

## ABSTRACT

Awake and Blind: A Novella

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In my thesis, a fictional narrative, I have created a fantasy story that explores the philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes, and Plato with regard to the question of reality. *Awake and Blind* follows Liam through a journey when he wakes to a world where he cannot trust what he sees. He must seek to uncover the source of the illusion and rediscover the truth of reality for the world. In addition to the works of Hobbes, Descartes, and Plato, this story draws upon ideas from many sources, including *Utopia*, *The Prince, 1984*, and Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories*. My thesis project is centered on the exercise of writing a long piece of fiction, and it also contains an analysis to explain my sources and artistic decisions within the work. Ultimately, within the work, I try to grapple with the concept of interacting with reality and to determine what matters most when we cannot trust anything.

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AWAKE AND BLIND: A NOVELLA

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
University Scholars Program

By  
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To the Inklings  
Both here and there

“Of course it’s in your head, Harry, but why  
on earth should that mean it is not real?”

-J.K. Rowling

## AWAKE AND BLIND

A Novella

### **Liam**

The air smelled like blood. Dirt. Explosives. Liam lay flat on his back, and the air seemed to evade his lungs as he breathed in quick unfulfilling gasps. His side hurt—a broken rib, maybe. He flexed both of his hands, felt no pain, and slowly placed them on the rough ground beside him. This was what war felt like, he reminded himself. The heaviness of the battlefield surrounded him.

Liam opened his eyes expecting to see the world as dark and destroyed as it had seemed only moments before. His head spun, disoriented by the bright glint of sunlight and the shiny new glass buildings. The road was clear and newly paved, not even a piece of trash in sight. In fact, there was nothing to even suggest the slightest imperfection. He took a deep breath.

Still the same. It smelled like battle, death, and destruction—if those things could even be a scent. But Liam knew they could. He'd been there. He'd almost died in the war. Yet he was here now. Was he alive? He wasn't sure.

He slowly shifted his weight onto his hands and pressed against the—was it gravel? He looked down but only saw smooth black asphalt. His legs shook unsteadily, and he walked across the street and tripped over... *something*. His foot had undoubtedly made impact with something solid, but when he looked back, nothing. Confused, he stumbled into the nearest building, a national bank with an inviting open sign.

Liam stepped into the rotating glass doors and walked to the mahogany reception desk in the middle of the marble floor. Even though the neon sign in the window read *open*, there wasn't a person in sight. The only sound in the massive lobby came from the overhead music—a generic tune from his parents' childhood, thankfully without the off-key lyrics, but just loud enough to stick in Liam's head.

“Hit me baby, one more time,” he sang under his breath along with the song as he searched for some sign of human life. A bell on the desk bore a sign that said *ring for assistance*. He reached his hand out hesitantly to—his hand went straight through the bell without contact, and the bell disappeared.

Beneath his hand, in the small space where the bell would have been, he felt a small scrap of paper, which he slid off the desk. He read in the scrawled handwriting: *Room 24*.

Liam looked around. The hallway leading away from the left side of the atrium was lighted, unlike the identical hallway on the right side. He decided to follow it.

A distinct breeze through the room made the hairs on Liam's arms stand up, as if the wind from outside had somehow made its way inside, but no windows were open nor vents visible. Liam realized that the sounds of the music were replaced in this room by the unfaded sound of the street outside.

Ten chairs surrounded a wooden table. Hooked up to the wall, a high tech computer screen stood as the focal point of the room. Only one person sat in the room now, a young blonde woman, in her early twenties like Liam. She sat at the head of the table, immersed in a newspaper. She looked perfectly at ease in the office, but her attire—a pair of faded blue jeans, t-shirt of an old band, and Converse sneakers—



separated her from the sterile walls of commerce. Liam moved toward one of the seats furthest from the unknown blonde. She had to acknowledge his presence sometime. If she'd left the note, maybe she could explain why he was here.

“I wouldn't sit there,” the blonde said as he chose his seat and began to lower himself into the chair. She glanced up from her newspaper and stared. What presumption, he thought, and deliberately held her eye contact as he sat in his chosen chair. But his body never made contact with the fabric of the seat. He felt his body sink lower, lower, and lower until he found himself, rather painfully, on the floor. How had he missed the chair?! He could vaguely make out the shape of the chair around him as he sat, embarrassed, on the floor. But it was little more than a distortion in the air. The outline of the chair began to fade, and Liam began to question if it was only his imagination. Could he have a head injury? Perhaps he'd had a concussion. That certainly would explain how he could wake up in an unfamiliar place—a street of all places, good and dangerous—and why his memory felt so fuzzy. How messed up was his brain?

The blonde stood from her chair—a chair that actually held her up, which was just so unfair—and walked to Liam. She offered her hand to him. Reluctantly, he took it and allowed the woman to pull him to his feet.

“Warned you,” she said as she walked back to her seat and picked up the paper once more with a smirk that infuriated Liam. He stood hesitantly and watched the clock on the wall behind the woman tick while she flipped the pages. A minute. Two. Finally, he cleared his dry throat.

“Where can I sit?” Much as he hated to ask for it, he figured she might be able to help him find a chair he could sit in without falling through. After all, she hadn’t fallen through her own chair.

The woman smiled, refolded the paper, and deliberately set it down on the table in the exact same location as before, about two feet to the right of her seat. “Decided to listen to me, have you?” she said, but this time her tone was kinder. She gestured to the chair directly to her left. He made his way toward it, suddenly unsure of every step. “I didn’t actually want you to fall through, but it got your attention, didn’t it?”

The haughty edge to her voice grated on Liam’s nerves, especially in his current state. However, she was the only person he’d seen since his bizarre awakening. Until he had a better option, Liam decided he shouldn’t discount the only person who might be able to explain what was going on.

He decided to streamline the process, skip the pleasantries, and head straight for the meat of what he wanted to know. “Why did I fall?”

The woman ignored his question. “Who are you?”

Her question caught him off guard. Such a simple query should require a simple answer. An answer he’d always known. Now, though, he wasn’t so sure. He tried to search his brain but found only fuzzy images and words just out of reach. How much of his memory had he lost?

“Liam.” That was all. He didn’t know if he was dead or alive, what day it was—forget that, he didn’t even know what year it was. How had the war ended? The whole city laid in ruins in his last blurry memory. How did they rebuild so fast? Or was it even fast? Where were his loved ones? His... Liam stopped, his heart pounded in his chest and

he felt a jolt in the pit of his stomach... his wife. *Emily*. They had been married a month before the war started. Was she still alive? Was she looking for him? How could he find her?

The war. Liam couldn't remember what they were even fighting for. He remembered joining the battle eagerly, believing so strongly in the cause, but what was it? He would never forget the faces of soldiers, some as young as fourteen, untrained and without uniforms, falling in battle. Blood soaked their jeans, seeping out of fresh wounds too deep to survive. How many men and women had he watched die? He struggled to remember what he was fighting for. If it was worth the loss of so many lives—so many good men—certainly it was important.

Liam's head felt too heavy for his neck to support anymore. He leaned forward to put his elbows on the table, but his stomach swooped and he nearly fell again, forward this time because his arms never made contact with the table surface. He glanced up to the woman for answers, but she gave none. He found no words to continue, so he finally shrugged in reply, and she spoke.

“How long have you been awake?”

Awake? The question raised more questions in his mind than the answer could possibly quell in hers. Yet it seemed oddly comforting. His strange unconsciousness was normal and expected? How long had it been since that moment on the street? An hour? Not even. He told her as much.

“That explains the confusion. And the chair,” she said and nodded to herself.

“You probably don't even know who you are now or how you got here. Am I right?” He

shrugged. “Maybe it would be easier to tell me who you were, if you remember anything.”

“Liam Coleman,” he said, the name unfamiliar until he heard his own voice speaking it. “I have a wife, Emily. But I don’t remember where we live. I have the oddest feeling, like it’s close, but I have no idea how to get there or what it looks like.”

“So you lived around here before the war,” she said. “Were you involved in it?”

“Yes.”

She looked up, apparently startled by his quick answer. She narrowed her eyes into a measured stare. “Which side?”

“I can’t remember,” Liam said. “What were we fighting about? I couldn’t even tell you what the sides were.”

“That’s the general consensus right now. In all honesty, I was hoping you could tell me. Nobody seems to know what we were fighting for,” she said. “I wonder if they ever knew.”

But he had known. He could remember that much. Every time he tried to think back, to reclaim his memories from *before*, one emotion stood out clearly: he cared so deeply for the cause, whatever it was.

He didn’t mention that to the woman. Instead, he tried to turn the questions back on her. “Who are you?”

She stared at him for a minute with pursed lips and narrowed eyes. Liam felt himself begin to waver under her scrutinization, but he refused to let it show. He held his jaw taut and held her gaze. The moment she made a decision, it showed in the relaxation

of her face. “Teagan,” she said. “Teagan Middleton. I’ve been awake for two weeks, six days, and fourteen hours.”

So he wasn’t the only one.

“How long has it been since the war? How did it end?” He been unconscious in the middle of the street? How long? Maybe he should think about getting to a doctor. Why hadn’t he been run over or worse? He imagined the putrid smell of road kill emanating from his battered body on the side of the road. How many people were around, or *awake* as Teagan had called it?

“One month, two weeks, and four days as far as we can tell, but no one has been awake that long. We don’t know how it ended, and we don’t know how we all ended up unconscious.” She sighed, obviously frustrated, but Liam couldn’t tell if it was from the strange state of the world or from his abundance of questions. He clenched his teeth to hold back several of the ones in his head—who had rebuilt the city and how, who had survived, why hadn’t anyone found him in the middle of the street, what did it mean to be *awake*—please don’t let that be a metaphor for death—and landed on a simple but important one.

“Where are we?”

“Downtown, in the middle of the Capital. You don’t recognize it?”

“I don’t recognize anything,” Liam said with a smile. “It does feel familiar, but there’s something... different.”

“Different *how*?” she asked. She leaned forward in her seat, fixated.

“It feels...” Liam glanced around the room. His eyes slid past the sleek windows and cream walls to linger on the empty chair he’d fallen through before. Something was

definitely off. He'd felt it from the moment he had opened his eyes, but he couldn't quite nail it down. "Well, for one thing, everything looks too perfect, you know? All the potholes and imperfections to the street and buildings—the things that give a place character, make it feel lived in and real—they're all gone. It's like I'm watching a movie. It's a decent approximation, but it looks fake."

Teagan smiled, her face brightened while he spoke, and she nodded approvingly. "Okay. Really good start. Anything else?"

Liam thought for a minute. Another gust of cold wind blew past him, and he glanced back at the closed windows. Caught in the same impossible breeze, the newspaper flew off the table. "When I close my eyes, I feel like I'm in another place entirely. The sounds, the smell, the feel—none of it matches."

Teagan stood up, her grin spreading further across her face, and held out a hand to Liam. "Come with me."

He rose from his seat and grasped her outstretched hand. What was she doing? She turned toward the wall opposite the door, and began to walk forward, directly *into* the windows. Liam opened his mouth to say something, but before any words came out, she disappeared through the wall, his hand along with her.

The unnerving sight made Liam let out a slight noise of distress at the sight of his invisible hand before he heard Teagan's laugh nearby.

"Liam." Her voice came from the wall, as clear as a moment before when he could see her. "Come on. Take a step forward." He felt a slight tug on his hand, and watched more of his arm disappear through the wall.

“Holy hell,” he said in a whisper and took a deep reassuring breath before he closed his eyes and stepped forward.

He felt nothing. It was no different from the step to the wall—as if the wall weren’t even there.

Liam opened his eyes to see Teagan standing before him, both of them outside the building. The wall stood, a visible and imposing sight, a mere step behind him, and they were back on the street of the strangely perfect world.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Teagan asked, but her smirk faded into a reassuring look when Liam continued to look confused.

Liam wasn’t comforted, though. His eyes darted back and forth between her and the wall they had walked through.

“How did we do that?” he asked. “How did you know that the wall wasn’t real? And how did you know that one chair would work even though the other didn’t?”

Teagan shrugged. “Eventually you’ll get used to it and learn to tell the difference between what’s real and what isn’t.”

“And until then? What’s happening?”

“Liam, trust me,” Teagan said.

He shook his head, unwilling to yield so easily. “Give me a reason.”

“You don’t have a better option.”

## **Teagan**

Teagan smiled sadly at the man before her. His clothes were stained with mud and stiff from the filth, and she wondered if he’d even noticed the state of his appearance yet. She wanted him to trust her, however unsure she felt about trusting him yet. Without

waiting for him to respond, she turned right on the sidewalk and began to walk away, leaving him alone by the side of the building without a word. She knew her response offered neither help nor reassurance, but she knew he needed to choose to trust her based upon honesty and faith rather than comfort.

She barely made it halfway down the block before she heard footfalls jogging to catch up with her, and a genuine smile passed across her face before Liam reached her. They followed the path Teagan had carefully marked that morning in silence for about a mile before they reached the narrow alleyway that led to the rickety fire escape.

Teagan watched Liam hesitantly test each stair step before he put his weight on it, much to her amusement. She understood the urge, but couldn't help but laugh at his endeavors. When they reached the top floor of the building, Teagan slid her fingers under the latch of the furthest window and slid it open. Her fingertips grasped the sides of the window frame and she lowered her body through, beckoning Liam to follow her. After ensuring that he was on his way in, she walked through the bedroom into which they'd climbed, to the hallway, and followed it toward the living room.

“Spence!” she said. Her voice echoed through the apartment, bouncing off the tall ceilings and bare walls. “I found a live one.”

A grunt came from the kitchen, and Teagan followed the voice to find Spencer. He sat at the kitchen table, still in his pajamas, pouring over notebooks full of writing, his jet-black hair falling into blue eyes.

“Spence!”

“Hey—I am working,” he said. Spencer held one of the notebooks up and waved it at Teagan, who rolled her eyes.



“Didn’t bother with real clothes this morning?”

“Societal construct,” Spencer said. “And since we don’t live in a fully constructed society at this time, I don’t think I am bound to follow those same rules.”

“Okay, crazy,” Teagan said. Her friendship with Spencer was going to ruin her eyesight with the high rate of eye rolls per minute in his presence. “We have an unusual guest in the other room. Come meet him.”

They found Liam in the tiny living room, made even smaller by the wealth of papers and books littered around the room. Liam stood in front of one of the maps of the city that covered the walls along with the blueprints of a piece of machinery. Teagan watched Liam step closer to the map and squint to read the small print beneath one of the blueprints.

“Is this presentable?” Spencer said and turned slowly for Teagan to assess his new outfit—he’d traded his pajama pants for a pair of sweatpants and thrown a ratty t-shirt on over his wife-beater.

Liam jumped at the sound of the new voice and stepped back from the wall.

“So you’re the new guy?” Spencer asked. He extended a hand in an uncharacteristic welcome.

Liam nodded and introduced himself as he firmly shook the offered hand.

“I’m Spencer. Spencer Bennett,” he said gruffly. “Welcome.”

Liam started to respond but distractedly moved toward the window. He peered through the glass and watched the typical five o’clock crowd traverse the street below.

“What’s going on down there?” he said without turning his head.

Spencer stepped toward the window and watched beside him. “Five o’clock. Rush hour. People leave the office and head home.” He narrowed his eyes appraisingly at Liam and waited.

“There’s... there’s something wrong with the people,” Liam said.

A hint of a smile played at Spencer’s lips. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure...”

Spencer waited until Liam turned toward him before he raised his eyebrows and continued. “They’re not real.”

“They’re—” Liam started. He glanced toward the people on the street then back to Spencer. “But how?”

“You could tell,” Spencer said. “How?”

“I—don’t know.” Liam’s chest heaved, and he glanced wildly around the room until his wide eyes found Teagan. She shook her head and turned to watch Spencer continue with his favorite game.

“Think,” he said to Liam. “Your brain rejects the projections for a reason. Verbalizing it will help you understand and keep your brain sharp enough to keep differentiating between reality and non-reality.”

“Non-reality?” Liam asked.

“Just think.”

“Okay, well...” Liam trailed off and looked at people along the street below.

Teagan walked to the other window and played her usual game of trying to find a real person amidst the perfect chaos of the rush hour traffic.

“I guess it’s... they’re all the same,” Liam continued. “Same expressions, same movements—I mean, I can see a few variations, but it’s like every fifth one is identical. Like a repeating set of people. And they look...”

One, two, three, four, repeat. Teagan counted the usual faces, surprised that Liam noticed things it took her nearly a week to first figure out and then to become comfortable with. She was pleased with his progress, but a small seed of jealousy burned in her chest. He remembered *before*, and now he could figure this out too? It wasn’t fair.

“Yes?” Spencer prompted.

“Fuzzy,” Liam said. “It’s like I know they’re there, and I can see them, but there’s also a slight distortion to the air around them.”

Spencer and Teagan exchanged a glance, and Spencer tilted his head toward the kitchen. Teagan followed him, and they left Liam behind to stare out of the window alone.

“He got it quicker than anyone I’ve ever seen,” Spencer said. He slammed his fist down on the counter hard enough to shake the porcelain mug next to it. “You mentioned he was unusual, but this is... Let’s just say, I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“He remembers his past,” Teagan said. “Bits and pieces at least. I’m not sure how much he’s telling me, but he definitely remembers more than anyone I’ve met so far.”

Spencer raked a hand through his hair, and Teagan watched him anxiously. Had she made the wrong choice in bringing Liam back with her? Could he be dangerous?

“We have to keep an eye on him,” Spencer said. “There are those who wouldn’t take too kindly to him if he starts to remember anything from *before*.”

Teagan jumped when she heard a loud “ahem” behind her and spun to see Liam standing in the kitchen doorway staring at the two of them.

“So,” Liam said and walked further into the kitchen. He sat slowly at the breakfast table—feeling the chair carefully first—and faced Teagan. “What now?”

Teagan turned to Spencer. She’d already made a big enough move by bringing Liam here at all. Spencer could decide how much to let him in on.

Spencer hesitated as he appraised the disheveled man, but Liam did not flinch.

“The world is strange. There’s obviously something going on,” Liam said. His voice held a matter-of-fact tone, and he held Spencer’s stare challengingly. “What are we going to do about it?”

“We?” Spencer asked. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly and he shook his head.

Teagan interrupted in an attempt to ease the tension between the two men. “Liam, we don’t know what’s happening.”

“Well then, let’s find out,” Liam said. “Obviously you’ve been working on something. What’ve you got so far?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Spencer said.

Liam scoffed. “I want to know what’s going on as much as you do. I’m going to try to figure it out either way, so you might as well use me.”

“This is dangerous,” Spencer said. Teagan saw a strange gleam in her friend’s eyes—a challenge and a warning. He couldn’t reveal what he knew to someone he just met. She knew he resented her indiscretion, but they both knew they needed help in whatever form they could find it. They couldn’t afford to be so picky anymore. Teagan

had been awake for nearly three weeks, and they still hadn't figured out anything substantial. She was sick of feeling alone and secretive, and she knew Spencer felt it too. There was no thrill in being a rebel and blindly punching the air when they didn't even know who or what they were fighting against.

Liam pursed his lips and looked down, deep in thought. "I don't care," he said after a moment. "I want answers."

"Fine." Spencer turned toward Teagan and nodded. "We'll tell you what we know, but from here on out, if we go down, you're going with us."

Liam smiled. "Try not to get caught, then. For my sake."

### **Spencer**

The kid asked too many questions.

Spencer's eyes wandered to the blinking green light on the microwave. A quarter to eight, and Spencer's stomach had been grumbling since he'd finished his meager lunch at half past noon. He kept trying to catch Teagan's eye or to somehow find a break in the conversation to remind the other two that it was his favorite time of day: dinner time. But the new guy—Liam—kept asking questions.

"Can you explain what you mean by *awake*?" Liam asked, once more interrupting Teagan's answer to another question of his. Each question followed the last with an edge of desperation as though Liam thought, maybe with this one, he would find some sort of pattern they'd missed and solve all their problems. How full of himself to think he was going to catch something they'd missed. "How does someone *wake up*, and what state were they in before?"

Spencer rolled his eyes. If Liam couldn't figure that one out on his own... well, there would be problems. Why did he let this guy stay in the first place? "Where were you when you woke up?"

"In the middle of the street," Liam said. "But I have no idea how I got there."

"You've probably been there since... whatever happened, happened," Spencer said. "Bit stupid of you to go to sleep in the middle of the street, really," he added under his breath.

"But if I'm potentially not the only one, then why didn't I see anyone lying around outside? And why didn't anyone see me and, you know, do the decent thing and move me out of the middle of the street?"

"It's an effect of whatever is causing this illusion," Teagan said, and Spencer allowed his mind to wander back to daydreams of hot dogs and macaroni. "It's also one of its flaws. Whenever someone sleeps—whether they're still unconscious from whatever happened or just plain old asleep—they disappear."

"That's bizarre," Liam said. Spencer watched Liam's eyes and mouth widen in surprise and copied the expression mockingly. When would this kid shut up? "So, if Spencer were to lay his head down right now and take a nap, he would vanish?"

"Pretty much," Teagan said.

"Would you like me to demonstrate," Spencer said, half serious. He laid his head on the table like he had wanted to for the last two hours. "I would be more than happy to help you learn without having to listen to your constant yammering." He yawned, not deliberately, but found himself pleased by the effect when Teagan glared at him.

“Ignore him,” she said to Liam and kicked Spencer’s chair. The chair tumbled sideways, Spencer along with it, and finally silence filled the room as Liam and Teagan sat stunned. It was worth the bump on the back of his head and the massive headache he’d have later tonight.

Spencer smiled at the silence and finally took his opportunity.

“And now we eat.”

The incident proved to be much more beneficial than Spencer first expected. Teagan tried to compensate for pushing his chair over and offered to make him whatever he wanted for dinner—macaroni and cheese, of course—and Liam seemed at least a little scared of him. He didn’t quite shut up all the way, but he stopped talking as incessantly as before. Unfortunately, Teagan encouraged him to ask more questions and cheerfully offered up all the information they had worked so hard to compile.

“Don’t forget, Liam, most people can’t remember their old lives at all. They don’t question the strangeness because they can’t remember how it was before,” she explained, and she poured the cooked pasta into the green plastic colander. Steam rose from the slightly grayish noodles, and the water drained down the sink.

“What *did* happen?” Liam asked. Spencer groaned. Did he ever run out of questions?

“As far as we know: war, loss of consciousness, now this,” Spencer said before Teagan could give Liam the extended version. He reached into the colander to grab a noodle as Teagan shook the rest of the liquid out, but she slapped his hand away. He sighed and continued, trying to catch every question that could spring from his answer

with a rushed: “We don’t know what the war was about, how these images are made, or who’s behind it.”

“So, basically you know nothing,” Liam said.

Spencer glared at him and grabbed into the colander again, this time ignoring the slap from Teagan and grabbing a whole handful of noodles. His stomach couldn’t wait a second longer.

“That’s what we’re working on now. We’re trying to figure out anything and everything that might be able to help explain,” Teagan said and she shooed them away from the stove to sit at the table. “Spencer has a contact at the government lab, one of their research scientists. He’s been helping us test several theories about the composition of the illusion. We haven’t actually found any answers yet, but we have been able to disprove some of our theories, so that’s a start.”

She carried three bowls of steaming pasta back to the table, and sat down with them. Spencer grabbed a spoon and shoveled heaping spoonfuls into his mouth. He ignored the burn of the hot food; he wasn’t about to wait for it to cool before eating.

“You said I was unusual,” Liam said after he’d eaten three quarters of his own meal. He, like Spencer, seemed ravenously hungry. Finally, something Spencer could find relatable about him. “That I remembered more than most people. But I barely remember anything.”

Spencer glanced to Teagan and watched closely for her reaction. Memories were a sore subject with her. She took a deep breath and put her spoon down. He glanced to her bowl. She wasn’t even half way through with her food, and her portion had started out smaller—he’d checked to make he hadn’t been gyped.



“Most people don’t remember anything at all except their names. Some don’t even remember that. A few people vaguely remember there was a war, but I’ve never heard of anyone remembering anything else from their pasts. You remember your wife and where you were before this happened—that’s very unusual.”

“So, you...?” Liam asked. Spencer glared at him. It wasn’t fair of him to pry into Teagan’s personal life like this.

“Have no idea who I was before this happened,” Teagan said. “I don’t remember anything about my life before, and Spencer’s the same. I don’t even remember if there’s someone I’m supposed to be missing. I can’t even remember my name.”

Spencer watched Teagan closely, looking for signs of a breakdown. She’d had more than one in the time since she’d found Spencer two weeks before. She looked strong now, though. He could feel Liam staring at him, but he refused to look away from Teagan.

“So,” Liam said after a minute. “Where do I start?”

Spencer broke his gaze from Teagan to see the new determined look on Liam’s face.

Teagan and Spencer explained that they’d been around for a while, so people were starting to get a bit suspicious of them. They couldn’t very well pretend that they were learning something for the first time, or that they’d just woken up, so it looked pretty suspect for them to ask too many questions.

“That’s where you come in,” Spencer told Liam. “You’re newly awake, so you can poke around a bit, make some new friends, and ask a few questions without raising too many red flags.”

“So, just be myself,” Liam asked.

Spencer couldn't help but laugh. He rose from his seat and gathered the now empty dishes to wash. “Yes, but you could tone it down a bit,” he said. “Try not to pester them with too many questions—you want answers, not a punch in the nose.”

“Where should I go?” Liam asked.

“That's up to you,” Teagan said. She joined Spencer at the sink, held a hand out for the dish he'd just rinsed, and began to dry. “Go wherever you would have gone if you hadn't found me this afternoon. Or go wander into another random building and meet another random person. Whatever feels natural.”

“Okay,” Liam replied, and Spencer turned to see him slip back on his coat. “I'm going to head to the hospital. I probably would have headed there eventually.”

“That's a good idea,” Spencer said. “But Liam...”

Liam looked up from retying his shoe.

“It's nine o'clock at night.” Spencer pointed behind Teagan to the digital clock on the microwave. Liam looked baffled as the time registered, but his body must have agreed with the clock because he yawned loudly. Spencer smirked. “Get some sleep here and go in the morning.”

“Come on, Li,” Teagan said. She put the last dry dish into the cabinet and walked to him. “I'll show you to the guest room.”

Spencer allowed them to walk away without him. He didn't want to read Liam a bedtime story or whatever Teagan planned to do. Sometimes she was too soft for her own good. He walked into his own bedroom, flopped onto the twin bed gracelessly, and glanced around. The dark, slightly damp, and definitely dingy room felt comfortable

because of its authenticity. The walls were bare, the room sparse. A chair in the corner of the tiny room held all of Spencer's clothing and personal belongings in a small pile.

Three weeks ago, Spencer chose to break in and live in this apartment building because it was unaffected by the illusion. He hated the fragmented world—the duality of the material unseen and the immaterial delusion.

The unfinished wooden door opened, and Teagan stepped into the room.

“He asleep?” Spencer asked. He jumped up from the bed and cleared the chair for Teagan to sit. She ignored him and sat on the bed instead, leaving him the chair.

“Disappeared as soon as his head hit the pillow.” She shuddered. Spencer knew Teagan never really could get used to the image of people disappearing when they fell asleep. “How long will he be out?”

“It's his first day, so he'll be asleep for at least twenty-four hours,” Spencer said. His first night, he fell asleep on a Friday night and missed the whole weekend. Teagan slept less on her first night, but still didn't wake for thirty-six hours. “It takes a while for the body to recover.”

“There's something he's not telling us,” Teagan said, her frustration clear in her voice, but she avoided Spencer's eyes, choosing instead to stare down at the bedspread when she pinched at a stray thread. So she'd noticed Liam's pauses too. Spencer had heard Liam's brief hesitations, but he factored it in as a calculated risk. If Liam could hold something back from Teagan and Spencer, the first strangers he met, it might make him a better bet for an accomplice. If he could hold back now, then when it really counted, he could do it again.

“Instinct stops him from sharing everything with a stranger. It’s smart. Besides, we didn’t tell him everything either.”

“Of course not,” she replied. “We have too much at stake to go sharing everything with…”

Trailing off, she finally looked up at Spencer and nodded.

“Give him time,” said Spencer. He didn’t think Liam had any knowledge that would be of any value to them, but he hoped, for Teagan’s peace of mind, that eventually the strange man would feel comfortable enough to let her in.

“I hate not knowing,” said Teagan. Spencer understood. That was why he’d allowed her to join him in his search for the truth—she wanted it almost more than he did if that was possible. “Missing details, information just out of reach. It’s infuriating.” She slammed her hand against the wall, and the light fixture shook.

Spencer chuckled. He grabbed her hand from the wall and held it in his. “Then this whole place must be hell for you.”

She squeezed his hand back, her knuckles turned white with tension, but she didn’t drop his hand. “You think I’d be used to it by now, but the more I don’t know, the more I *need* to understand.”

## **Liam**

When Liam opened his eyes next, the morning sunlight streamed through the window. He blinked in the bright light and looked around the room for some indication of how long he’d been asleep. The clock beside the doorway brightly displayed the time: seven thirty.

He rolled off of the lumpy mattress and stumbled down the hallway through the kitchen and living room.

“Teagan? Spencer?” he called softly. Disappointed to be faced with empty rooms, he walked back down the hallway and knocked on one of the doors Teagan had pointed out—he couldn’t remember whose it was—and waited for a response.

No response came for a minute, so Liam began to walk toward the other room. However, just as he turned away, the door swung open, and a disgruntled Spencer stumbled out.

“What do you want?” Spencer grunted, running a hand through his untidy hair. He squinted his eyes in the light of the hallway. His pajama bottoms were red plaid, and his t-shirt was twisted around his body as though he’d moved around a lot in his sleep. Teagan walked out of the other room at that moment and laughed at the sight of her friend.

“Come on. Let’s go make breakfast and give Spence a little time to become human. He’s not a morning person.” She grabbed Liam by the arm and steered him toward the kitchen. “We’ll have pancakes in twenty,” she shouted back over her shoulder to Spencer, who was already retreating back into the darkness of his room.

Teagan sat Liam down at the table before she ran around the kitchen to retrieve various ingredients. Liam watched her work from a while before asking, “How long was I asleep?”

“A day and two nights,” said Teagan. She turned to face him. “Still remember everything that we talked about? Haven’t forgotten Emily?”

“Yeah,” said Liam. He remembered his fears from the night before—well, two nights before.

“Good.” Teagan set a plate of pancakes, steam rising from the pile, on the table just as Spencer, alert and dressed, walked into the kitchen.

Later that morning, Liam made his way to the hospital with ease, following the route that Teagan had mapped out for him—helped, but mostly hindered by Spencer’s comments. With sleek marble floors and floor to ceiling windows, the hospital was bright and inviting.. After he filled out a short form, Liam was called in almost immediately to see a doctor.

The doctor made pleasant conversation while he drew Liam’s blood, but despite the full check-up, he offered no explanation regarding the cause of the amnesia, and in fact he seemed to think it an unimportant symptom. The nurses, too, were polite as they promised to call him with the results of the blood test, but they were confused at his request for a check-up when he looked so healthy. As friendly as the few people he encountered were, Liam walked out feeling the entire trip had been a waste. However, when he exited the building, he encountered a man in a slick black suit and dark glasses waiting for him outside the door.

“Mr. Coleman?”

“Can I help you?” Liam asked but continued walking.

The man fell into step beside Liam. The man’s elbow brushed his arm while they walked, and Liam tried to step away, uncomfortable with the proximity, but the strange man marked his step, staying right next to him.

“I’m sorry, Mr...” Liam trailed off to give the man an opportunity to identify himself.

“*Captain* Alan Jefferson.”

“Sorry Captain,” Liam said. He increased his speed and made an impromptu left turn but the captain still kept up with him. “But I don’t know who you are.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Coleman. We’ve been looking for you. You may not remember, but you used to work for us.”

Liam started. This was someone from his past—someone who seemed to remember *before*? Maybe the captain could help him find answers. Maybe he could help Liam find Emily. Maybe his story was too good to be true. But either way, there was a chance Liam could learn *something*.

“I had no idea,” Liam responded. The dynamic changed: the captain began to walk faster down the street, so Liam sped up to stay with him.

“You were one of our scientists in the Lab,” the captain said as he turned a corner and sped up again. Liam jogged to keep up.

Liam tried to imagine himself in a white lab coat mixing chemicals and blowing things up in beakers and flasks. That’s what scientists did, right? The picture clashed with the image of himself he’d built. But, he thought, how was he to know what kind of a person he’d been *before*?

“You were working on a project that was never finished,” said the captain. “And the completion of that project could help us. I don’t know how much you remember or how much might come back to you if you had your old notes, but what do you say?”

“I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Excellent.”

They finally arrived at their destination: an old, decrepit building a few blocks away from the hospital. The bricks were crumbling at the base of the wall, and the upper floors of the building looked like they might collapse down through the foundation at any moment. Liam tried not to stare. He didn't want the captain to see that he noticed something different about it. Though he desperately wanted to ask why that one structure, unlike the buildings and street around it, looked so imperfect, he held his tongue as Teagan and Spencer had instructed.

The thick wooden double doors opened automatically when Captain Jefferson approached, and Liam hurried to follow him. Captain Jefferson flashed a badge at the guard behind the high-tech security counter and nodded authoritatively when the guard looked questioningly at Liam. The guard swiped a thin card twice through the device on the gate and the mechanism rose long enough for both men to pass through.

The cold concrete floor contrasted with the sleek technology of the security desk. Beyond the checkpoint, the first floor was bare but for the shiny metal doors of the elevator exactly opposite the entrance and a small white door on the left hand side. Liam stared at the faded sign next to the door while they waited for the lift. Stairs. If he hadn't been following the captain, he would have chosen the self-sufficient option—and not just for the exercise. The bell overhead dinged, and the smooth doors opened.

Neither of them spoke during the elevator ride down, deep into the basement, far below the city, with nothing but the groans of the machinery to break the silence. Liam focused his gaze forward and waited until his companion spoke again. But the captain



didn't seem eager to continue their conversation. As soon as the doors opened, the captain stepped off the lift.

Liam followed him down a sterile hallway into a cavernous room. Liam glanced at the machinery littered around the room. It looked oddly familiar. Captain Jefferson finally turned back to him.

"This was your old workstation, Mr. Coleman," he said, arms wide to the room behind him. "We tried not to disturb it too much, but we have had other people in to try to figure out how to finish the product while you've been gone. You'll find everything you need here, but if you need anything else, all you need to do is ask.

"We also tried to gather your old team. We found two, but they—like you—don't seem to remember much. They'll be in later this afternoon along with a woman from command we've assigned to your team."

Liam nodded.

"You'll need this," the captain said. He slid an ID badge off one of the granite countertops. Liam glanced at the picture of his younger self in the corner of the badge where the lamination had started to curl. He clipped the ID to his shirt. "If you need me, dial extension four-oh-one or come find me in my office on the third floor."

"What is it I'm meant to be working on?" Liam asked. He looked around at the hodgepodge of technology with no idea where to start.

"The AID: The Alternate Illusory Device," the captain said. He walked toward the center of the room and set his hand on top of a computer connected to the largest piece of machinery. The device resembled an old MRI machine with the computer connected by a

jumble of wires to a metal archway. Liam wondered if it was safe to stick his hand through it.

“What does it do?” Liam asked. The captain looked bored, and he crossed to the door.

“Your notes should be in your desk.” He pointed to a cubicle in the far corner of the room. “Good luck, Liam. We are counting on you.”

The door shut with an echoing clang behind him, and Liam stepped closer to the AID. He ran his hand along the top of the metal, searching for some sort of recollection. Nothing. He sighed and walked over to the cubicle. Did the captain really expect him to lead a team to fix this thing when he didn’t even know what it did?

Liam reached for the top drawer of the desk, but before he opened it, a framed picture next to the personal computer on the desk caught his eye.

Emily. Liam’s heart leapt at the sight of his beautiful wife. He couldn’t fathom how he’d forgotten the image of Emily—his Emily: her unruly blonde curls fell crazily, yet somehow gracefully, along her back; her warm brown eyes that always watched him, always knew what he was feeling better than he even did himself most of the time; the way she dressed, with utmost care to look professional, and yet failed nearly every time. Either she would carelessly stick a clothespin in her hair, forget an earring, or begin to fix her hair and forget to do the other side in her haste to get back to the latest experiment. She wasn’t what most might consider classically beautiful, but to Liam, she was perfect. Her quirks made her special, and as he had often told her, he truthfully would never change a thing about her.

In this picture, she wore a blue lab coat over a flowered summer dress with an ID badge pinned to the lapel. Liam looked down. It matched the badge Captain Jefferson had given him. His feelings of suspicion started to lift. If Emily had worked here—had been happy here like she obviously was in this picture—he would trust that to be enough for him.

The mere image of her made Liam relax and a true grin emerged on his face for the first time since he woke on the street. Her smile, even in the photograph, was catching. Her bright grin displayed two rows of straight white teeth, and her mouth was open mid-laugh. Her eyes were fixed on something out of the frame. Him?

He sat down in the rolling desk chair, a vague memory fighting to the surface—a minute, one moment in time. But that was how memories work sometimes. Only the moments that matter most are the ones remembered.

\* \* \*

They were the only two people left in the lab—they'd waited for everyone else to go home before even discussing the upcoming evening. Liam grabbed the homemade sandwiches out of the box marked *caution: toxic chemicals* he'd put in the shared office refrigerator that morning. He walked back into their lab area and set the food down next to the AID computer before he snuck over to where Emily was grabbing the rest of the supplies in his cubicle. Liam watched Emily move aside the folders of paperwork from the desk's bottom drawer to pull out the bottle of wine and checkered tablecloth. She turned around and smacked into him, nearly dropping the wine but not eliciting the surprised yelp Liam had hoped for.

“Ready?” she asked. Emily stepped back to look at him with a smile.

“This is purely for research purposes,” he reminded her before cracking a smile of his own. “But yes, I’m ready.”

Emily laid the tablecloth on the ground and placed the wine bottle on one of the white squares precisely in the center. The sandwiches were next. Liam brought them to her outstretched arms, and she divided the food between the two plates stored in the bottom of the box and set the dishes on either side of the wine.

“I’ve always loved Paris,” she said. In one smooth motion, Emily sat on one of the corners of the tablecloth and waved her arm in a motion for Liam to hurry up.

“Paris it is, then.” With a final command keyed into the device, Liam had just enough time to join her on the tablecloth before the room around them shifted, and they appeared to be sitting on grass a short distance from the Eiffel Tower. An old woman with a vintage camera snapped a picture of two teenage girls who stood on one side of Emily and Liam’s tablecloth. A young couple strolled past arm in arm. Lines of tourists radiated from the base of the tower.

“It’s really Paris!” Emily said. Her eyes widened, and she pointed to the angry crepe vendor a few yards away. He yelled in French at a young boy who had chocolate smeared across his face. The boy shook his head fervently in response to the vendor’s shouts. While he took slow steps backward, away from the vendor, the man followed him to point at the evidence and two other boys snuck into the vendor’s stand. The boys grabbed a few jars of chocolate each, and all three boys sprinted away. The vendor shouted and threw his apron to the ground.

A red rubber ball rolled toward Emily’s plate, and she reached to pick it up to toss back to the boy, but her hand went through it. Liam watched her face fall as she drew her

hand back in shock, but she tried to cover her movement by grabbing a sandwich off the plate in front of her.

Liam gazed around critically, noting the pixilation of his vision. “It’s blurrier than I remembered.”

Emily swatted at his arm. “Liam, do you know what this means?”

“That we still have a lot of work to do?”

“No—buzzkill,” she said. “Li—we could go anywhere, see anything. We could have a beach in our living room or a garden in our kitchen. We could throw a party in Tahiti or Antarctica and invite all our friends, and we wouldn’t have to worry about transportation. Maybe those are silly examples, but imagine the possibilities!”

“Em, it’s not near finished.”

“No, but this is major progress, dear. Fake a little enthusiasm please.”

Liam reached out to pull Emily toward him into a hug. She fell into his arms, and he wrapped them around her.

“This is my favorite place in Paris, you know,” he said and smiled down at her. She nestled into his side.

“Mine too.”

“This is where you agreed to marry me.” Liam grabbed her left hand in his, and his thumb grazed over the rings on her finger.

“I remember.” Emily turned her hand over and intertwined their fingers.

## **Spencer**

Spencer sat at a booth in the back of the coffee shop that was his usual meeting location. His contact from the government ran late almost every meeting, but this was a

record. Spencer flagged down the waitress to refill his coffee for the third time. A curl of steam rose from the dark liquid, but the taste was bitter and weak. He emptied four sugar packets into the mug out of boredom, added a pinch of salt and a shake of pepper for good measure, and stirred it all with the straw from his water glass.

Another ten minutes passed, and the glares from the waitress increased in frequency. Spencer calculated her next move, and just before it seemed she had almost gotten the courage up to issue an ultimatum—either order something or get out—the doors opened and his contact entered.

The man always dressed in a crisp suit, which he wore confidently, but the overuse of gel said otherwise. He tried too hard to impress people, and Spencer worked to exploit that trait.

“Well,” Spencer said. The tardiness was a power play, and he knew the best response would be to remain unfazed. “Did you bring any new information?”

The man set his briefcase on the table and pulled out a manila envelope. Spencer reached for it, but the man pulled it back. Spencer dropped his hand. He’d made a fatal mistake in the struggle for power.

“What’s your price?” he asked.

“A name.” The man smiled and took the seat opposite Spencer. He pulled the saucer toward him and drank a sip of the coffee. Spencer smiled as the man choked the concoction down. He’d gotten back the upper hand.

“No,” Spencer said. He eyed the envelope. “I don’t even know if your information is worth it.”

“Trust me, it is,” the man said, his voice steady. “I have information on the name you asked about yesterday.”

Spencer froze. “Another price—any other price.”

How had he thought he could gain the upper hand just by attitude? The other man had leverage. Spencer wished he had a card to play—something, any other option than turning on one of his friends.

“No other currency you have is of interest to me.” He stood from the table and moved to put the envelope back into his briefcase. Spencer stared at the envelope and made a decision.

“Wait,” he said. Spencer took a deep breath as he wondered if he was making the right choice. He’d always enjoyed poker, but this was another game entirely. He couldn’t win. “One name.”

The envelope stilled, and the man sat back down. “I’m listening.”

“Bennett.”

“Is that a first or a last name?” The man scribbled it onto the coffee stained napkin. He looked up at Spencer. “I’m going to need both.”

“Last.” The pen hovered in front of the name. “Now I’ve given you half, I want the envelope before I continue.”

The man slid it toward him.

Spencer grabbed the envelope from the table and hoped the contents were worth the risk.

## **Liam**

The workstation doors crashed open and the loud noise startled Liam.

“Hey!” a tall black man yelled from the doorway. His sharp attire—a bright yellow polo shirt and bright green pants—contrasted with the wrinkled dark clothes of the shorter, sandy-haired man beside him. The taller man walked toward Liam, his long strides taking him across the room in only a few steps. He pulled Liam up from his chair and into a bro-hug, made awkward because Liam wasn’t sure how to react. He tried to wrap his arms around the man, patted him on the back, and ended up allowing his forearms rest against the back with his hands half-clenched in fists. The man stood at least a head taller than Liam, who was by no means a short man.

“Hi?” Liam said. The sandy-haired man who had followed the man still hugging Liam into the room laughed behind him.

“You’re Liam, right?” the man asked and finally released him.

Liam stared up at him, confused why this man—who apparently wasn’t even sure who he was—had greeted him as eagerly as he did.

“He’s a bit overenthusiastic,” the sandy-haired man explained. He also came up to Liam and hugged him after his friend had released him, though not nearly as enthusiastically. “He hasn’t been able to remember much lately, but I told him about you, and how we all used to be good friends, and—you do remember, don’t you?”

Liam shook his head. “Not much, I’m afraid.”

“I’m Kieran Jones,” the tall man said. “And killjoy over there is called Haden Fisher.”

“So the three of us used to work together?” Liam asked.

“Well, four of us, actually. Where’s Em—”



The door crashed open again, interrupting Haden. A severe-looking woman stood in the entryway for a moment and glared at the three of them before she smoothed her pencil skirt and walked toward them. Kieran and Haden moved away from Liam and each other and pretended to work on something. The woman marched directly to Liam without a glance for the other two men, who stepped away when she passed. She held her hand out to Liam and introduced herself as: “Doreen Mathews, at your service. But I prefer for you to call me *Lieutenant* Mathews.”

Liam shook her hand. Her tight grip crunched the bones of his fingers together. He tried not to flex in pain when she released it. Though her words said otherwise, it was clear to Liam that she was not *at his service*, but rather under his supervision only as long as someone else ordered her to be.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lieutenant,” he said. The others stared at him, and Liam realized after a moment that they were waiting for further instructions. “I—suppose you all know more about the device than I do at the moment, so why don’t you continue whatever you’re working on right now, and I’ll try to read my notes and catch up.”

The three nodded and walked away from the cubicle, Mathews with a huff, and the other two with sympathetic smiles and promises to help if Liam needed them.

Liam’s notes were complex, but enlightening. The former version of himself had been meticulous. He had documented every step, trial, and component and detailed them in his notebook. Little by little, he began to understand how the machine worked and was left with only a few questions—most of them personal—that he wished he could ask his

old self. However, since that was impossible, he decided to take the one that bothered him most and would be most crucial in completing his assignment to the captain.

Bypassing his team, who were busy tinkering with the spectroscopy pump—they didn't need to be doing that, he made a mental note to tell them later—Liam found an identical white door to the one on the first level and took the stairs up to the third floor to the captain's office. On his way out of the stairwell, however, he ran into the captain on his way downstairs, so Liam stepped with him into the elevator.

“Mr. Coleman, what's on your mind? I had hoped you and your team would be working hard and making progress on the Alternate Illusory Device now.”

“Sir, I've been looking over my notes, and I had some questions,” Liam said. “I thought you might be able to help me answer them.”

Captain Jefferson raised an eyebrow. “I was never a part of the development of the AID, so I'm not sure I'll be of much help.”

“I was just wondering, sir, about the purpose of the AID.” The captain remained silent and the corners of his mouth twitch downward. “It's just, if it's for commercial purposes—if it is for use on a small scale, the construction and various issues will be different than if you're planning to use it on a larger scale.”

The captain sighed and ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “Coleman, I'm going to be honest with you, but you need to hear me out, okay?”

The elevator doors slid open with a ding, and the captain reached forward to press the button to close them again. Liam felt trapped in the motionless elevator but nodded anyway.

“Originally, the device was created to be a commercial product. You and your wife had an idea, and you decided to make it. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone more creative than either of you. I suppose you don’t remember, but she worked here with you.”

“Do you...?” Liam asked hesitantly. Was he crossing one of Teagan and Spencer’s lines? “Do you know where she is now?”

The captain shook his head, and the hope that bubbled in Liam’s chest waned. “We’ve been trying to search her down, same as you, but we haven’t any luck yet. Give it time, though. You turned up, didn’t you?”

At least someone with resources was looking for her. They had managed to find him, however they’d done that. In fact—“How did you find me?” Liam asked.

The captain chuckled. “We’ve been watching the hospital. Bank, too. Basically, if your name came up in any database, we had it flagged for us.”

“Oh.” That made a lot more sense than the scenarios Liam had been devising in his head. A bead of sweat dripped down his face from the heat trapped in the elevator. Liam glanced at the closed doors and wished they’d begun this conversation elsewhere. “So, the device?”

“Yes, the AID,” said the captain. “Well, when it came to our attention what you were working on, we wanted it to be under our supervision. We could foresee the device being used for the wrong reasons, and we wanted to monitor the production and keep it quiet. Somehow, though, the word of what you were working on got out, and several other companies started work on the same type of machine. The most worrisome, of course, a weapon supply manufacturer began to try to steal the formula and blueprints.

The focus of your research shifted at that point. We were on the brink of war with New Sweden, and we knew that they were working on their own version of the device. No longer were you trying to figure out how to create an alternate reality; you were trying to learn how to break the illusion—to beat the system if the need ever arose.

“War broke out here before we knew it—a rebellion inside threatened to weaken us before we even started the inevitable war with New Sweden. The Alternate Illusory Device wasn’t finished, but the other side—the rebels—dropped a new type of bomb. It destroyed half the country, killed hundreds of thousands, and knocked most people unconscious. We had to make a decision.”

Liam felt the floor shake and the lighted numbers above the elevator door increased with small dings at every floor.

“We deployed the AID over the country to protect as much of Euterra as it would reach,” the captain continued, ignoring the movement. “There was neither time nor money to rebuild, but we had to appear strong to our enemies. If New Sweden knew we were already devastated, it would be the end of us before the war could even begin.

“Now, though, we need your expertise more than ever. We deployed the AID before it was ready, and we’re not sure how to lift it. New Sweden no longer poses a threat; they went to war with Wales instead and lost. We have the resources and opportunity to rebuild now, but we’re working by touch alone. Unconscious people lie all over the city. We need to lift the AID so we can take care of them. So you see, Mr. Coleman, we need you. Only you can reverse—”

The captain stopped when the elevator doors slid open on the twelfth floor, and a young man in his mid twenties with slicked back hair stepped in.

“Ericson,” the captain said.

“Captain.” The man reached forward and pressed the button for the ground level, and once more they travelled down.

“I trust your meeting proved more fruitful this time?” the captain asked.

Ericson’s lips curled upward in a twisted smile. “It was illuminating. I would venture so far as to say it’s nearly time.”

The lift doors slid open, and this time the captain stepped out alongside Ericson. Liam followed the two out and turned into the stairwell. After his conversation with the captain, Liam found he wanted to work on the AID, to figure it out more than ever, now that he knew he was at least partially responsible. This new information changed things, though. He was free to ask the questions he’d avoided up to this point—any question about the skewed reality was not only allowed, but also necessary for his job. He had a job—a purpose. And he could figure out things to tell Teagan and Spencer. But the captain’s story raised more questions too. Why did the *rebels* rebel? What *cause* were they fighting for?

In a daze, Liam made his way back down the stairs to his office. He had a new plan of action to implement.

The door swung open as Liam entered, and he watched Kieran and Haden jump up from where they’d been sitting on the floor and begin to fiddle with the machine like they’d been working all along. Kieran inspected the archway with a thoughtful expression while Haden typed nonsense on the computer keyboard. Liam watched the farce play out for a minute before laughing at the two men.

“Guys, it’s okay. I’m not Doreen.” Liam felt bad as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He wanted to bond with his old friends, but knew it was bad form to mock his new co-worker, especially from his position of authority.

Neither reacted beyond a short laugh, and moments later, the aforementioned woman made her way into the room with her nose crinkled as though the smell of the room, or perhaps the people in it, was too foul for her liking.

Liam stood a little straighter in an attempt to make his posture at least as good as Doreen’s as he addressed his team. “I think it’s time to take a different approach,” he told them. “I’ve just gotten back from a meeting with the captain, and based on the information he’s given me, we need to focus on the way the Alternate Illusory Device was working at the time of deployment rather than trying to improve or perfect the device now. We’re working on lifting the current illusion rather than creating a new one, so enough time in the lab fiddling around with this hunk of junk—let’s get out there and study its effects.”

Haden furrowed his brow in confusion, but after a moment nodded amiably, while Kieran nearly bounced up and down in excitement. Doreen, on the other hand, glared at Liam with tightly pursed lips and narrow eyes.

Liam surveyed the three of them, trying to determine the best way to split them up and still end with all four alive at the end of the day.

“Jones, you’re with me; Fisher and Mathews together,” he decided. “Figure out whatever you can about the composition of the illusion, and find anything that might alter or destroy the images. Meet back here at five, we’ll debrief and start where we leave off tomorrow.”

Lieutenant Mathews glared between the men and headed for the door, and Liam grabbed Haden to apologize.

“It’s fine,” Haden interrupted before he could explain. “She’d strangle Kieran for smiling, and I don’t think she’d be able to work past all that resentment if you worked with her.”

Liam laughed. “Yeah, and would you get any work done if I put you and Kieran together?” He glanced over to Kieran, who was packing up two backpacks with equipment and notebooks.

“The curse of working with your best friend.” Haden smirked. “Actually, you’d be surprised how much we can get done even with goofing off. Emily was always the same way.”

Liam’s heart leapt at the mention of his wife. “How much do you remember?” he asked. Maybe if Haden could remember something... but hadn’t Teagan warned him not to trust anyone who remembered? Well, she’d never met Haden. Maybe it was okay? Liam couldn’t quite convince himself that Teagan would allow him to make a concession in this instance, but he wanted to hear what Haden had to say anyway, whether he could trust him or not.

“Too much,” Haden started, but was interrupted by an argument mounting between Kieran and Doreen behind them. Their voices rose higher and higher—in volume and in pitch. Doreen pulled a sandwich out of the blue backpack and tossed it back on the counter. Kieran grabbed the bag away from her, and the contents spilled onto the floor.

“We’ll talk later,” Liam assured Haden. He walked over to break up the fight. They all needed to get away from this lab—and each other—and get some work done. If he solved this problem, Liam was convinced it would help him find Emily. She could be anywhere. She could be unconscious on the side of the street somewhere. He had to fix this so he could keep her safe. Wherever she was.

## **Emily**

Emily watched the green line dart across the computer monitor steadily and ran a hand through her greasy blonde curls. She’d worked two days straight. It was well past time for a break, but she couldn’t bring herself leave.

“What’s the status?”

Emily jumped when a hand on her shoulder accompanied the deep voice behind her, and she spun around on the swivel chair she’d stolen from the cubicle across the room. She hadn’t heard the door open.

“Don’t scare me like that,” she admonished. She let out a shaky laugh. The tall dark man held his hands up in surrender and pulled another chair up next to hers. He leaned in to look at the chart. “His vitals are strong, and his breathing is consistent. I’ve been watching the monitors, though, and so far his reactions have been what I predicted. I’m going to win the bet.”

“Don’t be so cocky,” the man said. “Besides, it’s my time to take over, and who knows what could happen now with my influence.”

“You know he’s set on a course. It will progress the same way no matter who’s around.”



“Then it doesn’t matter if you’re here or not,” he said. The man rolled her chair over and placed his own in her spot directly in front of the monitor. “Go home, Emily, and get some sleep. I promise, you’ll be the first to know if anything changes.”

The man handed her the blue lab coat from the counter and walked her to the door. Her eyes traveled once more to the unconscious man on the makeshift cot, and she allowed the door to swing shut between them.

## **Liam**

“It’s good to have you back, boss,” Kieran said as they walked down one of the many unfocused streets. They encountered several of these on their little field trip—deserted streets that weren’t quite as defined as the *fake* streets, but weren’t quite as real as the *real* streets—but they had made the decision to experiment on one of the major streets where the illusion was strongest. They just didn’t realize how long it would take them to find one this direction. Maybe the illusion wasn’t as strong or as widespread as Liam had imagined it to be.

“I thought you didn’t remember me.”

“I don’t,” Kieran said. “But Doreen has been in charge for the last few days. Your return means that we don’t have to put up with her power trip anymore. Well, not as much.”

It felt surprisingly natural for Liam to work in conjunction with Kieran, who was full of energy, as Liam had come to expect from his brief encounters with the man in the lab. Once they’d gotten out into the field, Kieran was diligent in his work in addition to being a constant positive presence.

“Watch this!” Kieran shouted from across the street.

The sun radiated down from the cloud free sky, and the light bounced from shiny building to shiny building, making the whole street sparkle from the excess of sunlight. Taking his time to carefully test the ground before each step, he walked across the road to Kieran. Liam didn't trust a street this perfect.

When he finally made his way over to his friend, he saw that Kieran had his hand in the side of the building. He wiggled his fingers, and Liam watched the molecules of the wall move around Kieran's hand before he pulled it out unharmed. "Weird!" Kieran said and flexed his hand.

Liam laughed, but he stuck his hand in the same spot to try it for himself. "Well, it doesn't feel any different than just moving your hand around in the air," Liam noted.

Kieran walked to the backpack he'd set down a few yards away and pulled out a notebook and pencil. "Watch the building closely while you move your hand," Kieran said, pencil poised over paper.

Liam waved his hand inside the building. As he moved, the colors that distinguished the building from the air became more pixelated until that small space of the building resembled the static of an old television set. It took a few moments after he removed his hand for the visual consistency of that particular spot on the building to reform.

"Interesting. I think we should focus our research right now on the lag that we're seeing," Liam said. "In that moment, we're seeing something closer to what is truly there."

He stuck his hand into the building again and watched the piece of the building reform. He heard Kieran's pencil scratch on the paper behind him. Liam stuck both of his

hands in adjoining bits along the edge of the building. The inside part finished re-forming before the outer piece began to return to the form of the building.

“Do you think it will always re-form as a piece of the building?” Kieran asked.

“Or is it just conforming to the space around it?”

Liam leaned back on his heels and allowed his body to roll back onto the blistering asphalt as he considered the implications. If simply disturbing the image could destroy it—provided it couldn’t re-form to the space around it—perhaps this task of restoring reality would be simpler than Liam expected. If only they could figure out how to stop it from re-forming.

Liam beckoned Kieran over to try again. As Liam disturbed the image of the building with his hand, Kieran blocked that space of air off from the rest of the “building” by holding pieces of paper between. They waited as it tried to re-form. Nothing happened. Without the contact of the building to initiating re-forming, the disturbed air stayed part of the air around it.

“So what does this mean?” Kieran asked. He removed the papers, and the spot re-formed to the shape of the building. “We can change it, but as long as the rest of the illusion is still there, the pieces we *can* change won’t stay. Any ideas?”

“None,” Liam admitted. He glanced at his watch. “Back to the Lab?”

## **Haden**

He should not have agreed so easily. He should have grabbed Liam or Kieran by the ankles as they left the building and begged to go with them. Anything but this.

Doreen refused outright to leave the lab to do Liam's "little research project." Instead, she poked around Liam's desk, tried to read his notes, and fiddled with the AID while preaching.

"The captain and I have an understanding," she said. She slid the bottom drawer of Liam's desk open, and Haden pushed it shut again. "And I know this little assignment works against his end goal for the team."

She lifted the picture of Emily from the desk and scowled. Haden ripped the photo from her hands and steered her out of Liam's cubicle before he replaced the picture to its original position.

"Hey! That's my sandwich," Haden shouted. The snack Kieran had packed in the backpack for him was lying on the ground a few feet away from the table. Haden grabbed the backpack from the countertop and slung it over his shoulder. He didn't care what Doreen wanted to do; they were ordered to experiment outdoors, so he was going to go outdoors.

Two steps toward the door, Doreen grabbed the strap of the backpack and pulled with enough force that Haden lost his footing and fell backward on the floor.

She stood over him with a sickly sweet smile. Her lips curled. "We are not going outside today. You are going to help me fix the Alternate Illusory Device as previously planned. End of discussion."

Haden rubbed the back of his head as he sat up. What discussion? He started to wonder if she really was crazy.

## **Kieran**

Kieran felt Liam's eyes on him as he stuffed the notebook and pen back into his backpack and slung it around his shoulders. Their adventure had taken them quite a bit farther from the lab than they'd realized, and they were probably late heading back. At first, Kieran lengthened his strides, but Liam fell behind and tried to jog to keep up, so Kieran walked more slowly.

For a man who tried to be so private, Liam's emotions were clear in everything he said and did. Kieran wondered if the trait was obvious to everyone Liam encountered or just a residual talent of Kieran's from their former friendship. Liam's brow furrowed again, and Kieran couldn't stand it anymore.

"You can ask me, you know."

"Ask you what?" Liam's eyes widened.

"You have questions."

Liam began to refute the statement, but stopped. "How long have you been *awake*?"

"Nearly a week," said Kieran. Liam stumbled over another invisible pothole, and Kieran grabbed his arms to keep him upright. "I woke up last Tuesday morning."

"What's today?"

"Monday." Kieran stopped to look at Liam. He wasn't what Kieran had been expecting. In Haden's stories about *before*, Liam always seemed to be the guy with the answers. Kieran expected him to show up at the Lab and save the day. This Liam knew so little. Was he the savior they'd expected? "How long have you been *awake*?"

"A day. Or I guess two. I think I slept through one."

"Yeah, Haden said I did the same when I first woke up."

“How did you—I mean, that’s quite a coincidence... meeting your old best friend when you first wake up, isn’t it?”

“Not much of a coincidence when you wake up in your old bedroom and your roommate is in his bedroom next door.” Kieran thought back to that day. Haden later had explained that he’d thought he was alone in the apartment. When Kieran had woken oh-so-gracefully by rolling onto the floor with a loud thud, Haden raced into his bedroom with a baseball bat. A small red plastic baseball bat that, combined with his unkempt appearance, couldn’t even begin to be threatening. Haden had worn only a green plaid robe over his boxers, a pair of white tube socks that were pulling off at the toes, and he had a shaggy beard from at least two months growth. Even after being unconscious for however long, Kieran had looked more put together than Haden.

“You’re lucky,” Liam said. “I woke up in the middle of the street with no one around. I still don’t know where I used to live.”

“Where are you staying, then?” Kieran asked. He thought of the green fold out sofa bed in his living room.

“I met some friends. They’re letting me stay with them for now.”

Kieran swung the backpack around to his front and dug in the front pocket for a pen and a scrap of paper. “If you need a place, you’re welcome to stay with us. I’m sure Haden won’t mind, and if he does, it still doesn’t matter.”

Liam smiled and pocketed the scribbled address. “You and Haden—you trust him, right?”

“Yeah.” Kieran frowned.

“It’s just—Haden remembers stuff about *before*, doesn’t he? He’s the only person I’ve met, besides the captain, who can remember anything.” Kieran glanced down at the makeshift map he’d made on their way away from the Lab so they didn’t get lost. He motioned for them to turn right when they reached the end of the narrow alleyway.

“He remembers everything about life before the war started, but he says his memories of the war are...” What was the word Haden had used? “...hazy. He says he remembers being there, but not really what was going on.”

“Do you believe him?” Liam asked. Kieran understood the true question behind the words: Should I believe him?

“He’s not telling me everything, and I know he’s holding something back. He’ll change the subject if I get close to whatever it is, but I trust him.” They reached the end of the alleyway and turned onto a street that looked identical to the last three streets. Were they going in circles, or did the illusion just create repeating streets?

“It doesn’t worry you?” Liam furrowed his brows.

Kieran understood the impulse. Part of him wanted to distrust everything and everyone, but the mere idea of not having anybody to trust sounded too isolating. “As much as I should say yes, it doesn’t. If it were something really important for me to know right now, he wouldn’t keep it from me. I can tell you think I’m crazy.”

“I just don’t understand how you have so much faith in this guy you barely know.”

“It’s not just him,” Kieran said. “It’s also faith in myself—I trust that I had a good reason to trust him before, so I’m trusting my own judgement. He’s the one person I can remember from *before*, so he must have been important. That’s enough for now.”

Liam looked contemplative. Kieran could tell Liam didn't agree or think his trust wise, but he seemed to respect Kieran's view.

"Hey, Kieran?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad we were friends."

Kieran smiled. "Me too." Liam seemed like a pretty stand up guy, cautious, but honorable. Kieran could see why they'd gotten along before.

They walked for a few minutes in silence, mulling over their strange predicament—a world full of the unknown, a new start for some and an irreconcilable hurdle for others. At the map's instruction, they turned left onto a street that, finally, Kieran recognized, and headed toward the familiar dilapidated building at the end.

"Do you ever think this could be a good thing?" Kieran asked.

Liam eyed him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean the war or the confusion," Kieran said. "I just mean it could be good, you know, having a second chance. Faced with the same questions, in a different context and without the memory, would you choose the same thing?"

A smile spread across Liam's face, and he shook his head. "You're such a scientist."

"What?"

"You see this whole thing as a possible experiment. Not some sort of great catastrophic confusion, like most people, but an experiment of human nature."

"And you don't? Not even just a little bit?" Kieran asked. "You're a scientist too—in fact, I'd warrant a bigger one—you're my boss."



The guard swiped them into the building, and Liam walked past the elevator doors to the entrance to the stairwell. Strange, Kieran hadn't seen anyone else avoiding the elevator.

"Okay, okay," Liam said as he took the stairs two at a time to keep up with Kieran. "So what if it is a learning experience? Are you finding anything? Would you, in fact, make the same decisions you made last time?"

"I don't know," Kieran said as they approached the doors to the lab. He pulled open the door and gestured for Liam to go in ahead of him. "I'll keep you updated."

## **Liam**

Haden and Doreen were in the Lab, waiting for them on separate sides of the room.

"For the love of all that is real, please do not make me work with her again," Haden said in a sign as Liam walked up to where he sat next to the AID. He had his elbows up on the edge of the machine and leaned forward with his face buried in his hands. His voice sounded muffled through them. "She refused to leave the Lab to actually do what you ask, and we got nothing done. Please tell me that you two actually made some sort of progress."

Kieran swung the backpack off his back and set it down beside Haden. As he pulled out his notes and told Haden about what they discovered, Liam made his way back to his cubicle where Doreen sat at the desk. She poured over a thin journal, nearly all the pages of which had previously been torn out, and notebooks full of Liam's notes and data sat in piles all over the table. Doreen didn't look up as he approached. From a woman

like her, who prided herself on her military background, it was a blatant sign of disrespect. Fine. If she was going to play that game, Liam would too.

“Lieutenant Mathews,” Liam said in a formal tone. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “I don’t expect you to like your job all the time, or even to like me, but when I give you an assignment, I expect you to complete it to the best of your abilities, and I expect no complaints from you. Do you understand?”

Doreen raised her head and glared, but it appeared her military background came back to her, and she stood at attention, though her expression was one of utter contempt.

“If this happens again—if you do not fulfill your duties, or you are insubordinate—I will take it to the captain and have you relieved of your duties. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” Her mouth formed a thin line. “*Sir*,” she added, her voice thick with contempt, but Liam wasn’t going to take the bait this time.

Liam dismissed his team for the night. He and Kieran could share their discoveries with Doreen in the morning.

He found his way back to Spencer’s apartment, eager to share his day’s experiences with Teagan and Spencer. The journey took a little longer than his way to the hospital, since he got turned around a few times—those identical streets were so frustrating—and he constantly made sure that nobody could have followed him back to the apartment.

“Guys? I’m back,” he said. His voice echoed off the bare walls as he made his way in through the window as he’d done the night before.

From the living room, he heard Teagan shout a greeting, and, wearing a checkered apron over his pajamas and carrying a wooden spoon, Spencer walked around the corner from the kitchen.

“Oh my god,” Teagan said when she walked out of the living room. “What are you wearing?”

Spencer smiled. “You said I never do anything around here. Well, I made dinner.”

### **Teagan**

The three of them sat down around the table for a dinner of cold cereal—“Really, Spence?” Teagan said. “You needed the apron to make *cereal*?”—which Spencer seemed oddly proud to have supplied this meal for everyone.

“I have a question, actually,” Liam said. He lifted a spoonful of soggy corn flakes and dropped it into his bowl. The milk splashed.

Spencer rolled his eyes. “Of course you do,” he muttered through a mouthful of cereal.

Teagan gingerly used two fingers to lift from her arm the piece of soggy cereal that had spewed at her when Spencer talked. “Go ahead,” she said to Liam. She glared at Spencer and flicked the corn flake back at him.

“Where did you get the milk?” Liam gestured to the fresh carton that sat between them on the table.

Teagan frowned and glanced at the carton. The sell by date was three weeks out, not something it would have been if the milk were packaged before the war ended.

“It’s strange, though, right?” Liam continued. “I mean... I haven’t seen all that many people. Everything seems to have just stopped when the war ended. I would have thought that milk would be... I don’t know... kind of impossible to get.”

“I don’t know,” Spencer said. His voice rose, and he looked visibly unsettled. Spencer cleared his throat. “I hadn’t about it until you mentioned it.”

“It’s the whole mentality we were trying to explain the other day,” Teagan said. “Nobody notices something is off until someone points it out. Without clear memories to refer to, we forget to notice that things are out of the ordinary.”

“So where *did* you get the milk?” Liam asked. He poked at the cereal with his spoon. He hadn’t taken a bite, and Teagan figured the spoon wasn’t about to go anywhere near his mouth until he figured out exactly where it came from.

“There’s a grocery store a few blocks away,” Teagan said. She glanced at Spencer, who looked more withdrawn than usual. “Fully functioning.”

“But how can that be? Where is the food coming from?”

“We don’t know!” Spencer snapped. His spoon clanked against the rim of his bowl as he threw it down. Teagan felt more shaken by Spencer’s reaction, but she understood the impulse. After they had searched so long for answers, how could they have missed something right in front of them? What else were they missing? Teagan looked between the two men and quickly changed the subject.

“You had a meeting with Ericson today, right Spence?”

“Yep.” Spencer readopted his surly, indifferent demeanor he seemed to be trying to perfect lately. Teagan took a deep breath. He could be so frustrating.

“Did he have any new information?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Teagan watched him for a minute, expectant for more information, but when he did not continue, she cleared her throat and turned her attention to Liam.

“And how was your day?”

Liam brightened, his eyes wide with eagerness to tell of his day’s adventures. However, his face fell when the news wasn’t met with the response he seemed to expect.

“You worked for the Lab?” Teagan interrupted his retelling of his encounter with the captain. She tried to keep the sharp edge out of her voice, but failed.

“Yeah,” Liam replied. “You’ve heard of it?”

Spencer set his glass down with a clang.

“Liam—you’re working for the other side,” Teagan said. “The Lab is everything we’ve been working against.”

“I can’t believe it.” Spencer pushed his chair away from the table, which created a loud scraping sound of metal on linoleum. He began to pace back and forth across the small kitchen and ran his fingers through his dark hair. The resultant mess would have been funny in any other situation, but the mood was too heavy for Teagan to mock him as she normally would.

Liam looked back and forth between his two companions. “What? No.” He shook his head fervently. “No, we’re on the same side. We’re working on the same things you are!”

“We?” Spencer stopped pacing and glared.

Liam faltered. “I mean... I just meant that we—I mean to say all of us, you included...”

“Don’t lump me in with the Lab,” Spencer said. His voice was almost a whisper, the low tone dark with warning.

“Liam,” Teagan tried to explain. “You don’t understand.”

“No—come on,” Liam said. “How do you even know anything about the Lab? Maybe *your* information is wrong.”

Liam wasn’t listening to them. Teagan could see Spencer’s anger rising, and she couldn’t blame him. After all they had seen—the people they’d known who had been arrested or worse by that awful organization. Maybe it wasn’t Liam’s fault he hadn’t known before, but he needed to give her an opportunity to explain now.

“Liam,” she said in a stern voice.

“No. The Lab can’t be bad,” Liam interrupted. “I used to work there—with Emily. Trust me. We’re working on the same thing.”

“No.” Finality rang through Spencer’s voice. Liam clenched his jaw but didn’t speak. “I’m sorry, but if you choose to work there, we cannot continue to associate with you.”

Spencer glared at Liam, turned his head deliberately toward the door, then turned back to look at Liam with raised eyebrows.

“I’ll prove it to you,” Liam said. He pushed his full bowl of cereal towards the center of the table and stood as the milk slopped over the sides.

Teagan stood with him and stepped between the two men. She bit her lip anxiously but kept her eyes trained on Liam. “How?”

Spencer's mouth shrunk to no more than a thin line, and his nostrils flared. Teagan knew that to continue this line of conversation treaded a thin line with her friendship.

"I don't know," Liam admitted. "But I will."

The Lab was working for the wrong side. Hadn't she seen that time and again? Teagan doubted this time would be any different, but the slight waver under Liam's confident tone told Teagan that he needed to believe it was true. He'd find out on his own in time, but she would allow him to grasp at the straws he needed.

"Well, when you have something more concrete, come back and tell us. Maybe we'll listen." She wasn't going to promise anything.

"I'll be here soon, then."

Spencer narrowed his eyes and walked towards Liam. He pushed one pointed finger into Liam's chest harshly. "Leave our names out of your little *investigations* at the Lab."

Spencer turned to leave the room.

"Spence, I would never—" Liam said, but Spencer was already gone.

Teagan heard a crash from the next room accompanied by a muttered expletive.

## **Spencer**

Damn him, Spencer thought as he kicked the wall. He paced throughout the apartment. That kid had the audacity to come into his house—his borrowed house, he reminded himself—and put the only person he cared about in danger. How could he?

Spencer dropped to his knees on the edge of the sofa and began to punch the cushions. After everything they had worked for this little stray couldn't spoil everything.

It wasn't enough. He wanted to feel pain; he wanted to cause damage. He stood from the couch and punched the wall. The drywall cracked beneath his knuckles, and a shock of pain radiated up his arm. Again. The crack in the wall deepened, and he pulled his hand back to look at the redness of his knuckles. He punched the wall a third time, and finally his fist went through to the insulation.

The droplets of blood that formed on the raw edges of his knuckles weren't enough. Spencer groaned. He risked too much for someone he barely knew, and for what?

His beat up old backpack sat on the coffee table. Spencer dug through the contents until he found what he was looking for. He pulled a manila envelope out and ripped open the seal. The edge of the paper sliced his forefinger. He stuck the wound in his mouth and threw the envelope onto the coffee table. He reached inside with one hand and wrinkled the papers as he pulled them out. He wanted to know what it said before he destroyed it at least; the cost was too high for mere trash.

Huh. Spencer stared at the words on the page and sank onto the couch. That changed things.

## **Emily**

Emily couldn't sleep. Her brain refused to turn off as her mind raced through all the possibilities. She didn't want to be in bed anymore. She didn't want to be anywhere that wasn't by his side.

All the small things she never noticed before drew her attention and kept her awake—the ticking of the clock on the wall in the next room, the blinking red dots on the alarm clock by her bedside, the steady green light of the fire alarm above her bed.



Her phone buzzed on her bedside table as the vibration moved it a few centimeters to the right, and she sat up, happy for the distraction.

“Hello?” she answered on the first ring. The slightly increased volume and forced positive tone betrayed her anxiety. The caller ID displayed her work number. Would they have called for anything but an emergency?

“Knew she’d be awake,” a voice muttered on the other end of the line. She heard a shout of laughter in the distance, then, “Em—stop thinking about it, and go to sleep!”

“How do you know I wasn’t already?” she countered. “Your call could have just woken me up.”

Her voice echoed back at her through the phone. Was she on speakerphone? Her suspicions were confirmed when another voice, deeper than the first, joined the conversation.

“If you were asleep, you wouldn’t have answered,” he said. “We wouldn’t have woken you up—you are the deepest sleeper ever.”

“Yeah,” the first voice agreed. “When you fell asleep at your desk on Monday we threw things at you and blasted the music as loud as the main stereo would go. You snored right through it.”

“Shut up, I do not snore!” Emily felt her face heat in mortification. She knew he hadn’t made it up; she’d snored as a child but had hoped the trait had faded over the years.

“You do,” the second man said. “But don’t worry, *everyone* here thought it was adorable.”

Everyone. Monday. The words jumped out at her. *He* had been there Monday—had he heard her snore too? Just her luck—that was one way to attract her crush of three years... just snore at him.

Emily grabbed the alarm clock from her bedside table and held it in front of her face. The blinking red lights blurred together, but when she squinted and stared carefully, she could tell that it was three in the morning. Had she really been evading sleep that long? She ran a hand through her tangled hair and tried to remember the last time she took a shower.

“But don’t worry about that right now. Go to sleep,” the first man said. “Do you need someone to sing you a lullaby? I’m sure Jones would be happy to oblige.”

The second voice shouted protests in the background, and Emily imagined the scuffle between the two men. The line crackled, and she pictured the shorter man holding the phone behind his back to keep the taller man from grabbing it.

She hung up and wondered how long they would argue over the phone before they realized the call had been ended. Emily sighed and crawled out of bed. She couldn’t sleep, so she might as well shower so she could look—and smell—more presentable when she went back in to work. Tomorrow could just be the day he’d wake up.

## **Liam**

He wasn’t welcome at Spencer’s apartment anymore. That much was clear from the reactions of his once-comrades. Liam swallowed the hurt he felt from being kicked out of the one place he felt sure he belonged. Surely they would soon listen to him about his new—old—job. The Lab wasn’t bad; they were working for the same side. Hadn’t he spent all afternoon trying to figure out how the non-reality worked with Kieran? Sure,

there were people like Doreen who worked at the Lab who he really didn't like, and there was Captain Jefferson, who seemed strangely intense at the most random times, but there were also people like Kieran and Haden and him. They were good, right?

He turned toward the door to leave, but Teagan's hand on his shoulder stopped him before he made it out. She grabbed his arm and led him back to the kitchen.

"Here," she said. She handed him a paper bag from the cupboard and instructed him to hold it open as she took a jar of peanut butter from the shelf and began to make peanut butter sandwiches.

"What are you doing?" Liam asked her.

"Look," she said, smearing peanut butter on multiple slices of bread in quick succession. "We may not be working for the same side, but I'm not going to just kick you out on the street and expect you to fend for yourself."

She stuck the sandwiches in individual plastic bags and placed them in Liam's bag. He followed her into the hallway, where she began to pull items of clothing out of the closet, occasionally holding them up to him for size.

"Spencer's not comfortable with you staying here right now," she continued, as she stuffed a large pile of clothing into the bag. "There are plenty of abandoned apartments just like this one that you can crash in for the night. But just in case you find one that doesn't have any food stocked or clothes that fit you, I don't want to send you out on your own empty handed."

She stepped back, cocked her head to the side and surveyed him. She grabbed one last item, a brown pair of weathered hiking boots and nodded to herself, satisfied.

“Okay, I think that’ll be good to start you off,” she said, with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Come back around here when you find yourself back on our side.”

Liam smiled gratefully, and he thanked Teagan for the bag of stuff. It was a nice gesture, even if a gesture really was all it was. Spencer grunted from the sofa as Liam walked out. He couldn’t tell if it was a grunt of goodbye or one of good riddance.

After he slid the rusty grate of the window back up and climbed out onto the fire escape, Liam reached into his pocket and pulled out the torn paper Kieran had given him earlier. He hoped the offer was as genuine as it had seemed at the time. The chill of the night air nipped at Liam’s cheeks and nose as he stepped out into the unwelcome unknown.

Liam stood on the stoop of the unfamiliar house and waited for someone to respond to the ringing doorbell. He picked at the note grasped tightly in his hand and rechecked the address for the fifth time. It had taken three before he’d gotten up the confidence to ring the bell in the first place. He heard footsteps inside and held his breath. The door swung open.

“Hey!” Kieran arrived first at the door and without hesitation pulled it wide for Liam to enter. Liam stepped inside but lingered in the entryway. “What’s up? I thought you were going to your friends’ house.”

Haden trailed a few steps behind Kieran and nodded in greeting to the figure in the doorway.

“I was... well... can I stay here tonight?” Liam asked. It seemed like there was hardly any need for the question, though, as Kieran bounded into the other room and passed back by the two of them, his arms laden with sheets and blankets.

Shocked by the quick reaction, Liam looked to Haden for a more concrete answer.

“I suppose you can take that as a yes,” Haden said. He pulled the door shut and led Liam into the living room, where Kieran was making up a bed on the sofa. He had already taken the cushions off the back of the couch, and they were stacked precisely on the matching love seat. The sheets were already tucked into the couch, and he held two nearly identical blankets up for Liam’s inspection.

“Um... the blue one?” Liam said when he realized Kieran was waiting for him to choose between them. Kieran threw the other blanket at Haden and went to work laying the blue one onto the sofa bed. Haden stared at the blanket for a moment before he tucked it awkwardly under his arm.

“Haden and I already have the rooms, so I guess you’ll have to make do on the sofa for tonight,” Kieran said in a rush as he passed Liam.

He speed-walked out of the room and came back moments later with three large pillows. Haden reached out and grabbed one from him.

“This is from my bed!”

Kieran ignored him, but let him keep the pillow, which Haden tucked under his other arm.

“I suppose we could work on a rotational system—it doesn’t seem fair to make you sleep on the sofa every day.”

Liam opened his mouth to protest that the sofa would be just fine, but Kieran's words tumbled out too fast for him to edge in a word.

“If you don't mind sleeping on the sofa today, you can sleep in my room tomorrow, and I'll stay out here. Then the next night, you can take Haden's room, and he can sleep on the sofa.” Liam could practically see the gears turning in his head and wondered if, at the speed he was moving, he'd already planned out a chart of the schedule to color code at his earliest convenience.

“Actually,” Haden said, with his voice raised to interrupt his friend. “I can show you to your apartment if you'd prefer to sleep in your own bed. I remember where you and Em used to live.”

“Really?” Liam asked. It was too good to be true—he'd have a home of his own, and it would certainly help in his search for Emily. What if she was already there?

“Yeah, of course,” Haden replied. “But if you don't mind sleeping here tonight, can we wait until morning? It's pretty late.”

He motioned down to the flannel pajama pants he was wearing. Liam tried to stifle his laughter when he glanced down and noticed for the first time the pattern of little Scottie dogs on Haden's pants.

“Shut up,” Haden said, and he shoved Liam onto the freshly made sofa bed.

After the two men headed to their bedrooms, Liam lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Disconcerted, he noticed it, like the fake streets and people, blurred before his eyes. If it rained, would he get wet? What was the point of living indoors if the buildings weren't real?

## **Spencer**

Spencer waited until Teagan went to bed before he pulled the envelope out again. She couldn't see it, not yet. He rummaged through the drawer of desk supplies in the kitchen and pulled out a yellow post-it pad and a sharpie marker.

He wrote a single word on the post-it note with bold strokes and ripped the paper off the stack to affix it to the outside of the envelope.

Where to hide it? He needed someplace Teagan wouldn't find it today—she couldn't know before it happened. She would try to stop it and get herself hurt. But once he was gone...

He winced. Was it regret? He couldn't dwell on it—not now—it was done; it was too late.

Once he was gone, he thought again and pushed through the pain the idea caused him, she would have to be able to find it. He needed her to find it so she could pass it along.

Spencer slipped through the hallway, his cautious footsteps soft on the carpet floor. He stepped into his bedroom and placed the envelope under his pillow. She wouldn't go into his room until she knew. He adjusted the pillow so the corner of the envelope was just visible against the white sheet beneath it. There—it wasn't blatantly obvious, but if she looked for something, she would easily find it.

He grabbed a coat from the wardrobe and lingered in the doorway for a moment before he turned from the room and shut the door without a sound. He walked down the hall and stood before Teagan's doorway with his hand on the doorknob. Spencer stepped away from the door without opening it.

Without a word, he walked through the dark house, slid the window up as silently as possible, and snuck out into the cool night air.

## **Liam**

A few hours later, Liam awoke bleary-eyed to Haden's voice. "Liam? Hey, Liam."

A hand shook his shoulder, and he turned his body toward the inside of the couch to shake it off. Liam blinked until his eyes opened halfway. Haden stood over him, his eyes fixed on the couch where Liam's feet were. Liam started to close his eyes again and hoped it was a dream.

Haden reached out again and grabbed his shoulder to shake him more fully awake. Liam rolled over from his uncomfortable position and blinked in the bright light of the lamp. The clock on the wall said it was three o'clock, and other than the lamp, the house was dark. Two o'clock in the freaking morning.

"What?" Liam asked. He tried to say it as pleasantly as possible, but couldn't be blamed for the irritation. It was a ridiculous time to wake someone up.

"I was wondering—can we talk?" Haden smiled sheepishly. He hunched with his hands in his pockets and rocked forward onto the balls of his feet. Liam raised his eyebrows.

"Now? You just had the urge to chat at two a.m.? Is this a sleepover party—are we going to paint each other's nails and talk about boys?" He couldn't stop the sarcastic words. Huh. Lack of sleep was starting to make him sound like Spencer.



“I wanted to explain some... things,” Haden said. His voice grew more confident as he spoke. “I couldn’t really talk to you around Doreen or Kieran. I know it’s really late... or really early, but do you mind?”

Liam groaned, ran a hand through his hair, and swung his legs around to a sitting position before he pushed himself up from the couch. He paced back and forth behind the couch to stay awake. “Yeah, no. Go right ahead,” he told Haden.

“You asked Kieran earlier why I could remember more than either of you.”

Liam nodded.

“Right, well... I haven’t exactly been completely honest with him. It’s just—the truth doesn’t show me in the best light, you know?” Haden looked up at Liam, his shame written on his face. “I’ve told Kieran some of what I’m going to tell you, but not everything. Just—please don’t tell him the bad stuff. I don’t want you to hate me either, but I can’t bear to lose my best friend over this again. I know I made the wrong decision, but I want to make it right.”

“Again?” Liam asked.

“Yeah. I kind of... you were all not speaking to me by the end of *before*.”

“Why are you telling this to me?” Liam asked.

“In case it helps,” Haden said, his face repentant. “I want to find the truth as much as you do, so I need to tell you what I know.”

“I can’t promise what my reaction will be if whatever you did is as bad as you make it sound.”

“Maybe this would sound better with tea,” Haden said. He hit his palms against the coffee table and pushed himself up. Liam stood to follow him into the kitchen.

“How about coffee?” Liam sat at the small, round table on one side of the kitchen while Haden fiddled with the kettle for a minute. Liam waited for him to start. Finally, Haden made his way over to the table with two mugs filled to the brim. Steam rose from the porcelain mugs. He placed a blue mug in front of Liam and kept the other, a chipped green mug, for himself and sat in the chair across where Liam had seated himself.

“I was a coward,” Haden said in a quiet voice. His eyes were transfixed on his mug, and he ran a finger around the top of it distractedly. Liam took a few sips of coffee as he waited for Haden to lift his head and maintain eye contact before urging him to continue.

“Start from the beginning,”

Haden turned his head to glance at the dark hallway behind him before he began. “It started out—it was a dream job—we had this amazing invention you’d dreamt up, and we were working with our best friends. But something happened.

“All of a sudden, the Lab wasn’t the comfortable workspace we were used to. Everything got really tense, and you kept butting heads with the captain. You suspected that something was going to happen, and we helped you make adjustments to the AID so that nobody other than the four of us could work it correctly. We didn’t know what was going on, but we trusted you.

“You confronted the captain in his office, and before we knew it, we were watching you being escorted from the building.”

Liam held up a hand to interrupt. “I don’t understand. What are you afraid to tell Kieran?”

“I’m getting there.” Haden took a deep breath. “After you and Emily left, we fought. He wanted to join your rebellion against the Lab. He said, ‘Liam wouldn’t do this without a good reason.’”

Haden leaned forward to Liam.

“I never doubted that you had a good cause. I never did figure out what it was, though, because I made the wrong choice.

“Those were hard times. Our government was about to instigate a war with New Sweden. We were never given a reason for the war, but people were either too scared or too complacent to speak out against it. Joining you meant jumping into the unknown. Kieran went; I stayed. And I regretted it every day, but still I did nothing. I lost my three best friends, and I fought against you because I was too scared. I didn’t see any of you again, except in government pictures of the *rebel forces*.”

“I thought Kieran said he woke up here,” Liam said. He glanced around the tiny room. “If you hadn’t seen him in however long, how is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” Haden said. “I don’t remember everything. After the war starts, my memories blur together. I remember the feelings—the terror of the war, the guilt, the pain—but nothing specific. I woke up here a few days later, alone, and I thought—hoped—the war was just a bad dream.”

“Did you go back to the Lab when you woke up?”

“No,” Haden said. “I took one look out the window, saw the illusion, and vowed not to leave this apartment until the effect of the AID was lifted.”

“You weren’t in the apartment today. What changed?” Liam lifted his nearly empty coffee mug to his lips again. He wondered if it would be impolite to interrupt Haden’s confession to ask for a refill.

“Kieran woke up,” Haden responded.

“But I thought you said you were alone here when you woke up.”

“Haven’t you realized that people aren’t visible when they’re asleep? It’s not like I spent a lot of time in his room. It wasn’t likely I was going to trip over him or anything.”

“So Kieran woke up, and…” Liam gestured for Haden to continue.

“And I knew I owed it to the three of you to finish what you started,” Haden said.

“With your help, we can end this illusion and take the Lab down.”

Haden left Liam in the kitchen to mull it over. Liam walked over to the coffee maker and poured himself another cup from the still warm coffee pot. No steam rose from the cup, but the caffeine was really all that was necessary. Liam gulped the coffee down and set the mug in the sink next to Haden’s.

Liam wanted to believe Haden. He wanted to believe something, and Haden’s story made sense. But so did the captain’s and Teagan’s and Spencer’s. Haden looked truthful. He really did, but so did Captain Jefferson. Could it be possible that they both believed their own version of the truth? He didn’t have many memories of *before*, and Teagan had none. What made Haden’s memories or the captain’s memories any more definite than the city around them?

He heard the door click down the hall behind Haden, and Liam walked into the living room again. He folded the sheets on top of the makeshift sofa-bed. He wasn’t

going to get any sleep that night, and he didn't want to deal with anybody else right then. He needed more time to think. Everything conflicted. He couldn't believe anything he'd been told.

Liam crept toward the door and let himself out silently.

He tightened his grip on the bag Teagan had given him earlier and walked through the dark and empty streets back to the Lab. If he couldn't sleep, he might as well work on answering the question that dominated his mind: how to make everything go back to normal. Because, he reasoned, if he could fix the world, he would be one step closer to finding his wife.

## **Spencer**

Spencer stared at the decrepit old building before him. He didn't need to check the address in his hand; he could tell by the mere contrast to the rest of the street that this was the correct place. He hated how this despicable place—the epicenter of this illusion—was unaffected by the deception. It wasn't fair.

The wooden double doors swung open as he approached, and the guard behind the desk stepped forward to intercept him.

“No visitors.”

He was already making this too easy, delivering himself to their doorstep. But he thought about his ultimate goal to protect Teagan, and he continued, “They'll be expecting me.”

“Name?”

Spencer took a deep breath. This was it.

“Bennett. Spencer Bennett.”

The guard looked down to the clipboard in his hands and his lips twisted upward into a cruel smile.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t that convenient.” The guard reached down behind the desk, and with the push of a button, the large doors slammed shut behind him. Spencer heard a click as the lock activated. They still thought he would be a flight risk at this point?

Spencer raised his empty hands in surrender. “I came to you, remember?”

The guard touched his ear and spoke into his wristwatch. Didn’t that sort of thing only happen in old spy movies?

“Bob—your job just got easier. I’ve got a man in the lobby who claims to be Bennett,” the guard said, his narrow eyes fixed on Spencer as though they dared him to move. Spencer stepped to the left slightly just to watch his reaction. The guard lunged at him, but knocked his knee against the desk. The guard hissed between his teeth and grabbed his knee. Spencer smirked at him.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of a large metal detector separating the security desk from the rest of the building, and two more security guards ran toward Spencer, wheezing from the exercise. The metal detector beeped angrily when the men passed through, and each new guard grabbed one of Spencer’s arms and forcibly bent it behind his back. Spencer heard the sound of metallic clicking from the cold handcuffs now affixed to his wrists.

“Easy there,” he said as one of the guards tightened his side too tight. Spencer felt the metal restraints digging into his skin. The guard loosened the handcuff a notch, and

together they frog-marched Spencer through the still beeping archway and down the stairs to a dark cavernous room.

## **Liam**

The on-duty security guard at the entrance to the Lab eyed Liam strangely when he entered. The fluorescent lights emphasized the dark outside, and the tinted windows reflected the room back to them. The room was colder than earlier in the day, and Liam tugged his jacket tighter around him.

“Morning,” Liam said to the guard. He nodded politely and held up the identification badge he’d been given.

The man furrowed his brow but swiped him in nonetheless.

Liam entered the stairwell and followed the concrete steps down to the floor he’d been working on earlier. A rough shout echoed up from the basement level below him. Liam hesitated with one hand on the door to his lab, but when the sound didn’t repeat, he decided to ignore it and left the stairwell.

He grabbed one of his notebooks from where it sat next to the AID and carried it back into his cubicle to flip through again. Maybe there was something he missed—something that could help him verify or refute Haden’s story.

He turned the pages past diagrams, lists, and notes, and he looked carefully at each of the handwritten notes in the margins. The added notes were written in two distinct handwritings—one small, cramped, messy scrawl that he recognized as his own, and the other a loopy, artistic, cursive lettering that he suspected belonged to Emily.

One small note in Liam’s writing, almost illegible, was written on the back of the second to last page.

*Ethical repercussions?*

The two words sent his stomach plunging. He knew where he stood with the Lab; he could imagine how he would have reacted if that fear hadn't been properly addressed. The ethical repercussions of the device could have been enough to halt progress and lead him to argue with the captain. Would it have been enough for the captain to have him escorted out of the building? Liam glanced down at the scribbled note. He remembered—

\* \* \*

The sleek doors of the elevator slid open, and Liam stepped out onto the hardwood floor that was characteristic of the upper levels of the Lab. With his notebook clutched in his left hand, he strode confidently toward the doorway at the end of the long hallway.

Without a knock, he pushed the door open and walked confidently inside. A female figure faced the captain with her back to the door as she sat on the desk. Behind the desk, the captain jumped up at Liam's entrance. The woman stood with him. Doreen Mathews.

"Coleman!" Captain Jefferson cleared his throat. "I trust you've made progress by this point."

Liam held his gaze firm on the captain. Doreen sidled out of the room behind him. Liam waited until the door clicked behind her before speaking.

"Captain Jefferson, my team has been working hard, but as my report stated last month, the virtual reality device needs years more work, not to mention the ethical considerations that need to be factored in before it can ever be deployed."



The captain stepped around the desk and stood closer so that he towered over Liam, who was unfazed by this favorite intimidation technique of the Captain.

“It is not your job to think about the ethical ramifications of the device. You’ve been employed to make it work—nothing else.”

“Captain—the ramifications of the device—”

“*Mr. Coleman!*” The captain emphasized the title to remind Liam of their difference. “You are in subordination.”

“I cannot continue this project. It—”

Captain Jefferson walked to the door and opened it wide. “Then you will forfeit all compensation, Mr. Coleman, past and present.”

“Fine.”

“You will also forfeit all plans and technology as property of the Euterra government.”

Horrified, Liam stepped back. He hadn’t expected that. “I can’t—”

“It was established within the contract *you* signed, Mr. Coleman. I must ask that you vacate the premises immediately. You now lack the security clearance to be here. I will have a guard escort you out.” The captain leaned his head out of the door and shouted to the guard in a sleek black suit by the elevator. “Ericson!”

The man, Ericson, walked swiftly to the captain’s office and wrestled Liam’s arm behind his back. He pushed Liam out of the office and toward the elevator.

“The ethical considerations—” Liam shouted over his shoulder. The pressure Ericson pushed him forward with was too great for him to fight even enough to turn around fully. He heard the captain scoff behind him.

“Are no longer any of your concern, Mr. Coleman,” the captain said. “I caution you—the confidentiality clause of your contract is still in place. Should you speak of this to anyone...”

Liam felt the memory drift away. A single word stood out among the rest: *Ericson*. Wasn't that the name of Spencer's government contact? This man definitely wasn't a research scientist. He had to warn Spencer.

### **Teagan**

The drums of Teagan's dream persisted though she felt her mind begin to wake. A soft pounding beat drifted to her as she lay in bed.

After a few minutes of listening to the persistent beat, Teagan's sleep-fogged mind began to realize it was a knock at the door. She glanced at the clock. Three o'clock in the morning. Who could be knocking so persistently at that hour?

Rather than waiting for the noise to wake Spencer up—for that would lead to a miserable morning in his presence—Teagan climbed slowly from the warmth of her bed and tripped down the hall to the window that served as their doorway coming and going from the apartment.

“Spencer! If you're in there, please open the window!” A familiar voice shouted. “I think you're in—”

Teagan caught sight of Liam's face through the window, unlocked the latch, and pulled the window open sharply.

“What do you think you're doing?” she asked and refused to step out of the way for Liam to enter.

“Spencer!” Liam ignored her and climbed through the window. He ran into the apartment and down the hallway toward Spencer’s bedroom. Teagan heard the door click open and slam against the wall, but the expected reaction of Spencer yelling never came. Red faced, Liam raced back to where Teagan stood by the door. “Is he here?”

“Asleep, I thought,” Teagan said.

Liam clenched his hands into fists, but he didn’t look angry, like she would have expected his attitude to be toward Spencer—and toward her too—after last night. He looked panicked.

“This can’t be good,” Liam said. He pushed past Teagan, and she followed him into the kitchen. From the doorway, Teagan watched Liam grab a cup from the cabinet and fill it with the constantly lukewarm tap water at the sink. He gulped the water down and tossed the plastic cup into the sink before he sat down at the table with his head in his hands.

Teagan approached him with gentle steps and hesitantly placed her hand on his right shoulder. “Liam? You’re starting to scare me.” She moved to sit next to him but kept her hand on him, sliding it down his arm to his clenched fist, and she held on for comfort for both of them. “Where’s Spencer?”

Liam pushed himself back from the table and began to pace again. “Spencer’s contact—the scientist friend? What was his name again?”

Teagan frowned. “Ericson?” What could he have to do with Liam?

Liam let out a noise of frustration—somewhere between a groan and a sigh, and his expression looked pained. “Teagan, there’s a man who works at the Lab, one of the guards, his name is Ericson.”

“What?” Teagan felt a sudden swooping sensation in her stomach like the wind had been knocked out of her. She knew what it meant. But she didn’t want to believe it. Not Spencer. Not now.

“He’s not who he says he is; Ericson works for the Lab. Spencer’s in trouble.”

Liam stared at her for a moment, his mouth slightly open as though he had one more thing to say, but he turned and raced out of the apartment without another word.

Teagan followed his path slowly, still in shock from the news, to stare out the window after him. He bounded down the steps of the fire escape, almost to the ground in half the normal time.

“Good luck,” Teagan tried to call after him, but the words came out in a soft whisper only she could hear.

## **Spencer**

“You know, I’m kind of disappointed.” Spencer’s voice echoed throughout the dark, cavernous room, his bright tone a stark contrast to his situation. He could see little of the room around him. Only one small, direct light lit the area of the chair. The rest of the room seemed even darker and more distant outside the radius of the piercing spotlight. He had been led to a lone chair about twenty paces into the room, and his hands were tied behind his back and his feet to the legs of the chair with a thin but unyielding rope. Two guards had brought him into the room, but only one had stayed to guard him. Spencer stared at the overweight man before him. He was wearing dark clothing and a cloth mask to shield his identity or perhaps to seem more dangerous; he didn’t look particularly menacing. The upper hand still was up for grabs as far as Spencer was concerned, and he was going to take it for himself. “I thought those robber masks were

supposed to make people look scary or intimidating or something. In reality, it just looks like you're wearing your mom's pantyhose on your face."

Spencer watched the guard's eyes darken, and they seemed to search the room for an adequate retort. He spluttered out a few incoherent vowels, but wasn't quick enough with a response before Spencer decided to continue.

"And that gun? That's really not how you're supposed to hold it." Spencer wondered if the man had ever used a gun before. He aimed the pistol at Spencer, with his right arm bent at a ninety-degree angle and his left hand resting on top of the slide.

"I would offer to help you out, give you some lessons at the gun range—free of charge, even—but I suppose you wouldn't let a prisoner use a gun. That's smart. I mean, it's not as smart as gun training prior to guard duty, but well... I suppose it could be a good scare tactic if your prisoner had no knowledge of guns."

The guard moved his hand cautiously and, in lieu of a holster, tucked the gun into his belt. Spencer tried to hold back a laugh, but he was pleased he could get to the guard this much. Keep talking, he told himself. Keep the upper hand.

"Heck, even I'm a little scared right now. But that's more out of a concern that you might fire it off without intending to shoot. At least take it out of your waistband, if you don't mind. It's really not on my list of things to do today to watch someone shoot himself in his own buttocks. I'm not good at the whole comforting thing, you see, and well, to be perfectly honest, I have no desire to see your rear end—even in bits and pieces on the floor."

The guard clumsily lifted the gun out of his belt and moved it to the front pocket of his pants. Spencer noticed that the safety was on—thankfully—but he knew the guard didn't realize that, and he couldn't help laughing at the pure stupidity.

“Really? You're afraid of losing your rear end, but you're not uncomfortable with the barrel being pointed straight at your—”

“Okay, okay!” The guard pulled the gun out of his pocket. “What would make you shut up?”

Though his tone was raised to be intimidating, the slight jump in pitch countered it. Spencer tried to keep his face neutral and not show his smirk of self-appreciation at the turn of the conversation. The guard asked him for instructions. Spencer had the upper hand now; he'd let the guard think he still had some control before he took it any further. For now, he needed to get the gun away from the guard and keep him distracted and frustrated.

“You can put it wherever you like. Just stop waving it around like a freaking idiot,” Spencer said. He had to make it seem to the guard that he had made the decision to put the gun on the ground mostly on his own. “You're as likely to shoot yourself as you are me, and I'm quite partial to these pajamas; I wouldn't want blood on them, if you don't mind.”

The guard held the gun in both hands like a hot potato and gingerly leaned over to place it on the floor, far out of Spencer's reach. He stood and walked away from the gun, toward Spencer and eyed him cautiously. Spencer needed to distract him fast, before he could question whether Spencer intentionally got the gun away from him. And he needed

to be just annoying enough that the guard wouldn't think too closely about anything he said.

Keep him distracted, Spencer thought. Keep talking.

## **Haden**

Haden shouldn't have dumped his problems on Liam. Of course his friend would run out in the middle of the night. He didn't blame him. It was exactly what Haden had expected to happen. At least he hadn't shared his past with Kieran yet.

Haden left the apartment with as little sound as possible so he didn't wake Kieran. He snuck through the dark living room and shut the front door behind him gingerly. He winced at the soft click it made when the lock re-engaged.

The distortions of the buildings on the street appeared even blurrier in the early morning darkness, like he was wearing someone else's prescription glasses. Haden's eyes felt strained, and the headache that began to develop only grew as he passed street after street of the same distortions.

Haden raced into the Lab, past the security checkpoint, and into the stairs. If he were Liam, where would he go? The Lab was perhaps the last place in the city that old Liam would have gone to, but now, when it might be one of the only two places he knew...

He found Liam on the stairwell landing on the second lowest level. Liam looked at him with wide eyes, almost manic, but not accusing. Haden breathed more fully than he had since they fell out before the war. This wasn't the time, obviously, with the way Liam looked, but Haden felt relieved he hadn't lost his friend.

“Haden!” Liam’s whispered shout brought him back to reality. “The lower basements—is this where they keep prisoners?”

“Yes. Through these doors are the cells and interrogation rooms.” Haden shuddered. The reminder of all that the Lab did haunted him.

“Thanks,” Liam said. He grabbed the handle of the door but paused and stared at Haden. “You should probably go. I’m about to do something very... inadvisable.”

“No,” Haden said. He shook his head. “This time, I’m not abandoning you. This time, I’m going to fight for the right side.” This was his chance to make up for his past; he had the opportunity to change his choice. He would be an idiot to make the same mistake.

Liam shook his head fervently. “Haden, I do not have a plan, and I’m going to do something very stupid. Now is not the time to be a hero.”

“Not a hero,” Haden corrected. “Just not a coward anymore.”

Liam sighed, but he didn’t argue again. He twisted the knob on the door and pushed it open. Haden followed, catching the door behind him and pulled it shut as softly as possible.

They made their way down the dim hallway with slow and cautious steps. The doors on either side of the hall were each marked with a number and had a postcard size window an inch above Haden’s eye level. He stood on his toes to gaze into the first one on his left, a door labeled 12. Haden couldn’t see anything in the darkness of the room and moved to the next one, door ten, while Liam peered in the window of a door labeled 11 on the right side of the hallway.

“Nothing,” Liam whispered, and he walked to nine.



Haden ruled out door after door, and they made their way further down the long hallway. Each door was separated by a large stretch of wall, and Haden wondered how big the rooms were. He'd never been inside them. In fact, he'd never visited this far down in the Lab before.

At door number four, Haden saw a light inside the room. A man was tied to a chair in the center of the huge room.

"Liam," he whispered. Liam turned from door number three and hurried to Haden. "Is it him?"

Liam glanced in the window. Haden noticed with a slight pang of jealousy that Liam had to lean down a little to see through the small opening. Haden missed Emily a little more for the mere fact that it was nice to have someone shorter than him around.

Liam stepped back from the door and shook his head. He shut his eyes and scrunched his forehead. He looked pained. "Not him."

"We'll find him," Haden said. He tried to sound reassuring, but he still didn't know who *he* was. "Come on, two more doors."

They each walked on down the hallway, and before Haden could even glance in the window of door number two, Liam called him over to door one.

Haden stood on his toes and peered through the small glass. A man with dark hair sat in the middle of the room on a chair just like the man across the hall. A large guard stood a few feet away, a gun at his feet. Strange place to keep a gun.

Liam grabbed Haden's arm and pulled him back from the door as he placed his hand on the knob. He turned the metal doorknob slowly and inched the door open a

crack. A voice carried across the room and out to them. Haden glanced down the hall to make sure nobody was there to hear.

“Is this really all captivity is?” The man in the chair said. He projected his voice, and Haden looked closer at the body language of the two men. The guard shuffled where he stood, his right foot moving in small aimless circles on the ground. The man in the chair looked completely at ease. If it weren’t for the ropes binding him, Haden wouldn’t be able to tell that he was the captive. The prisoner yawned and continued, “It’s way more exciting in movies; prisoners have their lives threatened; dramatic music plays while they struggle against the bonds of their restraints. I suppose I could try that, but what’s the point? I’m just bored. Do you have something else planned other than sitting here all day? It’s not very nice to invite someone over and make them just sit there. If this were my party...”

“This isn’t a party,” the guard interrupted finally. His voice wasn’t strong enough to carry like the prisoner’s, and Haden thought he heard a bit of a waver behind it. Haden watched the man in the chair glance up at the guard with raised eyebrows.

“Oh good, you were listening,” the prisoner said. He seemed unfazed by the guard’s position of authority. Haden wished he could behave like this guy if he were ever caught. “You must be just as bored as I am, sitting here all day. If conversation is not your thing, there are always other options. Maybe you could find some music, and we could have a dance party. You’d have to uncuff my feet, though. I can’t exactly bust a move in shackles.”

Haden heard a snort beside him and glanced over at Liam, who held his hand tightly over his mouth. He turned to Haden and dropped his voice so low that Haden had to strain to hear. “Trust Spencer to rile up the guard.”

Haden glanced back to the guard, who looked more confused than angry at the continuous commentary. The man—Spencer—continued.

“I suppose a game of badminton would be out of the question. Pity, I’m always up for a game or two.”

“That’s enough,” the guard said. His voice was slightly firmer this time, but the command was still weak.

“Any ideas?” Liam asked. Haden stared into the room. Even with the gun on the floor, the guard would still have an advantage if they ran into the room. They wanted to get Spencer out, he assumed, and they all needed to get out safely. He shrugged.

“How much longer are we going to be here?” Spencer asked. He blew out a dramatic breath, and the bangs of his shaggy hair flew up. “Only, I had plans for this evening. I was going to make dinner—probably cereal again; I don’t know how to make much else, then I was going to change out of these pants and watch TV. I hate pants. They’re uncomfortable, and I don’t know why we have to wear them in the first place. I think if I were in charge, I’d institute a no-pants policy. Then nobody would be forced to wear pants.”

Haden wasn’t sure how to take this comment. Torn between laughter and horror at the idea of a pant-less world, he couldn’t decide if Spencer was insane or if this was a brilliant tactic. It seemed to work—if that was the intent—because the guard looked uncomfortable at this revelation. He stepped away from Spencer.

“I’ll—I’m going to check on your dinner. Don’t move. I’ll be...if you move... just don’t move.” The guard shuffled toward the door and glanced back to Spencer every few feet as if to make sure he hadn’t moved. Spencer sat unmoving in his chair, arms still tied around his back and feet bound to the legs. His smile broadened, and he raised his chin in a sort of salute.

Liam raced across the hall to check the door opposite number one while Haden held the door open slightly. They didn’t want to risk the sound of the click if the door shut while they didn’t have a place to run. Liam shook his head. The door was locked. He stepped back over to Haden. There was nowhere to hide. They hadn’t thought this part through.

“Adios,” Spencer said.

“Now listen here,” the guard said. He jabbed a shaking pointed finger in Spencer’s direction. “No funny business.”

Spencer’s smile was quickly replaced with a wide-eyed, innocent expression. “Me? I don’t know where you would get an idea like that. I’m not one for shenanigans anyway. I’m a very serious person.”

Haden pushed Liam into the hinges of the door and held his breath along with the knob. He felt pressure on the other side of the door and allowed it to be pushed back toward him.

“I’m not paid enough to put up with this idiot.” He heard the guard mutter under his breath while he walked out.

When the guard let the door go, Haden allowed it to fall almost to the latch but grabbed it before it could shut fully. He pulled Liam through the door after him and hoped the guard wouldn't turn around. The door shut behind them.

## **Liam**

As soon as the door clicked shut, Liam made his way toward the middle of the room, where Spencer sat, while Haden stood watch by the door. Liam was surprised to see that Spencer did what the guard asked and sat there waiting for him to return. He looked despondent as he stared at the ground. This couldn't be the same Spencer. Liam walked to the center of the room and stepped into the light. He cleared his throat to get Spencer's attention.

Spencer raised his head and stared at him. He clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes. Liam could feel the hatred radiating from him. "Of course. You."

Spencer was silent as his attention was drawn to the path of a bug while it crossed the floor in front of him. Slowly, deliberately, he raised the toe of his foot as far as he could with the rope that tied him to the chair and stomped on the bug. He raised his toe again to display the squished remains on the floor, and then he raised his head to look at Liam challengingly.

Liam's breath stuttered. He shook his head fervently. "Spence—I didn't."

"I know," he said. "It doesn't matter how they got me. Just seeing you here, working for *them*..." He trailed off into a low growl. Spencer started to fight against the ropes that bound him. The coarse texture ground against his skin, and Liam saw drops of blood begin to form. "I told her not to bring in any strays, but did she listen? If you breathe one word to these scumbags, so help me I will—"

“She’s fine. She’s safe. Spencer—”

“What? What do they want with me now?” Spencer’s lip curled in contempt.

“What is it they have you doing at this here wonderful Lab?”

Liam breathed a deep sigh. He hated the next part. “I was wrong.” It was hard to admit however despite how much of an understatement it was. “Please, Spencer, you don’t have to trust me, just believe that I can help you get out of here.”

Spencer scoffed. “Why would I want your help to get out? Did I say I wanted to escape?” Spencer smiled and glanced around the room. Liam noted how he squinted and strained to see the corners. Was he checking for hidden cameras? “I am having a jolly good time here. Just smashing.”

Liam raised his eyebrows and waited for Spencer to finish. After a sizable gap in conversation, he spoke. “There aren’t any cameras. We checked before we came down here.”

Yes, it was a lie. They hadn’t checked, but he knew that even if there were cameras, there wasn’t a surplus of staff. The Lab couldn’t afford to have someone watching the live feed of security cameras. They had, however, seen a number of cameras on their way down to the basement. Those Spencer would notice. He didn’t want Spencer to think he was intentionally deceiving him so...

“There are some on the way out,” Liam said. “But they aren’t monitored, so it doesn’t matter. If they check the footage later, they’ll just see what they already know.”

Spencer frowned. “They’ll see you too, you know.”

“I know.”

Liam could tell this was the proof Spencer needed. He seemed stunned by Liam's confidence and willingness to be caught. He allowed Liam to cut the ropes that bound him and followed him to the door.

"By the way, this is Haden," Liam said.

Haden held out a hand, but Spencer eyed it skeptically.

"He's with us," Liam added.

Haden nodded eagerly, and Spencer cautiously shook the offered hand.

Liam peered through the tiny window in the door, and when he was sure it was clear, he motioned for Haden and Spencer to follow him through. They ran to the elevator door, careful to make as little sound as possible. Haden reached out a careless hand to press the button to call the lift, but Spencer slapped it out of the way.

"What are you thinking?" he hissed. The display above the elevator dinged, and the light moved along the numbers closer and closer.

Spencer grabbed Liam and Haden and threw them through the door to the stairwell. They began to run up the stairs but heard footsteps clamoring down toward them.

"Down," Spencer whispered and changed direction. They ran down one flight of stairs and found themselves at a dead end. A single locked door at the lowermost basement level. The three men edged as close to the wall under the stairs as possible and hoped against hope that whoever was on the stairs didn't plan to come down all the way. The footsteps came closer. Four floors up. Three. Two.

A door creaked open, and Liam let out a breath of air he hadn't realized he held. Spencer shook his head, though, and pulled Haden back to the wall. He held a finger up to his lips, eyes focused on the stairs above them.

"Yeah, I'm headed down there now," the voice of the man who had been guarding Spencer drifted down the stairwell. Haden turned to Liam, eyes wide. They listened closely as a pair of footsteps continued their descent. The door on the landing directly above them opened, and the footsteps disappeared down the corridor they'd just left.

"Well, that's our time gone," Spencer said. "They'll know in about ten seconds." He raced up the stairs two at a time. The other two kept up with him as best they could. There was no need to keep their steps quiet anymore—they weren't sneaking out, they were on the verge of being chased out. Sure enough, Liam heard a shout from a lower level, and the big guard lumbered up the stairs after them.

They skidded to a stop in front of the door to the Lobby level landing. Spencer shoved it open, and it crashed against the wall with a bang that reverberated while he ushered Haden and Liam through.

"Come on, quick!" Spencer said. He pushed Liam away from the door, heaved it closed, and turned the lock. "That won't hold him long."

The three of them stumbled across the lobby level, trying to regain their speed. The guard behind the desk, focused on his breakfast, didn't notice them properly until they were directly in front of the security area. Too late, he blundered up from the desk and toward them.



“Stop!” the burly guard yelled after them once he’d swallowed his bite of sandwich. Haden turned to look back, but Liam pushed him onward. They raced out the door and into the bright sunlight.

## **Teagan**

Teagan stood outside the dreadful building and weighed her options. On one hand, she felt sure the Lab was the best place to look for Liam after he’d run out. She suspected whatever had happened had something to do with the Lab. After Liam had raced out of Spencer’s apartment, Teagan had retraced his steps into Spencer’s bedroom, and sure enough, Spencer was not there. In fact, his bed was still made from the day before.

By the time she left the apartment, Liam was long gone, but she’d weighed the options and ended up... here. She glared at the crumbling bricks of the building she’d learned to hate. She didn’t know what to expect, going inside, because she’d never actually been in before.

Teagan took a deep breath and stood in front of the wooden double doors. She placed her hand on the door handle and began to pull when the doors were pushed open forcefully from the other side. She stumbled back.

Liam, Spencer, and a man she’d never seen before sprinted out into the street. Through the open doors, she saw four guards in pursuit of the men.

“What’s—” she started, but Liam cut her off.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her down the block after the other two. “Not now. Run!”

Teagan stumbled along with him for a few steps before she found her pace.

“Which way?” she shouted through harsh breaths while they sprinted. Liam increased his pace, and she realized he had slowed to stay with her. Teagan pushed herself to run faster and slowly caught up with Spencer and the other man.

“It doesn’t matter,” Spencer yelled. “Just run!”

Liam took the lead and turned right. He ran around the back of the Lab before he headed straight out into the city streets. They ran down two blocks and turned left. Teagan felt a stitch forming but ignored it. She took a large gulp of air and pushed forward.

“Any idea where we’re headed?” the unknown man called up to Liam, who had made another right turn at breakneck speed.

“Nope,” Liam shouted back.

Spencer moved so that he was running closer alongside Liam. “I know an old abandoned office building about four blocks from here. We should be safe hiding there for a while.”

“Show the way,” Liam said. He fell back a little which allowed Spencer to take the lead.

They made it three blocks before Teagan heard a siren behind them.

“They have police cars on us?” the unknown man said.

Teagan felt her pulse quicken even more and a burst of adrenaline pushed her forward faster.

“Seriously,” she said. “Is anyone going to tell me what is going on?”

“Later,” Spencer said. He slowed down and turned into a narrow alleyway. “Can everyone get over that?” he asked. He pointed to a chain link fence a couple feet taller than Liam that blocked the end of the alleyway.

The men nodded slowly, but each turned to Teagan. She was the shortest of the group.

“With a boost?” she suggested. It was unlikely she’d be able to scale it alone.

They raced to the foot of the fence together. The other man, who introduced himself quickly as Haden, climbed over the fence first to help catch Teagan on the other side after Liam and Spencer helped her up.

Teagan stepped into Liam and Spencer’s cradled hands. She felt her legs shake. They tried to lift her at the same speed, but her legs moved to different heights. When they finally got her to the top of the fence, Teagan climbed onto it and maneuvered one leg over the top. Haden grabbed her foot and offered enough support for her to swing the other leg over, and he lowered her to the ground. She could now say definitively that she’d never been a cheerleader. Her slow and steadily culminated list of skills she did not possess constantly narrowed down potential occupations she could have had before, but she never seemed to focus in enough to tell her anything definitive about herself. It frustrated her that everyone else seemed to know who they were, and she still had no idea.

## **Spencer**

After Teagan was safely over the fence and on the ground, Spencer began to climb. A few feet from the top, his foot caught in one of the metal pockets, and he fell to the ground. His other foot crumpled beneath him.

“Spencer!” Teagan’s shout and Spencer’s groan of pain rivaled the roars of sirens on the streets around them.

Liam hushed them and helped Spencer stand, but his foot wobbled unsteadily and he fell back to the ground. Teagan ran closer to the fence and gripped the metal with white knuckles. Spencer shook his head at her and gritted his teeth in pain.

“Go on without me,” he said. The three of them shouted their rejections, and Spencer rolled his eyes. No doubt these idiots were going to try to do the noble thing. He shouldn’t have expected anything less from this group. “I’ll only hold you back, and they’re getting close. Either we all get caught or just me. Go.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Liam said. He crouched down beside Spencer and tried to help him maneuver the weight off his hurt leg. Spencer batted his hand away. “And don’t you try to convince me to go. I’m stubborn, and I’ve decided that I’m staying. That’s that.”

“I’ll stay too,” Haden said, and Teagan nodded.

Spencer chuckled. “Fat lot of good you’d do me. The building is just there.” He pointed to the old abandoned office building he’d found when he first woke up. Not even a block away. They were so close. “Please, Haden, go with Teagan and make sure she’s safe.”

Teagan started to protest, but Spencer cut her off. Unchecked, he knew she could go on for a while. He wasn’t going to argue with her; her safety was not up for debate.

“Tee—you’re already on that side of the fence. Please go. I’ll be fine.”

He shot a pleading look at Haden, who steered Teagan further down the block to the building Spencer pointed out. Teagan resisted for the first few steps, but with a

pointed glare from Spencer and a deep sigh of her own, she began to run toward the building with Haden. He admired her stubbornness at times, but not when pitted against him. Spencer watched until she entered the building then turned back to Liam.

“Go ahead,” Spencer said. “There goes your chance to get away.”

The sirens grew louder. They were almost there.

Liam shook his head. “We’re going to get out of this together,” he said. He grabbed Spencer around the waist and pulled him to his feet. Spencer stood shakily and tried to appear steady, but he was unable to put any weight on his bad leg. He hobbled a few steps but fell against the alley wall.

“Liam...”

Hopeless, Spencer started to slide down the wall. He’d allowed himself to believe that he could actually make it out. There were more people on his side than he realized, but it was too late now. He slid further down, but Liam wouldn’t allow it. He put his arm around Spencer and supported half of his weight as they walked back down the alleyway.

“I’m sure there’s another way,” Liam said. “Maybe it’s a bit longer, but we’ll make it, okay?”

At this point, Spencer wasn’t sure if Liam’s Pollyanna attitude was more encouraging or annoying.

They only made it halfway down the alleyway before the sirens grew even louder. Liam and Spencer looked at each other. They were trapped. Muddled voices drifted toward them, and a pair of flashlights beams scanned the area. Spencer sank against Liam. Liam pulled them both against the wall, into a small spot that was obscured from the street by a bit of wall that jutted out away from the building. Spencer hoped against

all logic that the guards would bypass that particular alleyway. They couldn't possibly know for sure that they were there.

"Here kitty, kitty," a deep voice called. The beam of light circled the area. "We know you're here. You and your little friends." He clicked his tongue as though he were calling for an animal. Spencer narrowed his eyes, offended. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

"Shoot," Spencer said as the light flashed over toward where he and Liam were huddled. He grabbed the back of Liam's collar and pulled him further into the dark alleyway. One of them, he couldn't be sure who, kicked a garbage can as they stepped further back. The can rolled out of the alley and straight toward where one of the two guards stood.

"Shh," Liam said. Spencer rolled his eyes. That wasn't going to help now.

"Liam, they've got us. We can't both get away now. They're going to catch us."

"They know someone is here, but they don't necessarily know that it's us. Go," Liam said. He gestured to the fence on their right. "Get out of here, and they can catch me instead. Just go!"

"Liam." Spencer stared at him. "I can't." He gestured down to his injured leg.

Liam took a deep breath. "Stay here, then. You hide, and I'll go tell them it was just me, that you got away, but I couldn't get over the fence. They'll arrest me, and once they're gone, you can go join Haden and Teagan."

Spencer realized he should have given the kid more credit before. He really was a stand up guy. Spencer needed to make sure Liam got out of here safe. The police wouldn't stop until they got Spencer, he knew that, but Liam didn't have to go down with

him. If he could get him out of here, get him back to Teagan... Spencer would be more comfortable if he knew Teagan had someone like Liam looking out for her, although he'd never tell her he was concerned in the first place, and she would probably hate the idea of being looked out for.

Spencer breathed a small, humorless laugh. "Liam, they're going to check this alley to make sure I'm not here. I can't get away. You can. Please, save yourself and make sure Teagan is okay. For me."

### **Liam**

Spencer allowed a small smile before hobbling directly into the glaring light of the guards' car. As the beams illuminated his body, his soft smile transformed into a large smirk. Liam watched the vulnerability of moments before fade into cockiness.

"Hi there, Bob. Or was it Tom?" Spencer said brightly. He raised his hand against the harsh light and limped directly up to where the guard stood, as though he never had any intention of doing anything else. When the guard's hand darted out to grab Spencer's, which hung limply by his side, Spencer raised his arms and offered both hands to the guard, wrists together.

The guard who he had annoyed before in the basement of the Lab glared at Spencer while his partner slapped handcuffs back onto Spencer's wrists. Spencer winced when the guard closed the cuffs too tight, but the guard remained oblivious.

"All right, all right. Easy there, big guy. You can't just slap the cuffs on—there needs to be some foreplay first."

"You... shut up," the larger guard said. He pointed a finger into Spencer's face. Spencer rolled his eyes. The guard's finger shook comically, but Liam couldn't tell

whether it was out of anger or lack of confidence. Either way, he could tell the guard wasn't as in control as he would have liked to be. Spencer unsettled him. Liam couldn't help but feel proud. Spencer might have been recaptured, but he was obviously going to make sure he went on his own terms.

“Not up for a chat today, Bob?”

“Like he said, shut it,” the new guard said. He stepped closer to Spencer so that he towered over him. As far as intimidations tactics went, this method didn't do its job. Spencer glanced up to him pleasantly; his smile never wavered.

“I just don't understand all the hostility.” Spencer feigned innocence. “I can't imagine anything I've done that could have made you so angry.”

The guard named Bob spluttered. His face turned a deeper shade of red. “You escaped!” he shouted.

Liam wondered briefly at the incompetence of the guards, but he figured the Lab probably put some of their guards into place during or after the war, so there was a strong probability many of the guards wouldn't have been fully trained.

“Who, me?” Spencer asked, his eyes wide and innocent. “I'm not escaping. No, I just fancied a jog.”

The guards stared at him, nonplussed. Spencer mimed jogging—a feat surprisingly difficult with handcuffs around his hands and an injured leg, but the point still came across.

“You really should consider it sometime,” Spencer said. He gestured to Bob's protruding stomach. Bob tugged on his shirt and tried to disguise the rolls around his



midsection. “Good way to burn off some of those extra calories. Maybe even a good way to meet some ladies.”

“We’re not talking about running,” the taller man told Spencer.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that’s entirely accurate,” Spencer said. “You might not be talking about running, but I certainly am.”

“Do you want us to cuff your feet too?” Bob said in an attempt to reassert his dominance. Spencer eyed him skeptically.

“Well, I don’t see how that would be a solution to your talking problem, but go for it. Although, I should remind you that if you do cuff my legs, I won’t be able to walk to the car... and judging by the state of the two of you, I don’t think you’ll be able to carry me. Maybe I could hop? Or you could each cuff one of your legs to mine, and we could do a sort of five-legged race.”

“Enough!” the other guard shouted. He was obviously fed up. Spencer smiled calmly. He didn’t say anything, and this unnerved the guards just as much. Liam bit his lip to keep from laughing at their confused faces. After a minute of silence, Spencer spoke again.

“Can we get in the car?” he asked. Competent guards might have reacted to the misstep—they might have realized that Spencer wanted to get out of there for a reason; he didn’t want Liam to get caught. “Unless I’m mistaken and we’re waiting for something?”

Liam could hear a hint of pain in his voice, though it was well disguised. He doubted the guards could distinguish it.

Bob grunted and opened the back door of his police car. The other guard shoved Spencer, none too gently, into the cage-like backseat.

Liam watched the police cars drive away silently. He pushed himself off the wall, walked slowly to the fence, and climbed over. Speed wasn't necessary anymore. Nobody was chasing him. Not yet, anyway. He'd have time to run later, when they came looking for him. But for now, he took the time to reflect while he walked to get Teagan and Haden.

The doors to the building Spencer had pointed out earlier opened with a crash. He heard a small sound from above, but once the reverberating echo from the doors ceased, it was eerily silent. He started to worry that maybe he'd gotten the wrong building and began to back out slowly, before he realize they were probably hiding and thought he was one of the guards coming to find them.

"Teagan?" he called. His quiet voice sounded too loud in the emptiness. "Haden?"

His voice stayed quiet, unwilling to disturb the silence more than necessary. A small sound from above encouraged him. Someone was here.

"Teagan?" he shouted louder. "Haden?"

The stairs before him creaked, slowly at first, then they clattered more loudly, and Teagan came into view. She ran to him and threw her arms around him. She released him and turned to the empty space next to him expectantly.

"Where's Spencer?" She looked up to him, her eyes wide and sorrowful.

Liam shook his head, at a loss for words. "They..." He met her accusing gaze. "I'm so sorry."

**Teagan**

This was a joke. Cruel and mean, but a joke. Liam got him back safe. He had to.

But Liam didn't correct himself. Spencer didn't jump out and yell "got you!"

Tears began to stream down Teagan's face. Spencer was gone. Haden had explained to her why they were being chased, but she hadn't allowed herself to imagine the reality of Spencer's fate.

Teagan reached out to Liam and punched every inch of him she could manage. She wanted to make him hurt, make someone hurt, like she did. He stood still and took it, allowing her to vent her frustration until she finally fell against him, spent. Then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a hug.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Teagan felt her body wilt in his embrace.

"I should've—" Haden said from behind her. There were hundreds of things Teagan wished she could have done. Had she allowed Spencer to walk to his fate? Could she have stopped it—stopped him? They still didn't know why he was captured in the first place, beyond his connection with Ericson. Why now?

"There wasn't anything you could have done," Liam said. His quick words cut off her train of self-loathing thought. "And even if there had been, he still wouldn't have let you."

Teagan knew it was true. Spencer was stubborn to a fault. Even if she could have done something, he wouldn't have allowed it.

They stood in silence for a few minutes and allowed Teagan to sniffle out a few last tears. Finally, she stood up straight and took a deep breath. "Let's go home."

Liam and Haden nodded to each other, each slid an arm around Teagan, and together they walked out of the building into the first beams of early morning sunlight and toward Spencer's old place.

## **Liam**

Haden called Kieran while they walked back, and he stood waiting for them outside of Spencer's building when they arrived. Teagan climbed first through the unlocked window and invited the three of them inside for a pot of strong coffee. Haden made a big show of not allowing anyone else, especially Teagan, to make the coffee and led Kieran and Teagan to the couch in the living room. Teagan filled Kieran in on all she knew while Haden fixed the coffee. Liam snuck outside to sit on the steps of the fire escape.

The cold metal of the steps contrasted with the warm breeze that filtered past him while Liam allowed his mind to race.

Spencer had been caught. Again.

He couldn't help but blame himself for it, at least in part. If he had figured out the connection before Ericson had a chance to get to Spencer, Liam might have been able to warn him faster.

To be honest, Liam knew it was probably all his fault in the first place, beyond his current actions. He had invented the Alternate Illusory Device. If it hadn't been for him, the war may have never started; Spencer wouldn't have felt the need to fight against the Lab; and Liam could have been home—really home—with Emily.

Liam shook the thoughts from his head and tried to remind himself that it wasn't true. There was tension with or without his invention. He only helped create the

confusion and chaos that the Lab thrived on. The Lab functioned for the wrong side, a fact he wished he'd figured out earlier, and war had been building separately from the creation of the device. He couldn't be held responsible. Right?

Liam sighed. He wished life were easier. However, even in his fragmented memories of *before*, he still couldn't imagine it clearly. Easy seemed like something out of a fairy tale, an unobtainable joy he would never reach.

The window behind him opened and jolted Liam from his musings. Soft footsteps padded up to the fire escape and a lithe body stood behind him, her shadow cast down upon him in the sunlight.

"I found something," Teagan said. She sat down beside Liam on the step. He scooted over to make room for her but didn't speak. He felt enormously guilty. He'd been responsible for Spencer. Liam had allowed him to walk right to the guards. He'd allowed Spencer to be caught. Alone. Liam wondered if she blamed him. She should.

Sensing his guilt, she wrapped her arm around him and pulled him into her.

"Liam. You tried," she reminded him.

"And failed."

She shook her head. "Do you really think he wants you to beat yourself up about it?"

"No. He'd want to do that himself," Liam said. He smiled at the thought.

Teagan laughed and bit back a weak smile of her own. "Spence is strong. He'll be fine; I know it. In fact, he'll probably annoy them so much they'll beg him to break out again just to get rid of him."

How well she knew him, Liam thought. She hadn't even been there to witness his interaction with the guards.

"Liam?" Teagan asked, her voice a soft whisper. "All this running around... Spencer was captured, and he was just trying to..." She took a shaky breath and restarted. "Do you think we'll ever know what's real and what's not?"

"I don't know," he said.

"It's not fair," she said. "It seems simple enough—to want to be able to understand the world around you."

"I agree," Liam said. "But I don't know if you can ever truly know. Before, when we could trust our eyes to interpret the world, we still wanted more knowledge. We studied individual atoms and weather patterns and the human body. I don't think we'll ever be satisfied with our understanding of the world."

"But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

"Would you ever be happy to allow this fake world to stand unopposed?"

"No."

"Then there's your answer."

"But what if we can never change it back? How will we know what's real and what's not?"

Liam frowned. He picked a pebble up from the ground next to him and flicked it at the building across from them. The pebble flew straight through the side of the structure and created a ripple-like effect as the building reformed around it.

"Maybe we have to change our definition," Liam mused aloud. "Maybe we're focusing on the wrong thing."

Teagan stared at him. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“What is your definition of reality, right here, right now?”

“It’d be... what you can touch, right? I mean, that’s what I trust now.” Teagan stared at Liam for confirmation or contradiction.

“Why?” Liam asked, his voice neutral, not a dismissal of her definition; he just wanted her to expand upon it. “Why does touch supersede everything else? We have rejected the validity of reality as presented by sight, smell, taste, and sound. Touch is just another sense.”

“But it’s the one they can’t fake,” she said.

Liam shrugged. “Yet.”

Teagan whipped her head around toward him. “You mean—?”

“I don’t know,” Liam said, unsure of where he was going with this train of thought. “I’m still trying to figure it out myself.”

Teagan nodded, and they both lapsed into a contemplative silence. A stray thought urged Liam to jump from the fire escape to the street below to test the validity of the world as a whole. But the risk was too high. It was a lose-lose situation: either he would live and have to continue with more uncertainty, or he would die.

He wondered why this question of what is real mattered so much to him. He couldn’t pinpoint anything specific or verbalize it, even to himself, but it mattered. He couldn’t convince himself not to care.

A little while later—it could have been minutes or hours—a flash of movement next to him startled Liam. He’d forgotten Teagan was there. She stood and brushed the dirt off the back of her pants and turned to him.

“I came out here to give you this,” she said. She held a large manila envelope out to him. “I found it in Spencer’s room. I don’t know what it is, but it had your name on it.”

She handed the envelope to Liam and climbed back through the window.

He turned it over and saw the thick marker lines that spelled out his name. He tore the seal and dumped the contents in his hand.

## **Kieran**

Kieran handed the cup of now cold coffee to Teagan as she sat on the couch next to him. Dark bags under her eyes betrayed her forced smile and showed the weight of the day upon her.

For once, Kieran had nothing to say. He took a sip of his coffee and looked to Haden for guidance. Haden’s eyes were fixed on Teagan, too. He stared sadly at her but offered no words of hope or comfort.

An anguished scream from outside broke the silence. Kieran jumped up from the couch and ran outside, Haden close behind him. Liam stood at the edge of the rooftop, an envelope abandoned behind him. Knees bent, he stood on the edge, and he looked ready to jump. Kieran leapt at him and pulled him to the ground. Haden grabbed Liam from the other side, and they held him down as his limbs thrashed and tears streamed down his cheeks.

Together, they lifted Liam to his feet and carried him inside. Teagan ran into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water and a white pill. Haden held Liam down, and Teagan forced him to swallow the pill. After a moment, Liam’s head fell to the side, unconscious, and they lowered him onto the couch.

“What was that?” Haden asked.



Kieran stepped out onto the fire escape. He grabbed the abandoned envelope from the step and reached inside, but it was empty. He noticed movement near the edge of the rooftop and lunged to grab the envelope's contents.

He lifted the piece of paper and found the cause of Liam's reaction: a death certificate for Emily Beaumont Coleman, dated some three months prior, around the time that the war had broken out. The bold watermark told Kieran the document belonged to the Lab, and in red ink, under cause of death, someone had written "terminated." Kieran felt nauseated.

He climbed back into the apartment and held the document out wordlessly for Haden and Teagan to see. He avoided their eyes. There was nothing any of them could say. He made his way to the kitchen to brew another pot of coffee. It wasn't like any of them had slept at all.

## **Liam**

When he woke up late the next morning, Liam felt groggy from the medicine but determined. The sun shone down hot and bright, and the sky was clear and blue. Liam cursed the weather. He rolled off the couch and threw on the first pair of pants he saw, grabbed a shirt and his Lab ID badge and stumbled out the door.

Liam walked as though in a trance and found himself in the entry level of the Lab before he even knew where he was walking. He grunted hello to the guard behind the counter, who narrowed his eyes at Liam's disheveled appearance. Liam glanced down at the shirt still in his hand and sighed. He threw it on quickly and made his way to the stair door.

In the Lab, he keyed a few commands into the Alternate Illusory Device, grabbed all the notes from his desk, and walked back up the stairs and out the building. The guard looked at him, eyes narrow with suspicion, but Liam didn't care. He pushed the wooden doors open wide and smirked to himself at the more appropriate weather. He held the papers above his head and let his notes fade into nothing as the ink ran from the page in the pouring rain.

As he walked back to his apartment, Liam was pleased that none of the streets he encountered were too perfect. He'd somehow managed to find a way back entirely separate from the obnoxiously perfect and fake illusions the device produced. He didn't know how, because he couldn't map a way around the illusion himself, but he was thankful that he didn't have to encounter any of the fake cheer; if the illusion had annoyed him before he knew about Emily, now it served only as a reminder of the war and hurt a little more each time. He couldn't bear the cheerfulness of it anymore. If the illusion were a person, he would have punched it in the face by now. As it was, he was trying to keep away from people in general right now. They weren't always so compliant.

Teagan waited for him on the top step of the fire escape at Spencer's apartment. Her blonde hair hung down in wet strands around her face and her soaked clothing clung to her body. She'd been there a while.

"Liam—did you do this?" she asked without preamble, hands firmly placed on her hips.

"And hello to you too." Liam climbed over her to the window. He opened it only wide enough to climb through and deliberately slid it down behind him. Teagan placed her hand on the sill and caught the window. She yanked it up until it was all the way open

and climbed in behind him. Teagan ran around Liam as he walked through the apartment and stood in front of him to block his way and force him to look at her. Liam tried to ignore her presence and walked past her into the kitchen to fix a cup of instant coffee. She wasn't about to let him ignore her, though. She stepped between him and the counter and repeated the question.

“Does it matter?” he asked. He wasn't even sure what she meant. Nothing mattered. He ran a tired hand through his hair. In addition to the wetness from the rainwater, the strands felt greasy. When was the last time he had a shower? He couldn't remember. Nor could he really remember the last time he slept before the drugs knocked him out the night before, he thought and raised the mug to his mouth.

“Of course it matters!” Teagan shouted. “We're trying to figure out what's real and what's not, and you doing something like this—adding to the illusion—it's not helping. You're making it harder! We need fewer things that aren't real, not more!”

She grabbed the coffee from his hand and set it down on the countertop with a bang. The hot liquid splashed over the sides and created small pools of grainy puddles of poorly mixed coffee on the countertop.

“I don't care,” Liam said. His voice was low, desperate, and dangerous. “Don't you get that? I don't care!”

Teagan flinched when he raised his voice, but they both knew the shout wasn't directed at her. He shouted at the universe—to the great cosmic whatever that had allowed his wife to die.

“It doesn't matter what's real anymore, whether it's raining or not. Nothing matters. Emily is gone. There *is* nothing else.”

Teagan looked at him desperately, her expression a mix of sorrow and pity. “We still have a lot to figure out. Please don’t give up on us.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care if this building is real or if that person is real. Emily is gone. I don’t want to live in a world without her. That’s real. That’s all that counts anymore.”

He turned to the window. He had to get out. She didn’t understand. Nobody would understand.

“Liam—” Teagan said.

He turned to look at her with a sad smile. “I’m sorry. I do hope you find your answers, and I hope they’re what you’re looking for. But I’ve found mine, and I’m done searching. I’ve got nothing left to find.”

## **Haden**

“Haden!” Kieran shouted from the window. “Look at this!”

Outside, rain poured down for the first time since the start of the war. The droplets splashed into the ground and washed the city clean. Haden opened the door and breathed in the smell of the rain. Finally, the stench of war faded, and the smell of petrichor permeated the air.

Kieran stepped out onto the street behind him, stopped for a moment, then something caught his eye, and he raced down the block.

“Haden!”

Haden jogged to follow. Just past the stop sign that stood at the end of the block, where their street faded into a block of AID enhanced buildings, Kieran stopped.

“Look!”

He pointed up to the top of the building, where the rain beat down upon the illusion. The raindrops permeated the illusion in small, individual parts and wiggled through the building, creating a rippled tear as they passed through. The building reformed, as Haden had seen so many times before, but as the rain increased, the illusion struggled to keep up. When the storm reached to a downpour, the drops broke through the building all together and left no model to reform to. The illusion was destroyed, and they finally could see the wreckage beneath.

“He did it!” Kieran said.

The rain drenched their clothing, but neither man noticed. They rounded the corner and raced down the block toward the apartment they’d visited the night before.

The fire-escape steps were slick with rainwater, and Haden gripped the steps above him so that he didn’t fall as he ran up behind Kieran. When they reached the top, Kieran pounded on the window.

## **Liam**

“Liam!” Kieran’s shout filtered down the hallway. A second voice, Haden’s, soon joined his. Liam walked to the window without making any effort to rush. He slid it open only a crack to be met with the two men, red faced and out of breath.

“What?” he asked, his voice low and angry. Without invitation, they pushed past him and climbed through the window. Their clothes dripped on the carpet of the bedroom.

“It’s brilliant—”

“I always said—”

“I knew you’d be able to—”

“How did you figure it out?” The men stumbled to talk over each other, and Liam couldn’t figure out what they were saying or what they were talking about.

“Guys!” he shouted. It worked as he meant it to—he got their attention, and they both stopped talking—but apparently it wasn’t as intimidating as he’d hoped. They each wore a brilliant smile that hadn’t lessened any when Liam yelled. Teagan poked her head around the corner.

“Everything okay?”

Kieran turned to her with a huge grin. “Have you seen it?”

She shook her head and looked confused.

“One at a time,” Liam said. “What are you two talking about?”

“You did it,” Haden said, as if *it* were the most obvious thing in the world. Liam raised an eyebrow, still unable to follow.

Kieran nodded.

“I’m going to need to buy a vowel here,” Liam said. “Because I’m still lost. What is it I’m supposed to have done?”

“You haven’t seen it?” Haden looked between Liam and Teagan’s perplexed faces. He looked at Kieran and exchanged a significant glance. Kieran grabbed Liam, and Haden grabbed Teagan and dragged them up to the rooftop of the building, out into the slowing rain.

“You started it, right?” Kieran asked Liam.

“The rain?” Liam asked. “Yeah, I started it.”

Kieran’s grin widened. Behind him, Teagan shot Liam a glare.

“Look,” Haden said. He led the two of them to the edge of the rooftop and pointed to the streets below. Teagan understood what he was showing them first.

“The streets are back to normal—they’re all real! But how?”

Haden and Kieran turned to look at Liam proudly. The rain had almost entirely stopped, and the buildings weren’t reforming.

“They were right,” Haden said. He slapped Kieran and Liam on the back simultaneously. “They figured out that if there were some way to disturb the whole illusion at the same time, it wouldn’t be able to rebuild.”

“I never thought of rain, though,” Kieran said. “That was brilliant!”

“I didn’t—” Liam started, but Teagan interrupted him with a small smile.

“Thank you.”

“We should break into the Lab and destroy the AID so that they can’t ever do that again,” Haden said, already working on plans for the next step.

“Already done,” Liam said.

Teagan looked at him, her eyes narrow. She knew he hadn’t planned this effect with the rain; she probably wondered how he had known to break the device. He shrugged guiltily at her, and she shook her head.

## **Teagan**

Kieran insisted that they throw a celebratory party and offered Haden to run down to the grocery store—they still hadn’t figured that mystery out—to pick up more ice cream than the four of them could possibly eat.

Teagan listened as Haden and Kieran made plans for reconstruction the next day: they’d go find the old hardware store, break in to steal supplies, wake everyone up on the

streets and take them to get proper medical attention, and get everyone they could find to help in the rebuilding efforts. They planned to break the work up into teams, and Teagan agreed to lead the team in charge of finding new recruits—“Because you’re good at that,” Kieran told her as he elbowed Liam and laughed. Liam threw in a few ideas, but his smile never reached his eyes, something that Teagan knew better than to draw attention to. She didn’t need to ask; she knew the cause.

Liam excused himself and stood from the couch. Teagan wished she could say something to help make things better. She watched him turn the corner toward the guest bedroom.

## **Haden**

Teagan, Haden, and Kieran looked at one another. Once he knew Liam was well out of earshot, Haden spoke in a low whisper.

“There is an option,” he said. The others looked at him hopefully, but he shook his head. It was an option, but not a very good one. He pointed to the small machine in the corner of the room, buried under piles of worn books.

“What is it?” Teagan asked. She stood from the couch and approached the metal box. Her fingers ran along the edge as she took a closer look at it.

“One of the experiments that led to the AID,” Haden said. “It was meant to be a sort of prototype. We were researching the experimental value of placing an image into someone’s head.”

“Does it work?” Kieran asked. Haden could tell from his stony expression that Kieran knew what he was suggesting. It wasn’t a suggestion he was proud of, but he could tell Kieran understood. He was grappling with the same thing.



“It will be nothing more or less than a dream, but he can stay there as long as he likes.”

“Another illusion?” Teagan asked. She glanced toward the hallway where Liam had disappeared. “How is that better?”

“He said it himself: there’s no life for him here anymore.”

Kieran nodded, his face set in determination. “What do we do?” he asked.

“Wait until he’s asleep.”

## **Liam**

Disoriented, Liam opened his eyes to the bright florescent lights of a white room. A loud and constant beep emanated from a large machine beside him, and a green line darted across the monitor screen in regular hills and valleys.

His eyes darted around the room, and he tried to take it all in. He was strapped into a reclined chair. Some sort of a doctor’s chair—the crinkly white paper beneath him made noise as he shifted in the seat. A small, white heart monitor was attached to his finger, and several wires were attached strategically to his forehead. He reached up, ripped them all off, and threw the heart monitor to the floor along with them. He didn’t want to be attached to these strange machines any longer.

He struggled to stand up, but the restraints on his seat stopped him. Movement flashed in the corner of his eye, and Liam’s gaze jumped over to the doorway. His heart quickened noticeably as his eyes connected with familiar soft brown eyes.

“Hi.” The soft voice sent a comfortable calm feeling throughout Liam’s body.

“Emily.” His face relaxed into a smile as his eyes took in the image in front of him. Her blonde hair fell in disordered ringlets, and she was wearing the familiar blue lab

coat over a bright yellow sundress. Emily. His Emily. A bright red blush colored her cheeks as he continued to stare at her. She smiled slightly and ducked her head.

“Kieran let me in,” she said. “Kind of accidentally on purpose. I’m supposed to be home right now.”

He struggled to find the context. Where was he? Wasn’t she—? No. She couldn’t be.

“Oh,” he supplied. He suppressed a grimace at the lameness of his response. He wasn’t yet clear enough on details to say anything further than that, though. He added a noncommittal shrug.

“Sorry you had a bad simulation,” she said.

That’s right. Liam’s mind raced to remember as bits and pieces flooded back. The memory of his time in the simulator began to fade as the memories of the dream were replaced by reality. The Lab; the simulation. Kieran, Haden, Emily, Teagan, Spencer: his... colleagues.

Emily shuffled her feet in the silence, fists pushed deep into her pockets.

“Oh, yeah,” Liam stumbled to respond. “It—I mean, it wasn’t real, so it’s fine. I’m fine, really. Wait—” The implication of her words hit him, and his eyes widened in panic. “How do you—how did you know that it was bad?”

“The monitors.” She pointed to the set up of computers on the far side of the room. They were blank now, but Liam remembered the wires connected to his head. “We could see everything you could see.”

There was a desk set up with multiple swivel chairs in front of the screens. So they’d been watching everything that happened...

Liam thought back through what he could remember doing and thinking during the simulation. He groaned in embarrassment from some of his actions and the situations he'd dreamed up for himself.

"So," he asked. "You got *all* of that?"

"Yeah," Emily said. Her voice sounded apologetic, obviously aware of the invasiveness of it all. But he'd agreed to it, right? He wasn't sure. It was all so fuzzy.

"I'm sorry for killing you off," he said. He hoped that was what she felt so awkward about. Hopefully it wasn't... the other thing... the fact that his subconscious had decided to marry himself to her. Even just thinking it, he sounded pathetic.

She smiled. "Your stress levels went up at that point," she explained, and pointed to the heart monitor beside him. "Up to a dangerous height. It's when we decided we had to bring you out of the simulation. So... I know you didn't want me dead."

"I'm still sorry." He shrugged and tried to pass off his attitude as cool. It didn't work well.

"So... your dream." She changed the subject.

"Yeah." Liam wasn't sure what she was going for, so he decided to answer in the affirmative and let her continue on to her point.

"Captain Jefferson decided to pull the project," she said. "Figured if you couldn't handle the stress not knowing, then we'd have mutiny on our hands if we continued."

"That's good." It was what he had planned to suggest when he got a chance to talk to the captain himself. His blurry memory started to remember agreeing to the simulation in the first place. The design of the simulation intended to test his reaction to the effects of the project. If he couldn't handle it, they had agreed not to proceed.

Liam stared at Emily awkwardly, suddenly hyperaware of the fact that he had been lying on the makeshift chair-bed for days at this point. He hadn't showered or changed since before the beginning of the project. And, if he was honest, he'd probably been thrashing around a fair amount with all the running he'd done. And sweating. He tended to sweat a lot when he got nervous.

She stared back at him. Liam's pulse quickened.

"Liam?" she asked. She kicked a non-existent pebble with her shoe. He wondered how he could find such a simple action so endearing. He mentally shook himself. Now was not the time to fixate on his crush.

"Yeah?"

"It's just," she started, but she stopped and shook her head. Emily cleared her throat and tried again. "In your dream," she continued slowly. She waited until Liam lifted his head and met her gaze. "I was your wife." She looked into his eyes and searched for the answer in them.

"Oh, um..." Liam froze. Why did his subconscious have to be so inconveniently obvious? "Sometimes people.... I probably saw you last or... I...yeah. Probably."

She smiled shakily, and Liam watched her face fall. Had he said something wrong? She bit her lip. "I should go. I'll see you around."

Liam didn't respond, and she shuffled closer to the door.

"Wait," he said. "Emily."

She turned back to him quickly. She looked at him with wide eyes full of hope.

"Yes?"

“Would you like to... grab coffee or something sometime?” Liam hoped he wasn’t reading the signs wrong. He’d been a coward for too long. It was now or never, and never was a possibility he wasn’t willing to accept.

“Sure.” Her face brightened visibly as her smile widened and the spark returned to her eyes. She stepped back toward him.

“How about today?” he asked with newfound confidence.

“Perfect.”

## **Haden**

“Well. That’s done,” Haden said. He keyed a few final commands into the computer beside the unconscious man. Haden glanced to his companions for affirmation, but when he didn’t find any, he just shrugged.

Haden stepped away from his friend and stared down at the wires that connected Liam to the machine. He still wasn’t sure about what they were doing, but he couldn’t deny the pleading request of his oldest friend. Liam’s screams the night before, when Haden had held him back from the edge of the roof, haunted him. Death or Emily. He knew those were the only options Liam could see anymore.

“Do you think he’ll be happier there?” Kieran asked. He placed his arms around the two on either side of him. His sad eyes focused on Liam’s peaceful expression.

“He said he didn’t want to live in a world without her,” Teagan said. A tear slid down her cheek, and she looked down at her shoes. “He saved us. It seems awful, but this might be the only way for us to save him.”

“But after all that fighting to figure out what’s real and what’s not, we stick him in a simulation?” Kieran said. “It sounds almost cruel.”

“No,” Haden said. He wasn’t sure their decision had been the right one, but he felt oddly at peace. He hated the idea of the simulation, but it was the only way he felt he could give Liam a future. Could something that was wrong for some people be the right option for someone else? “He wouldn’t last living here anymore. We sent him somewhere he can be with Emily. That’s got to count for something.”

“I hope you’re right,” Kieran said.

Teagan grabbed Haden’s hand for comfort. “And you’re sure that he can be with Emily in the simulation?”

“Yes,” Haden said. “A whole life will be devised for him. He’ll have memories, explanations, everything. But it will all be built upon his most desperate desire. His world will literally revolve around Emily.”

## **Emily**

Emily smiled at the door. Ten minutes until Liam said he’d come to pick her up for their date. She busied herself around her small apartment with small chores to pass the time until he rang the doorbell.

It took less than a minute before the one dish she’d used in the last week was clean and in the dishwasher for good measure. She stood in the corner of her living room and glanced around with her hands on her hips to see what else she could do to distract herself, but there was nothing left to do. She’d already cleaned the entire house earlier that day. She tidied when she was nervous, and today was no exception.

She walked back into the small kitchen and rearranged the sparse contents of her refrigerator for the third time.

After what seemed like ages but was really only eight minutes, a chime rang through the apartment. Emily raced to the door, but stopped with her hand on the knob. She took a moment to gather herself and waited so she didn't seem too eager before she opened the door.

She peered through the peephole to see him standing in the hallway with his hands in his pockets. He rocked back and forth on his feet. Emily found it adorable. Her nervousness faded away as she looked out at the man on the other side of the door.

This was Liam. Her Liam. She didn't need to be nervous around him.

She pulled the door opened wide and greeted him with a smile.

“Hi.”

“You look beautiful,” he said. A red blush tinted his cheeks, and he looked down at his toes.

His nerves emboldened Emily, and she reached out and grabbed his hand as she stepped out into the hallway and pulled the door closed behind her.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they made their way down the stairs.

“You'll see.”

Together, they walked down the rain-drenched street and fell back into the easy conversation they'd always known.

“And now that everyone in the office has had an unfiltered insight into my subconscious...”

“You're definitely not going to live that down anytime soon,” she said with a laugh. She remembered the faces of her colleagues as they watched the simulation.

Liam groaned.

“Haden is convinced that you think he’s a traitor.”

Liam grimaced, and they rounded the corner. At the end of the block, Emily spotted a familiar red and white striped awning.

“You remembered!” she said.

“Best cupcakes in the world, so I’ve heard.”

Emily smiled. She knew it wasn’t something anyone would have caught. A few years ago, she’d gotten into a heated argument with Kieran about which bakery was the best in town. She was amazed that Liam had cared enough to remember all this time.

Liam opened the door for her, and the tiny bell above it jingled as they walked hand-in-hand into Beaumont’s Bakery. The first date, she hoped, of many.



## ANALYSIS

My thesis, by its nature as a creative project, is primarily centered on the practice of writing, developing, and editing a novella. While writing and developing the story, I drew from multiple sources. The ones I used consciously, I have tried to explain the influence and reasoning below. And as any reader and writer knows, the books we read influence everything we say, write, and do. From my understanding of human nature to the way I have chosen to tell this story, my writing has been influenced continually by the books I've read throughout my life.

### *Reality*

This story began with a single idea—the image of Liam trying to sit in a chair and falling straight through it. Many philosophers have grappled with the task of determining a definition for reality, and I wanted to devise a scenario where those preconceived notions were tested by altering the physical laws of the world. I wondered what the implications of what might be if we lived in a world where we could not trust that which we could see.

In my University Scholars Capstone Great Texts class, we studied a number of works that tied back to the foundational question: what is real? We began with Descartes and Hobbes, who each had a distinct definition for establishing reality.

Hobbes began his reasoning of reality by saying, “There is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of

Sense,” thereby establishing that for him, the definition of reality depended upon that which we can sense (13). Descartes, however, constructing his own method of establishing a reality said, “Because our senses sometimes deceive us, I wanted to suppose that nothing was exactly as [our senses] had led us to imagine” (18). Descartes “resolved to pretend that all the things that had entered [his] mind were no more true than the illusions of [his] dreams,” and chose to reject Hobbes’ ultimate tangible description of what is real, that which he could perceive with his senses, as nothing more than mere illusions (18).

Hobbes argued, “There are of knowledge two kinds; whereof one is Knowledge of Fact: the other Knowledge of the Consequence of one Affirmation to another” where “the former is nothing else, but Sense and Memory” (Hobbes 60). The second is “the Knowledge required in a Philosopher; that is to say, of him that pretends to Reasoning” (60). The two types of knowledge he describes demonstrate the distinction between the two philosophers. Hobbes believes the first knowledge to be the greater, most solid form of truth, whereas Descartes would dismiss the first and only find validity in the second.

With those two philosophies in mind, I questioned what might happen if these philosophies were put to the test. If a sense we generally rely upon so heavily, such as sight, were somehow no longer something we could trust, what would happen? Descartes’ philosophy might lead us not to find this to be entirely unexpected or completely disillusioning, for as he said, our senses are likely to deceive us. Would we be able to rest in the strength of our reality that is based, like his, on things not seen, or do we prescribe instead to Hobbes’ philosophy of “knowledge of fact” and senses (Hobbes 60)?

Thus my story began. As I developed the character of Liam and began to construct his mindset as he discovers that the world around him is not as it seems, I realized that his natural reaction would be to seek the knowledge that seemed just out of reach.

Liam's speech to Teagan on page 103 reflects my own reasoning behind this choice. He says that he doesn't "think we'll ever be satisfied with our understanding of the world," that "when we could trust our eyes... we still wanted more knowledge. We studied individual atoms and weather patterns and the human body." The desire that my characters have to understand the world around them is a mirror to the way we live today. We are hungry for knowledge, especially as university students and teachers. This reason, I believe, would make it uncharacteristic for any one of us to merely accept the world as it is presented to Liam. We would seek knowledge as he does, and we would want to right the deception if we could.

Any story that deals with uncovering the truth behind an illusion and struggling to bring that truth to all people owes its foundation to the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Removing characters' memories of the past afforded them the opportunity to begin like the men in the cave with "their knowledge of things carried past them equally limited" (Plato 225). Teagan explains this idea to Liam on page 53 of *Awake and Blind* by saying, "Without clear memories to refer to, we forget to notice things that are out of the ordinary." Like their counterparts in Plato's allegory, "such persons would hold the shadows of those manufactured articles to be the only realities" (Plato 226).

When the characters recognize the illusion that surrounds them, they react as Plato's released prisoner does when he descends once more into the cave and, "coming so

suddenly out of the sun... find[s] his eyes blinded with the gloom of the place” (Plato 227-8). The happy ignorance that Teagan and Spencer are able to experience with some unexplainable incidents of which they do not yet understand the strangeness turns into gloom when Liam points out the illusion. He brings them into the sun for a moment, but they are forced to face the gloom of the cave in the illusions before them. When Liam asks how they got the milk and draws to their attention the improbability of its existence, Spencer responds to the gloom of the illusion, frustrated, not by the milk, but by the knowledge that the illusion is deluding him that he is even able to recognize (53).

### *Government and Utopia*

Many of the books I read for my University Scholars reading list dealt with governments and utopias, and those constructions and ideas colored how I built the society in the universe of this story. I wanted to depict a society in which the government had attempted to construct a sort of mindless utopia—something created for the supposed betterment of the individuals, but that cannot fully be explained to those same citizens in order to protect the interests of the state. To create the ideas and characters of the government, I drew strongly from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and More’s *Utopia*.

Machiavelli said, “The common people are always impressed by appearances and results,” and that is what the government of Euterra sought to do (Machiavelli 101). The illusion had the appearance of results, so it appeased the masses. They counted on the idea that “Men are simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will find someone ready to be deceived” (Machiavelli 100).

The major flaw of the illusion, therefore, by Machiavellian standards, would be that the device was not sufficiently perfected so as to remain unnoticed and therefore unquestioned. As Machiavelli said, “Men always dislike enterprises where the snags are evident” (Machiavelli 72). The characters react to the effects of the AID because they can see the flaws, and therefore they know it’s there and that someone is trying to deceive them.

In order to discuss the government in this story, I have to begin with the people. One of the main introductions to the true nature of the captain is through the introduction of his people because “the first opinion that is formed of a ruler’s intelligence is based on the quality of the men he has around him” (Machiavelli 119). Through Doreen, we can begin to see the hints of something wrong with the captain.

As reference for a model of rebellion against the current authority in order to fight a bigger battle, I used J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Throughout the action of that book, Harry continually fights against the Ministry of Magic though his real battle is not against them, but rather with Voldemort. This book inspired the alignment with Liam’s fight against the Lab. He struggles against the governance of the Lab, but his true enemy, and the purpose of his action is not the Lab, but the illusion. Doreen and the captain are modeled after the characters of Dolores Umbridge and Cornelius Fudge. Just as Umbridge did when working under Fudge, Doreen does not feel a strong loyalty to the captain or any particular person. She uses the captain and the Lab to further her quest for power. Like her counterpart, she is unafraid to operate outside of the law and subscribes to the idea that “what Cornelius doesn’t know won’t hurt him” (Rowling, *Order* 746). The captain, like Fudge, is driven by fear. He is

afraid of losing his job, the reality of what he's done, and the reality of those who work for him. The Captain is not the mastermind of anything that's going on at the Lab; he's merely a figurehead that the others, often led by Doreen or Ericson, function behind.

As a disclaimer for the depiction of the government in this story, the reader must remember that there are many sides to any story. When Liam hears the captain's story, he is hearing the true feelings of the other side. No character's account of *before* is infallible. I wish I could have explored the captain's side of the story in this work, but it would not lend itself to the flow and plot of the story.

I spent a lot of time trying to determine the name of the nation in which the action of my story was set. I wanted the name to be synonymous with Utopia because that is what it desires to be, but like More's *Utopia*, this society is a perfect nothing. Thomas More created the name Utopia from combining *topia*, land, with the prefix *u*. The *u* can either mean not, which would create the meaning *no-land*, or it can use the Greek meaning of *eu* to mean good, which would create the meaning *good-land*. Therefore, Utopia is both good land and no land.

I wanted to create a name in a similar fashion, by replicating the process and the parts. I took the term *terra* from the Italian word for land, and added the *eu* prefix that More's Utopia suggests.

In deploying the illusion, Euterra became a good land in appearance because the negative aspects have all been erased from sight. However, in hiding the truth of the world, it no longer has its foundation in reality, and therefore, true to its name, it does not exist.

### *Ending the Story*

The ending of this story is fashioned after Orwell's *1984*. In a society where one man seeks so desperately to find answers and fix all he believes to be wrong with the world, it is painful to see that character succumb to the very thing he is fighting against. Though not nearly as chilling as the final four words of *1984*, "He loved big brother," my hope is that my ending will serve to establish the type of desperation that would drive anyone—including, potentially, the Lab—to deploy the device, thereby creating a small level of understanding for the captain's actions (Orwell 298). He was desperate, like Liam, because he was facing the "two things a prince should fear: internal subversion from his subjects; and external aggression by foreign powers" (Machiavelli 103).

I did not want my story to end with a complete resolution. I wanted to depict the way that we have a tendency to put more effort into things that don't end up being as important in the end. Therefore, I chose to solve the one problem that most of my main characters would have argued to be the most crucial and important initially and leave them with more problems. Liam has worked so hard to solve the problem of the illusion, but when he is actually able to destroy it, he is fixated upon the loss of Emily so that it doesn't matter.

### *Dreams*

Initially, I was hesitant to end my novella with Liam waking up from a dreamlike simulation. It seemed like something that could end up feeling cliché and seem like an easy ending. I was also hesitant because I felt as if I had violated Tolkien's idea of a fairy story. Tolkien says that from the realm of fairy stories, he would "exclude, or rule out of

order, any story that uses the machinery of Dream, the dreaming of actual human sleep, to explain the apparent occurrence of its marvels” because “if a waking writer tells you that his tale is only a thing imagined in his sleep, he cheats deliberately the primal desire at the heart of Faerie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder” (Tolkien 321). It seems to break the unspoken contract between the writer and reader wherein the reader suspends disbelief of the narrative in exchange for the author’s commitment not to spoil the fictive dream.

As I considered the alternatives, I realized that course of action was the most complete way to conclude the action and make the beginning and end of the story parallel. In one world, he begins the action of the story by waking and concludes the action by going to sleep. In the other world, he begins the assumed action by going to sleep in order to enter the other world, and he ends the action by waking up. In addition, because this story deals with the concepts of reality and illusion, I felt the mechanism of dreaming was complementary to the philosophical questions of reality within the narrative.

The nature of dreams is an important consideration in the philosophies of Descartes and Hobbes. Descartes chose to discount the reality of waking perceptions because “all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true” (Descartes 18). However, Hobbes did not believe dreams to be an impediment to believing the things he perceived while waking because as he said, when “waking I often observe the absurdity of Dreames, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking Thoughts; I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dreame not; though when I dreame, I think my selfe awake” (Hobbes 17). A



crucial part in the foundation of both philosophies is the ability to distinguish between dreams while sleeping and reality while waking. Descartes used the deceptive nature of dreams as an explanation for not trusting his senses and waking thoughts, whereas Hobbes used the ability to observe the absurdity of dreams as an explanation of why he could trust his waking senses.

For this reason, I wanted the characters in the two worlds to separately feel a sense of absurdity about the other world—what to them would be the “dream”. In accordance with Hobbes’ philosophy, I wanted the characters to consider the actions in the other world to be obviously unreal in order to leave the reader questioning which world, if either, was real.

This inconclusiveness of reality that I wanted to establish was also one of the reasons why I depicted the scenes from Emily’s perspective throughout the story. I established continuity for the other universe that carried throughout the time that Liam is in the world without Emily. By the time the readers reach the end of the story, I don’t want them to be able to say definitively whether or not one universe was the “real” one. Depicting scenes from Emily’s point of view that occur while Liam is unconscious to that world, proves that world continues to exist with or without Liam. For this same reason, I wanted to revisit Teagan, Haden, and Kieran once Liam was in the world with Emily. The worlds exist with or without Liam, and both worlds seem real while any character exists within them.

When the action changes to Emily’s point of view, it is inevitably confusing because she exists in a time stream that runs parallel to the action that occurs concurrently within the story. The people she interacts with are deliberately not identified

until the end because they are the same characters that are present within the action happening in the other universe at the same time.

### *Writing Process*

The process of writing this story has been a learning experience for me. I began by writing the first few pages about a year and a half ago, and then I set them aside and forgot about the story until the beginning of this past summer when I decided to adopt it as the basis for my thesis. I tried to work on it many times over the summer, but I spent more time mapping out the history of the world and the characters and trying to understand the composition of the illusion than I actually put pen to paper. I began without knowing where I was going, and I realized that my first task was to figure out the rules of the world of the story before I started in any direction. With fantasy and science fiction, more than with any piece of realistic fiction I've worked on up to this point, I've realized the crucial and intensive nature of planning that goes into the story. Tolkien spent twelve years developing and writing about Middle-earth for Lord of the Rings because he believed "every loose end, every detail of the story – the chronology, the geography, even the meteorology of Middle-earth – had to be consistent and plausible, so that the reader would (as Tolkien wished) take the book in a sense as history (Carpenter 224). I did not spend near that time on this story, but after working on this story, I have more respect for the effort that went into developing that world and understand the desire to develop the universe of a story more fully. In my story, like Liam, I had to figure out how the AID worked before I could figure out how to destroy the illusion.

I finished a near complete first draft of the story in December, one that has undergone many intensive revision since that time. In the first draft, the story was told entirely from Liam's point of view. However, as I began editing, I realized that Liam's point of view wasn't able to see the whole story, and there were aspects of the story I wanted to communicate that I couldn't without changing perspectives. In addition, I found that in developing multiple points of view, I was able to preserve the sense of the parallel universes.

Near the beginning of this semester, I opened a new document and typed the entire story again, deleting and re-writing entire sections and changing the perspectives I wrote from. Even now, I know that there are many things I could change, and the story could be cut down, extended, and edited in many different ways. Although as a writer editing can be a continuous, never ceasing process, eventually I have to step back and call it a completed draft.

As for the future of this story, I plan to set it aside for a while and work on other stories. Then someday, when I'm able to revisit the story with an open mind, I plan to completely tear it apart to edit it again, and I'll decide then where to go from there. In subsequent drafts, I would like to introduce more characters that accept the illusion and do not feel the same urge to fight against it as Liam.

Finishing this story has been an incredible experience. I have grown as a writer and learned more about writing and myself throughout this process. I look forward to continuing writing in the future, and hopefully, someday, publishing.

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