”

“Thanks.”

“I have never seen anyone stand up to Chelsea like that.”

Sage knew she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help but smile. It did feel good.

“You should try it sometime,” Sage said, opening her locker and shoving her book inside.

Ashley laughed, leaning on the locker next to Sage’s. “She’s not as mean as she seems.” The bell suddenly rang and Ashley’s smile faded almost immediately. “Oh, poop. I’m late.” She swung her small pink backpack over her petite shoulders and smiled one last time before racing down the hall. “See you around!”

Sage laughed as she slammed her locker closed. It had been the first time she’d ever stood up for somebody, and it felt good. Sure, she needed to keep her head low

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and her face out of the spotlight, but that didn't mean letting others walk all over her. Not anymore.

By the time Sage arrived at her next class, the door was locked. She knocked and watched through the narrow glass window as one of the students got up to open it. She tried ignoring the curious eyes as she walked toward the teacher's desk.

Mrs. Word stretched out her hand as if expecting a late pass, but when Sage handed her the schedule instead, she did not look happy. She scanned the paper then looked up at Sage.

"I do not tolerate tardiness," she said, her expression so cold it gave Sage the shivers. "But seeing this is your first day, I will pardon it." She then announced to the class that they had a new student, and as if that wasn't bad enough, she made Sage turn around and tell everyone a bit about herself.

Where are the Trackers when you need to run?

"Go on," Mrs. Word demanded in her stiff posture. "We don't have all day."

"Uh... My name is Sage Hansen and I came from Florida—"

Another knock came from the locked door and everyone's attention followed. Sage felt relieved. Through the

small window on the door she could see the young man's face. She recognized the brown wavy hair almost immediately. It was the same boy who had bumped her in the hall.

Mrs. Word signaled for one of the students to get the door, annoyed about yet another interruption. "Late again, Mr. Holt?"

The young man walked in sweaty from running. "I can explain—"

"You can explain in detention. Now, please sit and stop interrupting my class."

"But Mrs. Word—"

"Is one day not enough for you, Mr. Holt?"

He let out an exasperated sigh.

"Didn't think so. Now, sit."

Once Holt dropped his backpack on a desk in the back of the room, Mrs. Word turned her attention back to Sage, as did the rest of the students.

"Are you done?"

"Yep." Sage flashed a quick smile then darted to the back of the class. Uff. Saved by the bell—or in that case, the knock. The assignment was already written on the board by the time she made it to her seat.

"Yo, Damien," a guy called out in a hushed tone before passing him a note. It made him laugh, but he didn't write back. And Sage had no idea why she was even paying attention to that.

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She shifted her attention to unpacking her things, but then the lights flickered. She stopped shuffling through her bag, and the lights flickered again. It didn't seem to be a big deal for anyone else as they started the assignment, but Sage knew better than to dismiss it. Unfortunately, because of her circumstances, she had become way too paranoid to ignore even the slightest detail around her. The lights flickered again and Sage felt a knot tighten in her stomach. When the lights flickered a fourth time, it didn't stop for a few seconds, even the teacher looked at the ceiling with concern.

"Is it raining outside?" Mrs. Word asked, and that snob, Chelsea, stood up to open the blinds.

"No, ma'am. Kind of cloudy but no rain," Chelsea said, just as confused as everyone else.

Suddenly, the lights flickered one last time before blacking out the entire room as well the hallway.

"What in the world is going on?" Mrs. Word mumbled, starting toward the door. "I'll be right back. No one move an inch, otherwise you will get detention." When she opened the door, Sage could hear people talking in the hallway. It must've been other teachers because Mrs. Word joined them.

Sage waited for the door to shut before rushing to the window. As soon as she opened the blinds, she gasped.

"What happened?" Chelsea asked, more annoyed than curious. She stood from her seat to join Sage by the

window. “What is it?” She looked around, completely clueless as to what had made Sage so horrified.

When Sage didn’t respond, a handful of students got up from their seats and rushed to the window, hoping to understand what in the world was going on.

“The vaccine truck,” Sage whispered, knowing it meant a lot more to her than it would to everyone else.

“The vaccine truck?” Chelsea echoed. “That’s what got you all riled up?” she asked with mocking in her voice, but Sage forced herself to tune everyone out as she tried to spot Hunter in the line of kids outside of the school. If she could see him, then she could suck him into her mind and tell him to hide in the bathroom until she got to him. But she was too far away to make out any faces.

Though Sage was distracted, she could still hear the same familiar murmurs she’d heard many times before.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“That girl is weird.”

Sage backed away from the window but bumped into a desk behind her. When she turned around, Damien looked up from his phone.

“Look,” he said flippantly, “if you’re afraid of needles or something, you don’t have to freak out. Ours was last week, so you’re good.”

She was never *good*, but she didn’t bother saying that. Instead, she headed toward the door. She peeked her head out and when she didn’t see anyone, she ran down

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the empty hallway until she reached the staircase. By the time she climbed down to the first floor, Jayden was there peeking out the window.

“You saw it too?” he asked, alarmed.

“Yes!” Sage pulled him with her. “We have to get to Hunter before he gets into that vaccine truck.”

“What the heck is he doing in a vaccine truck?”

“No idea, but if they take his blood, that tube will be glowing with electric blue liquid within the hour.”

“Do vaccine trucks even take blood?”

“Not normally, but what if it’s a cover like it happened in Chicago? We can’t risk it.”

“Then why don’t you just suck him into your fantasy world and tell him to stay away from the stupid truck?”

“I can’t do it without seeing him.”

They sprinted down the hall but when they reached the double doors, it was locked. The security guard stood from his post with his arm stretched out in front of him.

“We are on lockdown,” he said, motioning for them to step away from the door. “No one goes in or out.”

“Look here policeman-wanna-be—”

Sage pulled Jayden by the collar, choking him to shut his mouth. He stumbled backward and she took his place.

“I’m sorry, sir. What my brother meant to say is that it’s an emergency. I have to get to my little brother at the elementary school.”

“Then you kids need to go to the office and get a pass,

otherwise no one leaves the building.” The guard crossed his arms and puffed out his chest. Typical indication that he was not going to budge.

Jayden stepped forward, ready to argue further, but Sage pulled him with her as she walked away.

“We can’t afford to waste any more time,” she whispered. “We need to get to Hunter, now.”

“How are we going to do that? All of the doors are locked.” Once they rounded the corner, Jayden stopped. “Wait, I think I have an idea.” He reached for the fire alarm on the wall and smiled. “How about this?” Just the idea of doing something he wasn’t supposed to gave him an incredible thrill.

“That will definitely reverse the lockdown and force everyone out of the building. That’s brilliant. Okay, pull it.”

Sage stepped back, bracing herself as Jayden pulled the fire alarm, but nothing happened. He pulled it again and again, but with no electricity and no generators, it was impossible to sound the alarm.

Sage heard footsteps down the hall and pulled Jayden into the nearest janitor’s closet. They crouched in the small space and waited for the footsteps to pass. Jayden turned on the light on his watch and scanned around the room.

“How about this?” He pointed the glare toward a fire detector in the corner of the ceiling.

“Without power that won’t trigger the alarm, either,” Sage said, losing hope. But suddenly her eyes locked on a sprinkler head above them. “Now *that* might work.”

“What?” Jayden followed her gaze upward.

“The water system is not connected to the electricity,” she explained. “Can you get a fire to burn underneath to make it go off?”

“Come on, sis, have a little faith, will ya?” Jayden raised his hand under the sprinkler head and flames shot out of his palm. The sensor was triggered within seconds and the water spewed out.

“Run!” Sage pushed Jayden out the door, blinking drops of water away from her eyes. Screaming students barged out of the classrooms in a wave of panic, and Sage moved with the current toward the exit.

As soon as she broke free from the turmoil, she darted toward the elementary school, sprinting across the football field. She saw a line of children leading into the blood drive truck, but none of them looked like Hunter, so she pushed forward.

“Hunter!” she yelled as loud as she could, but her lungs were giving out—as were her legs. Every muscle in her body was cramping and burning and aching, but she kept pushing to run faster. “Hunter!” She got to the chain-link gate that separated the properties, but it was locked. She yanked and tugged at the lock, but it was made of steel. She thought about climbing the fence, but

who was she kidding? She wasn't that athletic. She pulled the gate as far out as it would go to see if her body could fit through it, but the gap wasn't big enough.

Sage stepped back and looked around, searching for another way. Perhaps she could run around the fence, but it was too far. Suddenly, the lock began to glow a bright red and melt from the hinge.

Jayden.

She looked over her shoulder, searching for him, but the multitude of students made it impossible to pinpoint his location. Not that it mattered.

She refocused her attention and began to unwrap the chain from around the gate. She pushed the gate open and charged toward the vaccine truck. She pushed through the pain and exhaustion until she finally made it up the steps.

"Stop!" she cried with what felt like her last breath. "Hunter!"

"Excuse me, Miss?" A short-haired woman came from the back of the truck. "You can't be here."

"Where's my brother?" Sage could barely breathe. "Did you take his blood?"

The same woman reached for the clipboard and scanned through it quickly. "What's his name?" she asked.

"Hunter Hansen."

"Hmm... I don't see a consent form for that. Not to

worry, though. We will make a note to discard it at the lab.”

Sage’s eyes frantically roamed the tubes on top of the counter. “You know what...” Sage tried keeping herself from panicking. “Why go through all that trouble? Just give it to me and I’ll throw it out.”

“Even if we could do that, which we can’t, the first batch has already been sent to the lab.”

“I didn’t know vaccine trucks drew blood on minors?” Sage noted, and the woman looked up from the clipboard with a serious expression.

“There are exceptions in some cases,” she said. “But like I said, we will make a note for it to be discarded. You don’t have to worry. I’m sorry about the misunderstanding.”

Sage was sweating and the people in the bus were starting to look at her funny. Maybe they were all thinking she was a fanatic religious person making a big deal about a tube of blood. But that was better than them finding out the real reason.

She could hear murmurs behind her as she made her way out of the bus. Her mother was not going to be happy. And Larry was going to have a fit! But that was not the worst part. What was breaking Sage’s heart the most was the possibility of the Trackers finding out about Hunter. So far they only seemed to have gone after her and Jayden, but never Hunter.

If they found out Hunter was like them, he would also become a target, and just the thought of the Trackers taking Hunter and doing to him what they had tried to do to her made Sage sick to her stomach.

“Sissy, over here!” Hunter called out, sitting on a bench with a bag of chips.

“Hunter!” Sage rushed toward him. “Why did you let them take your blood?”

“I told them I didn’t want to,” he said innocently. “But they said if I didn’t, I couldn’t get chips.”

Chips? Are you kidding me?

All she wanted to do was hit him across the head, but despite her anger, she knew it wasn’t his fault. He hadn’t been told that their blood was different. Even though they had all seen how their blood changed color after about an hour of being outside of their body, still, he couldn’t have connected the dots. Apparently, all he was thinking about were free potato chips.

“Where’s Jayden?” Hunter asked, swinging his legs back and forth on the bench.

“Long story, kiddo.” Sage let out an exhausted breath. “If you only knew what we had to do to get to you—”

“Whoa!” Hunter’s eyes widened as he stared over Sage’s shoulder. “You guys did *that* for me?”

When Sage turned around, the entire top corner of the high school building was in flames.

Sage gasped. “Oh, Jayden... What did you do?”