

Thesis Proposal & Project: The Cave

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Author Note

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Working Title

The working title for my project is simply *The Cave* and was named by my husband when I was brainstorming ideas. Because most of the story takes place inside a mysterious cave at Natural Bridge, the title is fitting for the project. At the same time, if a better suggestion came along or if a more appealing title sprung to mind, I would be willing to change it for the sake of the project.

Artist Statement

Inspiration and Background of *The Cave*

Growing up in a small country town which most locals jokingly refer to as *Mayberry*, the phrase, “everybody knows everybody’s else’s business” comes to mind. While that is often restricted to gossip, that gossip can come in handy when bad things happen, and we need word to spread quickly. Social media posts go up, folks go live, and word of mouth suddenly spreads faster than a wildfire.

That’s exactly what happened in early June 2019, when 30-year-old Jacob Watts and 32-year-old Jacob Elmore went missing. Suddenly, Facebook was ablaze as rumors went around on their possible whereabouts. Like most rumors, a substantial amount of the ones being spread were useless and unhelpful to the families. Then when Jacob Watts failed to show up for work, his dad’s concerns morphed from curiosity to sheer panic. He started looking for answers on Facebook, and quickly found out his son had planned a caving expedition with his friend, Jacob Elmore.

Watts’ dad is an older gentleman and so, some of the younger locals pitched in to help search for the two missing men in the cave they were believed to have been hiking in. As luck would have it- though some would say it was the clucking of our best hens and lots of prayers- it didn’t take long for the men to be found. Both had hypothermia and, according to information later

shared by the family on Facebook, had two flashlights which had both gone out. The unlucky pair were sitting in a pitch black, freezing cave. According to an article on WSLs.com, “[Glen] Hugas said, ‘(The men) were probably four hundred feet into the cave and from their hypothermia they were unable to exit the cave on their own abilities’”(Williamson, 2019). Even if the men were able to see their way out of the cave, their bodies would have failed them anyway.

These days, both men are doing well and fully recovered, but I’m sure the memories and fear still haunt them. It was this story I thought of when I sat down on a cool September morning, when I started my journey writing, *The Cave*. The inspiration being a tale of survival that happened right in my backyard amid Facebook rumors and concerned friends and family.

As I began this story that would ultimately, hopefully, become my thesis project, it started out as fiction based on fact. I planned to stick close to the original “plot” that consisted of the two men trapped in a cave in complete darkness. However, I didn’t want to tie myself down to just two characters and I didn’t want those characters to be older. Older folks, even those in their late twenties or early thirties, wouldn’t have the same kind of tension and dynamic that could be created by a teenage group.

Upon choosing the setting and characters, it was now time to nail down the plot. When I first began this project in a fiction workshop last year, I created an outline that hinged around a central theme and plot. The theme was essentially built on these four teenagers finding their way out of the cave after they hiked back too far and the batteries died on their only two flashlights. It was going to come down to one “final girl” where all of the other characters perished inside the cave.

However, I quickly realized I had painted myself into a corner. Having a story where the characters’ flashlights go out in a cave, and then they experience total cave darkness meant these

characters couldn't see what was coming for them. In a sense, I believed I was cheapening the experience for the reader by hindering their ability to visualize the story in their own imaginations. Though I believe it is something which can be done by a writer, it was too much of a challenge for me.

Therefore, I needed to change my game plan. Somehow, there had to be a way to create a situation where there was danger lurking inside the cave where a final girl was still plausible without sticking too close to the original story when these two men's flashlights went out and left them blind. Then, after church one Sunday morning, I was having a conversation with my teenage boys about a video I'd seen on YouTube when this man was warned not to take anything from a holy place he'd visited because it was illegal and considered bad luck. Unfortunately, he ignored the warning and stole a rock. Afterwards, his friends and family swore he had nothing but bad luck until his untimely death, caused by suicide.

That's when the idea hit me! Rather than the flashlights go out, why not make this place special where they're not allowed to remove something from the cave? But instead of bad luck, make the repercussions much worse, like death. I'd already written the first two chapters where there was a rumor about a man killing another man inside the cave, though the body was never found, and the surviving man swore his friend fell into a bottomless pit. The bottomless pit itself was inspired by both the book of Revelations and an urban legend in my town that swears one of the caves in Low Moor has a bottomless pit if you go back too far. To this day, I won't go inside that cave. How, then, to tie this all together? Lying in bed with my husband one night, it hit me. I said, "Honey, I've got it! It's a science fiction book. The cave has a well of water inside with the power of miracle healing, but you can't take the water out of the cave." All of the missing pieces of this delicate puzzle I'd been trying to figure out suddenly came into full view. The cave

had been there for hundreds of years and was created by Mother Nature for this tribe to survive after their war with the white man. A lake of healing waters was placed inside to help them replenish and regrow their tribe, but only as long as they were willing not to abuse the power of the water for immortality. At long last, every piece of inspiration that came to me when I started the book was finally starting to work together to create this piece.

Introduction to the Manuscript

Imagine navigating through a forbidden cave full of secrets and surrounded by legends of ill-fated explorers. If you were brave enough to venture on, would you continue your expedition if you discovered that very cave held a lake of water which could heal anyone of anything, but there's a catch. The water must stay inside the cave, for in removing it, you open yourself up to a deadly demise. At the same time, that body of water-with the power to heal- would be worth billions! Could you resist the temptation of greed to save your own life? For Emily, Hunter, Nolan, and Kaylee-a group of four teenagers-such are the questions laid out before them as they stand inside a massive, bewildering cave, in Natural Bridge.

The dynamic between these individuals is also key to answering the aforementioned questions. Cautious, but vocal Emily seeks to heed the warnings and red flags of the cave, as does her boyfriend, Hunter. However, Hunter is a people-pleaser, especially where his best friend, Nolan, is concerned. Nolan is the opportunist who only sees the dollar signs, while his girlfriend, Kaylee, doesn't seem to have a mind of her own. Kaylee will go along with whatever Nolan wants to do. Meanwhile, all of their lives hinge on whatever decisions they make inside this cave. If they make the wrong choice and try to remove the water from the cave for monetary game, it's game over.

As such, the question then becomes, ‘Will any of them try to remove the water from the cave or not?’ We know the devastating consequence of the decision, but we also know the power of greed and the hold it can have. That hold can be so powerful that its prey wears blinders, impeding their ability to see the grand scheme of things, even when it means saving their own lives.

Literary Context

Prior to the story’s beginning, Emily lived in Roanoke, Virginia, with her parents until her dad passed away nearly two years before. Her mom, unable to bear the pain of living in the home she shared with him so many years, sought for a new start for her and her daughter. Therefore, she moved the two of them to Beckley, West Virginia.

After arriving in Beckley, Emily quickly fell for blonde-haired, blue-eyed, country boy, Hunter, who she describes in the story as looking more like a surfer than a redneck. However, Hunter also has a past and lost his sister to a single-car accident when he was thirteen. After her death, he started to volunteer at the hospital, finding his purpose in life and love for helping others. At his core, Hunter has a big heart that sometimes gets him into trouble, as he can’t always please everyone at the same time. This is especially true when it comes to Nolan and Emily, who tend to disagree on everything.

Hunter’s best friend, Nolan, is someone he’s known all his life and always looked out for. He loves Nolan like his own brother, but Nolan is an eccentric, excitable, and often selfish person. As an only child, he’s used to getting his own way and doesn’t mind throwing the random temper tantrum if he doesn’t get it. He also doesn’t mind hurting other people’s feelings to guilt them into doing what he wants. Nolan is that troublemaker you don’t want to hang out with because even when it sounds like he’s being sweet, playful, or helpful, you can bet there’s an agenda behind it

and something that's in it for him, even-and perhaps especially- as it pertains to his girlfriend, Kaylee.

Kaylee is the most minor character in the story, but one who I continue to try and pull to the forefront. When I first created her, I thought I had her all figured out. However, as the story has evolved, I've realized how small of a box I put her in in the beginning and so, I'm still looking for her backstory. What I know thus far is that she also grew up with Hunter and Nolan and even though she doesn't seem to care that other people are watching her, it's a mask to hide what's underneath. I can acutely recall a scene I was writing when Emily was particularly concerned about what might come to pass. In my mind, I watched Emily struggle with her concern as I simultaneously thought about adding more of Kaylee to the story. So, I thought to myself, 'what if Emily looks over at Kaylee? What would Kaylee be doing?' When I first wrote Kaylee, or "Kay," I saw her as one-dimensional when it came to her flirtatious nature. Therefore, I anticipated that Kaylee would be hanging all over Nolan. However, when I shut my eyes and had Emily look at her, Kaylee was even more scared about what was going to happen than Emily was, and this caught me off-guard! However, Kaylee started laughing again the second she noticed Emily looking at her. It was like she was hiding her true self with the clothes, make-up, and flirting.

That was the moment I realized I had been painting Kaylee one way in one color scheme without looking at anything else about her or the things that made her unique. There are often flirty characters in books, movies, or plays, but there are sometimes explanations as to why they need so much attention.

I believe Kaylee has been negatively impacted by her father's long hours working as a doctor. It's been nearly impossible for Kaylee to spend a lot of time with her dad, and I think she craves it. As such, I think she relies heavily on flirting for the male attention she wants from her

father but isn't getting. I also believe this is something she doesn't like to admit to anyone, so she puts on a tough façade to hide the pain. That's why she appeared so worried when Emily looked at her, but then quickly laughed it off when she realized someone was watching her. She can't stand being vulnerable or having anyone see her internal struggle. This is something unlikely to be revealed in the novel, but something I want to remember about Kaylee so that I can stay true to her character and the broken girl she's trying so hard to protect.

Ultimately, I believe each of these characters is dynamic in their own way and have something to add to the plot, which for me, has been the most fun part of developing this story. Initially, it was going to hold close to the original events that took place with some obvious storytelling along the way. However, I never got the chance to speak to Jacob Watts or Jacob Elmore about what happened in the cave. Even if I had, I believe the story would have taken the same turn, as I struggled with the original outline.

The main problem I kept having was that I was going to have to tell a story about characters who were in the dark. Originally, I had them getting lost, hearing things that go bump in the night, getting snake-bitten, separated, etc., but none of it was working. The more I tried to write the story the way I thought it should go, the more unrealistic it became and the more it got away from me. Additionally, I struggled with how to "show" a story that the reader couldn't "see" in his/her mind, as the cave was going to be pitch black. The whole point of writing out a scene in a book is so the reader can "watch" the story happening in their mind. How was I ever going to do that when the characters in the story couldn't see what was happening? The simple answer was I couldn't.

Then it hit me one night as I was lying in bed with my husband that I was going about it all wrong. I was trying to guide the story instead of letting the story guide me and it seemed to be guiding me down the path of science fiction. The idea frightened me, as I had never written a sci-

fi novel, and I was already writing the story in third person. In truth, I almost always write in first-person. The thought crossed my mind: What if I'm taking on more than I could handle? But the truth was, the story was writing itself in my mind. I just had to sit in front of my laptop and type the words.

I ran the new idea by my husband, and he loved it. In fact, this man who hates to read books said with confidence, "I'd read that book in a second!" So, I sat down to rework the story and it finally started to work. I had had professors tell me before to follow the story, but ignored the advice, thinking I knew best. Alas, the story knew best, and my professors had been right all along.

The story is now about a cave that is relatively well-lit in some areas, making it easier for the reader to see what's going on. The central plot rests on a magical lake nestled inside a peculiar cave. This lake of water has the power to heal the sick and injured and was initially created by Mother Nature. According to legend, Mother Nature created the cave to restore a Native American tribe called the Tahomas after the white man nearly wiped them out. When an enemy tribe, the Inadus, learn of the cave's power, they attempt to steal it for their own tribe by eliminating the Tahomas.

After they kill Chief Tyee, his daughter, Orenda, weeps over her slain father's body before deciding how to avenge him. Orenda scoops up his blood and rushes off to the cave. After sneaking past the Inadus, she makes her way to the water and pours in her father's blood. Then, she begs Mother Nature to curse the water forevermore should anyone try to abuse its power. Mother Nature agrees and creates a third path in the cave which leads to a bottomless pit. Should anyone abuse the magic, they will die, and their souls will immediately separate from their bodies, to be trapped in the bottomless pit for all time.

Significance of the Topic as a Christian Author

As a Christian author, this topic is significant because it is a chance, through storytelling, to warn others about the love of money, the danger of greed and potentially deadly cost of it. We see stories like this all throughout the Bible and even in modern-day forms of storytelling through novels and cinema.

In the Bible, there is the story of the greedy farmhands in the book of Matthew whose greed led to murder. There is also the parable of the rich fool in the book of Luke who wouldn't give up his earthly treasures to follow Jesus. Although the story did not end with the man dying, Christians know that his choice cost him the death of his own soul and an eternity in hell. Both are, by far, worse than any earthly death. The two thieves who hung next to Jesus are also examples of greed resulting in death.

In addition to Biblical examples of greed resulting in death, there are also many movies that address it as well. A few nights ago, I watched *Rush Hour* with my children and was again reminded of the deadly cost of greed. Toward the end of the movie when the villain, Griffin, A.K.A. "Juntao," tried to flee with a suitcase full of money, he was being chased by Detective Lee. When Lee caught up to him, Juntao used his suitcase to try and knock Lee off of the rafters in the building. However, the suitcase opened up and the money went raining down. Rather than keep running, Juntao reached out desperately for the bills and ultimately, went plummeting to his death.

In the 1991 movie, *Robin Hood*, starring Kevin Costner, the viewer becomes acquainted early on by the very greedy, very evil Prince John, whose every move promises self-gratification. His efforts, again, result in his own demise when Robin Hood (Costner) kills him in the end following a sword fight.

The aforementioned movies where greed runs rampant and deadly consequences follow are things I wish to pursue in my project. Though it is a theme that has played out before in the Bible, and in secular books and cinema, I want to see it explored more in Christian books, Christian movies, and by Christian authors. It is my desire to tackle that issue head on, and without showing mercy to these characters. The reason is because there's nothing this cave can do to them that would be worse than seeing God on Judgment Day. This is especially true if you've had the sin of greed in your heart during your lifetime and never bothered to repent for it or turn away from it.

On a more personal note, the sin of greed is a sin that sits very close to my heart, though it is one I am blessed to not have struggled with. For me, it is a sin I struggle to comprehend at times, particularly when loved ones are involved. I want to bring this topic to light in honor of my late grandmother, who passed of Alzheimer's nearly a decade ago.

My dad and uncle date the issue back to 1992 when my grandma-we all called her Mawmaw- lent my cousin a substantial amount of money he failed to pay back. When Mawmaw wrote him a letter asking for it, it angered his mother who in turn, refused to speak to my grandma. All I knew, until I was older, was that my aunt was angry at Mawmaw and didn't want to talk to her anymore. Mawmaw was such a gentle soul, I couldn't imagine anyone being mad at her.

Twenty-three years later, I saw that same aunt in the waiting room at the hospital when Mawmaw fell ill with dementia. Confused, I went to Mawmaw's room to see how she was doing and there was an anger in her eyes I'd never seen before. I would soon realize the anger was to mask the pain she was feeling. She told me that my aunt had brought in paperwork and told Mawmaw it was from the hospital to release her. When I was there to visit, she had just learned those papers were not from the hospital at all but were power of attorney papers. She had unknowingly given my aunt power over her person, bills, and bank accounts.

Until her death, many of us suspected my aunt was stealing Mawmaw's money and we took our concerns to her guardian ad litem, but nothing was ever done about it. Then after Mawmaw passed, my aunt and most her children fought over the funeral and her will. It was myself and my cousins at the front row of her funeral, weeping over the memories and wondering how greed could drive a person to treat their mother so horribly to the point where they were more concerned with what they were getting than what they were losing.

All I could think of sitting in the funeral home was how Mawmaw died in a nursing home instead of the house she and her husband bought together after he came home from the war. The fighting amongst her children led to her being put in a nursing home instead. Her house was sold to foot the bill and all the memories of my childhood visits at her home have been sold to someone else, who will never know the wonderful person who once resided there.

Greed, then, is deeply close to my broken heart. The pain of what she must have endured before her death has stuck with me. I believe greed is how it started, and that greed is how it ended. It brings the verse to mind, "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). My cousins and myself just wanted our grandma back, and to pretend she died at home in her bed like she was supposed to. Greed doesn't just affect the person being greedy, but those around them as well. No matter the circumstances surrounding greed, good cannot prosper from it, even if it initially seems that way to the person giving in to it. I hope to find a way to portray that in my project.

Conclusion

I believe this story has a lot of potential as a science fiction book and for my thesis project. There is a lot of background about these characters that I'll probably never get to, but it'll help me

better write the story as it unfolds. There are several stories within the story, as well, which I think makes it unique. There is the original Native American folklore in chapter six, there's the story of a man searching for a cure for his wife, and there's a story about two men who went into the cave nearly 20 years ago, though only one came out. There are rumors to explain one of those disappearances, but early on, the rumor appears to be false.

The reader will soon realize that these rumors were created because they were the only way for locals to explain the disappearances. Anyone who might get wind of what really happened will fall to one of the following scenarios: they won't believe it at all, they'll be too afraid to go in to find out (like myself and the "bottomless pit" in one of our local caves), they'll explore it to find out it is true and endure the same fate, they'll explore it and find nothing (unlikely), or they'll believe it when they watch it happen to a friend or loved one, but no one will believe them. All in all, it has a lot of potential for multiple books.

Critical Paper: Greed Bringeth Destruction

Luke 12:15 reads, “Then he said to them, “Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed, because one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (New English Translation). This sentiment of avoiding the grasps of greed can be again found in the book of 1 Timothy when Paul writes,

People who long to be rich soon begin to do all kinds of wrong things to get money, things that hurt them and make them evil-minded and finally send them to hell itself. For the love of money is the first step toward all kinds of sin. Some people have even turned away from God because of their love for it, and as a result have pierced themselves with many sorrows (The Living Bible).

With a fate of “many sorrows” to look forward to, it becomes more imperative for one to guard himself from the temptation of greed to avoid his own destruction. Since the beginning of time, man has struggled with this crucial sin, yet he continues to learn nothing, despite the numerous consequences, death included, that can be seen unfolding in his life or in the lives of those around him. Richard Newhauser, author of *The Early History of Greed* seems to agree as he writes, “...as Lady Church patiently explains to Hermas, every evil desire, especially that greed which abandons eschatological goods for worldly profits, results in death and captivity” (Newhauser, 2000). Therefore, greed—again—proves itself to be a costly sin and one we all should work to avoid. In my thesis project titled, *The Cave*, there are many stories within the story. In each one, the reader learns how each character’s greedy eyes blinded them from the dangers that most of them were warned about. In each case, their greed—a constantly growing problem in our society— became their undoing as they all met an early demise. For our

communities to avoid the damages caused by greed, we must all learn how to recognize it, condemn it, and discourage it for our own sakes and for the sakes of our children.

To begin, how might we define greed? Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines it as, "a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). However, I tend to prefer Richard F. Taflinger's definition who writes, "The definition of greed is an extreme or excessive desire for resources, especially for property such as money, real estate, or other symbols of wealth" (Taflinger, 1996). Greed can wear all types of masks and be seen in many forms. The basic idea, however, is that it stems from a person's inner and, in both definitions "excessive desire" to obtain things and to obtain more. Sadly, the society we live in only encourages that thought process.

How many times a day do we see reels on Facebook or short clips on TikTok that shout out to "look out for number one" and "follow your heart"? We are bombarded with immoral messages every day to seek out greed, rather than abstain from it. Such a message stands only to further challenge us. Everywhere we look, it seems the moral decline of our society is such where we continue to see good being called evil and evil being called good, especially where greed is concerned.

One area where this is probably the most noticeable is in common burglaries. Thieves are now gaining sympathy for having been shot and killed, rather than scrutinized for their rapacity. In a scholarly article titled, *Changing Representations of the Criminal*, the author writes, "A sympathetic attitude toward criminals has emerged in social periods when good economic conditions, optimism, a tendency toward liberalism and low imprisonment rates, tended to prevail" (Dario Melossi, 2000). The author is essentially alerting his reader that, even in the best circumstances, society is rewarding criminals with sympathy. In an article published by CBS

News Miami, two family members of a teenage boy named Trevon Johnson, were being interviewed following an incident involving Johnson. The night before, the teenager broke into a woman's home and was shot and killed as a result. In the shocking interview, both women blamed the homeowner. Johnson's cousin, Nautika Harris asked, "How he gonna get his money to have clothes to go to school" (CBS News Miami)? Suddenly, society is challenged to accept being burgled and believe the child had no other choice.

Rather than live in a society that defends the victim, greed has driven our society to defend the perpetrator. The worldly message seems only to scream louder that we all should look out for ourselves and ourselves alone. It then becomes more difficult to teach our children to avoid greed because the rest of the world encourages them that they are entitled to whatever they want, even if what they want already belongs to someone else.

If we were to observe the statistics of burglaries, the results might be surprising to some. According to an article written by Taylor Covington in *The Zebra*, "There are 2.5 million burglaries annually in the U.S." (The Zebra, 2022). Marija Kovachevska, a writer for Comfy Living, adds that, "There are around 100 burglaries that result in homicide every year in the United States" (Comfy Living, 2022). While one can reasonably deduce that some of these deaths are the result of the thieves being shot and killed, it is evident that a great number of these are innocent people who died because of someone else's greed. Either way, greed resulted in death for 100 of these.

However, burglary is not the only form of greed. In my artist statement, I referred to a story involving my grandmother where greed was evident, in my opinion, three times. The first was when my cousin refused to return money he borrowed, the second was when my aunt allegedly was stealing money, and the third was when my grandma's children fought over what

was left of her money after she passed away. While the price of greed may not have been death for those in my family who sought it, for those of us on the outside, we mostly went on our own ways apart from each other. Therefore, their greed cost them many family members who were once very much on their side.

Sadly, family fights over a deceased relative's will is not uncommon. In a YouTube video posted in 2018, a television journalist covered a story where two brothers were fighting over their mother's will. Not 20 seconds in, the two were involved in a physical altercation. One of the brothers is even quoted as saying, "This isn't a will. It's a war" (Scott Haywood, 2018). Rather than lean on one another following the death of their mother, these grown men are filled with hatred toward each other and are ready to have an all-out brawl over money and possessions. Not only have they lost her, but they've lost each other for the sake of greed.

In some cases, family members don't die, but are killed because of greed. Television shows like *Snapped* and *Crime Watch Daily* often feature stories where husbands, wives, and even children are murdered in the name of greed. In a series of videos posted to YouTube by *True Crime Daily*, they cover a story where a man named Karl Karlsen allegedly killed his first wife, several horses, and then, his own son, for a big insurance payout. Perhaps the most difficult pill to swallow is how he pushed a truck onto his son's body and left him to die. One of the detectives who questioned Karlsen recalls the interrogation, saying, "I say, 'so the brutal truth,' were my words to him, 'is that you caused the truck to fall on him and you left him dying on the floor.' And he says, 'yeah, that's what happened'" (True Crime Daily, 2017). Sadly, there are thousands of other stories out there just like Karlsen's where greed leads to killing someone in their own family. Karlsen, who would eventually be found guilty of murdering his first wife and

son, Levi, will now spend the rest of his life in prison. Such is the cost of his greed, though some will probably say it isn't enough.

How often do we hear stories in our lives? How often do we hear of burglaries, some of which turn violent or deadly? How often do family members and friends fight over someone's riches when they die, rather than mourn the loss? How often do people kill strangers or even family members for the sake of greed? How do we begin to comprehend that money, to some, is more valuable than a human being?

It is to this ever-growing phenomenon of greed where I wish to lay the foundation of my thesis project and further explore the effects of greed as it plays out among a group of four teenagers. In this project, they will be tempted by greed after learning the deadly cost of it. The reader must then turn the pages to discover if this group will fall prey to temptation or learn from those before them. How will they deal with this pricy sin as it stares each of them in the face?

As a whole, society needs to address the problem of greed head on and resist the urge to make excuses for themselves or one another. Whatever the reason for avoiding the weight of self-responsibility, a failure to overcome it can mean failure in other areas. In an online article titled, *Helping People Take Responsibility: What Does It Mean to Take Ownership of Your Work*, it reads, "Whatever the reason, if people fail to take responsibility, they'll fail in their jobs, they'll fail their teams, and they'll fail to grow as individuals. All of this makes it important to address the issue" (Mindtools.com, 2022). Though written for the advancement of their employees, the message is applicable to all who neglect taking responsibility for their own actions.

It is especially important for thieves and other criminals to take responsibility, particularly those who become repeat offenders. In a scholarly article titled, *Can Persistent*

Offenders Acquire Virtue, the two authors, Anthony Bottoms and Joanna Shapland, conducted a series of interviews with repeat offenders and reported their findings. To protect the privacy of the men who agreed to do the interviews, their names were changed. “Len” was one of the men who was once a repeat offender, but eventually turned his life around. The article reads, “Throughout this process [the authors’ research period], Len was learning, normatively, to ‘take more responsibility’ for himself and to think before acting; and like Kevin [an interviewee who became a success story] he seemed to take pleasure in beginning to live a life more in accordance with his true values” (Bottoms & Shapland, 2014). In Len’s case, taking responsibility was detrimental in turning his life around and avoid being a repeat offender any longer.

Owning responsibility is not just the job of the thief or criminal, however. Self-responsibility applies to all of us. Sometimes that means taking responsibility for our silence when we witness greed or see someone do something wrong. Sometimes it’s awkward and uncomfortable. Other times, speaking up may come at a price. In an article titled *Peer Ostracism as a Sanction Against Wrongdoers and Whistleblowers*, the authors write, “...those who observed wrongdoing, but did not report it, suggested concerns of norm violations against whistleblowing, and the cost they would pay were disincentives to whistleblowing” (Curtis, et al., 2021). It’s intimidating to blow the whistle on someone else, but we would be one step closer to defeating greed and creating a better life all-around. Psychologist Catherine A. Sandersen insists “If enough of us do so [speak up], we can change the culture to one of courage and action instead of silence and inaction” (Sanderson, 2020). It would make sense that courageous people would be more likely to take ownership when they are in the wrong.

In addition to being courageous, it would seem as though there are many proactive ways in which we all can learn, grow, and protect ourselves from the sin of greed. We learn from the

sins of others, we take responsibility for our own actions, we hope others take responsibility for theirs, and we follow the age-old motto, “See something, say something.” Perhaps in speaking up, we can inadvertently help someone else change, even if we end up facing retaliation. It would be worth it to take that chance and move forward to a better future where greed runs a little less freely. Additionally, we must avoid the sin ourselves, as it’s written in the Bible. “Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed, because one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15, New English Translation). This is a lesson I hope the reader will obtain from my thesis project and one that is close to my heart. The Bible promises that one stands only to meet with his own destruction if he should give in to the sin of greed. Sometimes, it also means destroying others. Time and time again, thieves and/or innocents lose their lives to greed, family members fight over earthly possessions or money, and some who are even killed for it. No good can or ever will emanate from the sin of greed.

Research Topic

The research I anticipate doing is mostly on caves themselves, even though my experience with exploring them is limited. However, I live in an area surrounded by them, and I plan to take full advantage of that. My husband and I like to hike and be out in nature, so doing research on caves has become of particular interest to us both. When I began last week, I started with Google to locate nearby caves that would be safe for my husband and I to explore. With both of us being amateur cavers, it was imperative to make safety my top priority.

I was overjoyed to find a cave in Lewisburg, West Virginia, less than 45 minutes from our home. I have been to Lewisburg many times and am familiar with the area. We were able to leave our teenagers home, take along our cell phones and hoodies, and explore the well-lit cave. It even had a gift shop upstairs where customers could purchase caving headlamps and souvenirs. Then it was time to explore!

We were able to read and learn about the cave, which included recent findings of fossils back in 2015. However, the most fascinating part for me was learning how the cave was created, how the stalagmites and stalactites were formed, and how the cave stays a crisp 52 degrees all year round, despite the rain, snow, or heat. It will be great to add in my own personal experience to the book and describe what I know to be true because I have seen, felt, touched, and learned these things for myself.

With a firm grasp of the setting, I want to explore how the confinement of the cave might play into the mental state of these characters, particularly as things begin to unravel throughout the book. Will the chill of the cave affect their psyche in such a way to where fear becomes easily planted in their minds? Will their minds play tricks on them? Will being surrounded by these walls give them a sense of security or provide a feeling of isolation and imprisonment?

How might that play into the storyline and into each of these characters? These are all questions I'm personally curious about and I look forward to having these questions run through my mind during my next caving expedition.

Comparable Literature

Following the cave tour in Lewisburg, I set out to find a published book which would aid in my research. During my Google search, I found a YA fiction book called *An Un-Conventional Murder* by C.A. Cox. The novel takes place inside a cave and is also described as science fiction. According to the *About the Author* section on Amazon, "C. A. Cox is an avid caver and lover of the outdoors." The book has proven to be worth its weight in gold as far as doing research on this project. Cox goes so far as to discuss the type of clothing worn by cavers in chapter eleven which reads, "Quite a few cavers were quite specific about what color their caving suits were, even though they wore them underground and proceeded to coat them with mud, which made all the caving suits look identical" (Cox, 2016). Additionally, Cox touches on cavers and various caves throughout the book, discusses their passageways, views, and slippery floors.

The first few words in *An Un-Conventional Murder* are, "I smelled death. It smelled good" (Cox, 2016). In just six words and in the title, I know I'm going to be reading a novel where a character is killed. In the description of the book, it is revealed the book is in the genre of science fiction, which is a genre I have never written in. I have also never killed a character in any of my past works, so this will be a brand-new experience for me as a writer. At the same time, I am looking forward to taking on the challenge. Because this book tackles murder, it has been beneficial in helping inspire me. It has also given me the ins and outs on writing a scene where a character is being killed off. The fact that it is also in the genre of science fiction has only added to the benefits of using it for research.

Additional Forms of Research: The Cave Book (Wonders of Creation)

While I continue to dive into C.A. Cox's novel, there are other forms of research I wish to conduct as it pertains to my thesis. Perhaps I will uncover another sci-fi novel about caves that is similar to mine, but if I don't, I am happy with the one I have already found. In the meantime, I plan to dive into the very useful information I have found in nonfiction form.

The book I discovered online which I continue to pour myself into is a book called, *The Cave Book (Wonders of Creation)* by author Emil Silvestru which was first published in 2008. Inside, there are six nonfiction chapters about caves, including several pictures available to the reader. There are even Bible references and hieroglyphic examples strewn throughout the book.

My novel is loosely inspired by both true events and the Bible, particularly 1 Timothy 6:10 which reads, "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (King James Bible, 1769/2017). Because of this loose inspiration, it makes Silvestru's book more relatable in that he has contained Biblical examples and references in his book. In the introduction, Silvestru talks about the Tower of Babel and what happened after the confusion when people were speaking in different languages. Silvestru writes, "So people soon forgot about the true Creator God and started believing in all sorts of gods dwelling in all sorts of places, some of them in caves" (Silvestru, 2008). Additionally, the book talks about cave paintings, making it a wonderful source of information due to my novel's reference to cave paintings on the wall earlier on in the book.

In one part of my thesis project, *The Cave*, there is talk about multiple paths inside, including one "room" meant for storage. The cave had been carved out of rock by Mother Nature to provide the magic healing waters and shelter for the Tahoma tribe if ever they should need it.

It is down the same path leading to the “room” meant for storage where the group of four find the cave paintings on the wall.

Interestingly, *The Cave Book (Wonders of Creation)* reads on page nine, “... there are paintings in a number of caves and rock shelters that are believed to be non-religious” (Silvestru, 2008). The Native American Tahoma tribe, who are talked about in my novel, are not necessarily religious, but they believe in gods and the power of Mother Nature. Because Silvestru’s book discusses how rock formations in caves provide shelter, he describes cave paintings, and his book is full of fascinating true details about caves and their history, it has made for a wonderful resource as I put together my thesis.

Additional Forms of Research: The Cave

Another form of research I used for my thesis is a movie I found called *The Cave* which was released in 2005 starring Cole Hauser, Lena Headley, Piper Perabo, and Morris Chestnut, among others. In searching for items to use in my research, I googled the title of my own novel to see if anything popped up and this movie was one of the first things on the list.

According to an online movie review written by Christopher Lyon, “When the opening to a huge underground cavern is discovered beneath the rubble of an old church in the Romanian mountains, a scientist hires a team of gung-ho American cave divers to help explore the cave’s ancient ecosystem” (Lyon, 2022). The movie poster also gives a clue as to the genre of this movie, as there is a huge monster in the water with his mouth open beneath the cave divers. Clearly, monsters are not real and so, it was easy to discern this movie is in the genre of science fiction/horror.

The purpose of studying the movie was to see how the shots were filmed to capture the cave and how they were able to create enough light where the audience could see what was

happening. One of the biggest issues I am having with writing my thesis is explaining how everything is seen in the darkness of the cave.

For the most part, watching the movie for the purpose of learning how light was provided for the characters, left me feeling a little indifferent. In the movie, the characters brought headlamps, flashlights, and large, elevated lights that reminded me high-tech streetlamps. While the latter use of lights would be an impossibility for the characters in my project, I was able to get a sense of the cave's darkness and as such, the research was still successful in teaching me about the darkness of caves and the work I'd need to do to create light.

Additional Forms of Research: History Museum of Western Virginia

The History Museum of Western Virginia, located in Roanoke, Virginia, was a great place to conduct research because of the large collection of Indian artifacts they carry on the bottom floor of the building. According to the website, "The History Museum of Western Virginia shares quarters with the O. Winston Link Museum at 101 Shenandoah Ave. History Museum exhibits trace the growth of the Roanoke Valley and beyond, offering a glimpse of how life was lived in southwestern Virginia" (<https://www.visitroanokeva.com/listings/history-museum-of-western-virginia/6205/>). This is a museum I had frequented before, though it had been more than a couple of years since my last visit.

In the thesis I am working on, there is a legend about the cave in chapter six that describes the Native American history about the cave. When I wrote the initial draft of the chapter, I researched Native American names and their meanings as I set out to name the tribes and characters. As such, each Native American name in my novel has a purpose and meaning. For example, the protagonist tribe, the Tahoma tribe, whom Mother Nature carved the cave out for and gave the magic waters is a Native American word that literally means "giver of the

water” (Murray, 2021) on the verywellfamily website. In fact, I used this article for a lot of the names I chose for my novel, making sure each name had a special meaning.

The History Museum also has several Native American exhibits where visitors can learn about names. Not necessarily Native American baby names, but the names they used for tools and everyday use items. It was in this area where the research on my project was most effective.

Additional Forms of Research: Legends of America

As I continued to conduct research for my thesis, one website I found was called *Legends of America*. What I thought was most interesting about this website was the fact that there was a section called *Native American Mythology and Legends*. Given that chapter six focuses on a Native American legend I conjured up in my own imagination, it was nice to compare and contrast it to actual Native American legends. Then, I searched around for one that may have taken place in and/or around a cave or if there were any legends about healing waters.

While I do not particularly know of any Native American legends that feature a lake of magical healing powers, I did take the time to explore that possibility to see if one existed and how it might compare to my own. As of right now, I have not uncovered such a legend, but continue to search the internet and library, among other resources, to discover if one exists.

Though I have been unsuccessful thus far in my endeavor, I was able to find a legend titled *The Division of Two Tribes*. In it, there is talk about two tribes: the Shosone and the Comanche, who are at odds with one another after the invasion of the white man. Additionally, they argued over “medicine water,” and began a quarrel over it. While this legend does not talk about healing properties of the water, despite the name, it does talk about how the Chief of the Shoshone tribe initially tried to make peace over it so they could drink the water together, but his tribe would not hear of it.

This small quarrel over water eventually led to the death of a Shoshone. The site reads, “Wacomish [a member of the Comanche tribe] crept behind him [a member of the Shoshone tribe], flung himself against the hunter, forced his head beneath the water, and held him there until he was drowned” (Charles M. Skinner, 1896). Like my thesis, the Native Americans cursed the water and it tasted bitter to the Comanche tribe.

It is legends like this, between the Shoshone and Comanche tribes, which have been beneficial to my research on Native Americans and their folklore. The entire site has been incredibly helpful to my thesis project in that, it has taught me about the ancient stories passed down by Native Americans for hundreds of years. I was able to look at the folklore I created and do a side-by-side comparison from a literary perspective and tighten up the screws of my writing.

Additional Forms of Research: Natural Bridge Caverns

When I began the book that would become my thesis project back in the Fall, I did research on which caves I would be writing about. There is a cave in Covington I pass by every time I drive down Valley Ridge Road that, when I saw it one day and remembered the two hikers who got lost in a cave near here, ultimately inspired the book. Instantly, it seemed perfect for the cave these four teenagers would be driving to. I’ve driven back and forth to Beckley, West Virginia, for years and I know it’s not too long of a trip. It’s believable four teenagers would be willing to drive that far to a cave and even further out to Natural Bridge if they could explore a cave that was tainted by folklore and legends.

This is where my research comes in. About a month ago, my husband and I visited Natural Bridge and experienced a guided tour inside a cave there. The experience was exquisite! We were able to take lots of pictures, learn about stalagmites and stalactites, and —at one point

during the tour— experience total cave darkness when the tour guide shut the lights off for a few minutes.

I went on the website to read about that cave and how it was formed, but the experience of it far outweighed the information I was only able to read about. The website boasted, “While underground, visitors can explore the caverns and view their many special features, including cavern structures such as the Colossal Dome room. This room is an enormous dome-shaped natural feature that was created over thousands of years” (naturalbridgeva.com). This room I was particularly interested in because it is akin to how I describe the first room in the cave of my thesis project. It’s the biggest “room” in my cave and breaks off into other paths. Seeing the cave in Natural Bridge and how it broke off into other paths was amazing and beautiful. At the same time, there were some paths which were blocked off and you could see where someone exploring the cave might get a sense of isolation, confinement, and fear while navigating through it. It gave me a great sense of how my characters might feel when exploring a similar cave.

This cave was the research I was most looking forward to exploring because it is the setting of my thesis project. I could not think of a better way to write about a cave in Natural Bridge than going there myself and experiencing an educational, guided tour inside their most popular cave. I wanted to learn more about how the cavern formed, which, according to their website, was “... formed by an underground "river" moving slowly through cracks and pores within the limestone” (naturalbridgecaverns.com). Being there in person, I also learned how men went in there by hand to create a path for explorers by digging into the cave, inch by inch to widen it. When they died, the project was abandoned, and the cave was left unfinished. We even saw a ladder inside that was left behind.

Having the opportunity to explore this cave at Natural Bridge, go hiking there, see the sights, and even eat inside an old restaurant, gave me a feel for the surroundings. I learned so much about Natural Bridge and its historicity that I look forward to seeing how I can perhaps incorporate it into this project.

Conclusion

When I began looking for resources on this project, I entered with an open mind. I never wanted to limit myself to one type of resource but have a well-rounded system in place where I could explore various sources. Each one will aid me in writing a better novel for my thesis project.

I have already visited one cave in Lewisburg, Virginia, and plan to visit another in Natural Bridge, Virginia, where my story takes place. It is not enough for me to visit one cave. I wanted to visit two. The best part about these choices is that I was able to do a self-guided tour in Lewisburg, take my time, read everything, and take plenty of pictures. In Natural Bridge, it will be a guided tour where I will get to learn more about that cave's history and can ask questions about it. For me, these two cave choices are the best of both worlds.

I am exploring both fiction and nonfiction books in preparation for the thesis project to gain realistic knowledge about caves. The science fiction book, *An Un-Conventional Murder*, is essentially killing three birds with one stone because it takes place in a cave, is science fiction, and is written by a caver, so she knows what she's talking about. The nonfiction book, *The Cave Book (Wonders of Creation)* will help me learn more about caves, their history, paintings, etc. and I can use it during my writing to make sure everything sounds believable.

Visiting the History Museum of Western Virginia and catching up with the website, *Legends of America*, I will have the opportunity to learn more about Native American history

and hopefully, that will include their history in caves and paintings. Having an entire chapter dedicated to Native American folklore, I will need this information to make it as realistic as possible.

Finally, seeing a movie that shares its name with my book, *The Cave*, that is also a science fiction story, I can see more about how this creative work shows the audience the interior of the cave. This is something I am particularly interested in because I want to know how they were able to create light to help their audience see inside the dark cave.

From the start, I have sought to explore different types of resources for a more well-rounded project. I believe I have done that successfully and can't wait to move on to the next portion of my project and write more in my novel. I am excited to get started and see where this amazing journey is going to take me.

A photograph of a cave interior. The walls and ceiling are covered in various rock formations, including stalactites and stalagmites. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue glow illuminating most of the scene, and a bright yellow light source visible in the distance, creating a warm contrast. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ancient.

The Cave

Jennifer Bailey

The Cave

Jennifer Bailey

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For Joe, Selena, Corey, & Jordan

Thank you for your love, support,
and encouragement.

Without it, this book would not have been possible.

All My Love,

Jennifer

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These men lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush only themselves!

Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain;

it takes away the life of those who get it.

Proverbs 1:18-19 (New International Version)

Prologue

The legend of the Magic Cave goes back hundreds of years ago when the white man came to our land. Believing they wanted no more than shelter from the cold, my great-great-grandfather of the Tahoma tribe gave them a warm place to sleep. Soon, the white man wanted more. They saw our food was plenty and our land was strong. A great war broke out, but my people fought back. We lost many men in battle until finally, a treaty of peace was declared, and the white man agreed to stay off our lands.

Mother Nature, kind and gracious, gave us a way to protect our people. She carved out a cave from rock at the foot of our shortest mountain, seeking to disguise the enormous cave which lied beneath. Not only did the cave provide shelter, but two very different paths for two very different purposes. Down one, marked by the rays of the sun, our people could store resources to see us through in times of famine. Down the other, marked by a mysterious blue glow, lay a pond of crystal waters.

These waters, blessed by the gods, were self-restoring and held magic healing properties which must only be used under the direst of circumstances, for in abusing its power, the waters would run dry.

For many years, the Tahoma tribe abided by Mother Nature's instructions, using the magic of the water when it was most needed to heal our children or spare the lives of the young and wounded.

Soon, the tribe grew strong, as we were for many years when my father, Chief Tyee, became leader. But a new enemy was lurking. The Inadu tribe, greedy and envious of the magic cave, conspired to overtake our people. One night, as our tribe lay sleeping, the Inadus snuck into the magic cave with many baskets, filling them and taking them back to their land.

As the sun rose, the Inadus sent men to block the entrance of the cave. The rest attacked the tribe. My people fought back once more, but we were met with an impossible task, for the Inadus carried with them sacks of the magic water. Each time our people drew their blood, they poured the magic water on their bodies, healing themselves instantly. The tribe was powerless against them.

My father heard the cries of war and rose up from his slumber, but he was too late, for many of our tribe had fallen. Seeing their bodies on the ground, he flew into a rage and blindly charged at the Inadus.

Then I, Orenda, his only daughter, looked on as my father was slain before my eyes. My heart was immediately broken. I rushed to his side and wept openly as I held his lifeless body in my arms. As my tears fell, I whispered in his ear, "Do not worry, Father, for I will find a way to protect our people."

I reached for his deerskin sack and captured his oozing blood inside it. Then I ran to the cave where the Inadu tribe was already fighting against our people. As the battle went on, I crept silently past them and to the magic lake.

As I sat on my knees in front of the cold water, I could not stop the tears from falling down or the anger growing inside my heart. I poured my father's blood into the water and begged the gods to curse it so I could avenge my father's death. For the sake of my father and our people, I begged Mother Nature not to dry up the lake, rather allow our tribe the chance to restore ourselves once more. I tried to ignore the rage that burned inside, but the greed of the Inadus had led to the spilling of innocent blood, and I could not contain it. I demanded the gods punish all those with greed in their hearts, for I had seen the evil and destruction that came from it.

Suddenly, I felt a great earthquake as Mother Nature carved out a third path inside the cave. The new path was dark and sinister and, at the end, held a bottomless pit that was chiseled out in a matter of seconds as a great thunder rang out. Then each member of the Inadu tribe who abused the water's power fell to their deaths. Their bodies were instantly separated from their souls, and they were forced to watch their own lifeless corpses being fed to the ground. Their souls were dragged into the bottomless pit. After Mother Nature captured them all, she closed the pit and held them there, where they would be forced to remain for all eternity.

Chapter 1: Spring Break

“I still don’t see why it can’t be just the two of us,” Emily said, crossing her arms firmly against her chest.

“Sorry, Em. Nolan grabbed my phone in the locker room and saw your text about the cave.”

“So, what! You just let him invite himself and Kaylee to tag along?” She gritted her teeth as she spoke, knowing her relaxing week was slipping through her fingers.

She turned to look out the passenger side window as Hunter drove them toward Nolan’s house. Since her dad passed away two years ago, prompting her and her mom’s move to West Virginia, Hunter became the first person Emily could relate to. That fact seemed to twist like a knife in her stomach now that they were arguing.

Her mind began to wander as she thought back to how they met in history class. It was her first day of school at Woodrow Wilson High and he’d taken her breath away with his powder blue eyes and boyish grin. Their history professor, Mr. Hodges, paired them up to write a paper on World War II. Once Hunter looked up at her, that was it! Emily was hooked. She stared at the trees blurring past the window and inhaled deeply as the memory pulled her under.

She couldn’t take her eyes off him that day, except for the few times he caught her looking at him. Each time, she’d turned away quickly and pretended to draw inside her notebook. It hadn’t completely kept her from embarrassment, but it did help. She’d stared intently at his sun-kissed hair and bronze-colored skin, thinking he looked more suited as a surfer in California than a deer-trailing, Keith-Urban-loving country boy in camo. At the same time, it suited him. She remembered thinking there was no way he could be interested in someone like her.

Emily saw herself as plain at best. She had deep brown eyes that matched well with her raven-colored hair, running only to the top of her shoulder blades. Her mom, Victoria, constantly begged her to grow it longer as she had when she was little, but Emily was an outdoorsy kind of girl who didn't mind the random game of two-hand-touch. Long hair would be both a distraction and a nuisance.

As she thought more about Hunter and how they researched German Nazis and Pearl Harbor, she couldn't help but feel a deep sense of sympathy for him all over again when he opened up about losing his sister to a single car accident years ago. As much as Emily hated his pain, it was nice having someone who could understand how she felt.

Now, as they were on their way to pick up Nolan and Kaylee, Emily's thoughts shifted again and she realized how disappointed she was to have to share him. She wanted to use their Spring Break to get closer to him and forget the anniversary of her dad's passing coming up. What she didn't want was to hand over her intimate week to uninvited guests.

"What is it you don't like about her?" Hunter asked, filling the silence.

Emily turned back to face him. "Besides the fact that she flirts with every guy she comes across, including you?"

"She's just a friendly girl is all."

"Sure, she is." Emily bit her lip and turned her attention back out the window, her eyes fixated on the West Virginian Aspens that blurred past them in the afternoon sun.

"Will you try? For me? I mean, Nolan's been my best friend since about the third grade. You know that."

Emily whipped her head around, her mouth hanging open. "In other words, tolerate Miss Flirts-a-lot for the sake of your best friend?"

“Can you please try to make the best of it? It’s just one week.”

Emily took a deep breath and focused on the emeralds, yellows, and sea greens swirling and dancing playfully in the breeze as the Jeep continued on to their destination. Hunter sounded sincere, but Emily wasn’t convinced she could stomach a full week of Kaylee. Still, what could she do about it? It was happening. “Fine. But don’t expect us to become BFFs.”

“Ok,” he agreed, then rode his brakes to the stop sign. Once the Jeep was fully stopped, Emily noticed Hunter didn’t pull out right away, so she turned back to face him again. His eyes moved back and forth; his expression puzzled as he opened his mouth to speak. Whatever he was going to say, he apparently changed his mind as he put his hands back on the wheel and tightened his lips together. Immediately, Emily was suspicious.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Could you do something else for me?” He bit his bottom lip as he spoke.

“Really, Hunter?” she fumed.

“Look, it’s just that Kaylee’s folks don’t know she’s coming with us. She kinda told them she was staying at your place.”

“What?” Emily could have strangled him.

“Nolan didn’t tell his folks she was coming either. Her dad would go nuts if he knew she was spending the week with a guy.” Hunter focused his attention back to the road and slowly pulled away from the stop sign.

“So, they’re worried about what a boy might coerce *her* into? Don’t they see what a flirt she is? The kind of stuff she wears out of the house?” Emily felt sick to her stomach. She’d always been clear she was close with her mom and now Hunter was asking her to lie for the sake of Miss Flirts-a-lot.

“I’m sorry, Em. Really. It’s just that me and Nolan have always looked out for each other, ya know?”

“And now you want me to do the same.” It wasn’t a question. More like an accusation.

“Well, yeah, I mean. That’s what friends do. They take care of each other.”

“You and I have different ideas on what it means to take care of each other. Me and my mom take care of each other, too, but that doesn’t include lying,” Emily huffed. “Who even thought this up anyway? I’ve only met her parents one time, Hunter. One. Time. What makes you think they’d buy it?”

“Truth?”

“If only,” Emily said, rolling her eyes.

“You ever notice how they treat her? It’s like the girl does no wrong. I mean, you and I both know nobody’s perfect, but you can’t tell ‘em that. You ever heard the expression, ‘they think she hung the moon?’” Hunter asked, his country accent rich as he spoke. He pulled up to another stop sign next to an open corn field and flicked up his right turn signal.

“Yeah,” Emily prompted.

“Well, if ya ask them, she not only hung the moon, but the stars, the sun, and the clouds to go along with it. Shoot, Kay probably made ‘em, too.” Hunter laughed at his own joke.

“Ok, ok. I get it. But that still doesn’t explain why they’d buy her story about staying at my house for a week. They don’t even know me.”

“Perfect people don’t make mistakes,” Hunter said.

“And therefore, they don’t lie,” Emily asserted, shaking her head at the irony.

“You got it.”

“What about when they try to call her?”

“Then she’ll answer. They don’t track her cell phone or nothing,” Hunter said, laughing. “She can tell ‘em whatever she wants. Me and Nolan will keep our mouths shut and if they need to ask what ya’ll are doing, you can just make something up. Shopping, hair, pillow fights, whatever girls do.”

“Right because that’s what we do,” Emily said, her voice laced in sarcasm. They’d only been dating a few months, but Emily thought it was plenty of time for him to notice the tomboy in her. She inhaled deeply, counted to five, then exhaled. It was a trick her dad taught her years ago to help relieve the stress and it was something she clung to whenever things were going awry. She wanted so much to not be arguing with Hunter right now, but she hated what he was asking her to do. It was bad enough that Hunter was allowing their week to be invaded by self-invited guests –if he was telling the truth about that– but now he was asking her to lie to her mom, too? It wasn’t fair.

“So? Would you cover for her?”

“No,” Emily said, raising her voice. “Look, if you guys wanna lie to your parents, then fine, but leave me out of it. Besides, it doesn’t sound like you need me anyway. Kaylee can deal with them all by herself.” Her tone left no room for compromise, and she was sure Hunter knew it. Much as she wanted a peaceful, relaxing week, it wasn’t happening anyway.

“You’re my girlfriend though, Em. Aren’t you supposed to have my back?”

“Yours? Yes. Kaylee’s? No.” She picked up her cell phone to play Candy Crush, abruptly ending the conversation.

As soon as Hunter’s Jeep reached the mouth of Nolan’s driveway, which was nothing more than an old, dirt road smack dab in the middle of the sticks, the uneven terrain caught

Emily's attention and she knew they weren't far from the house. She looked down at her cell phone, the screen almost too dark to see from the glaring sunlight and dying battery.

"Hey, did I leave my charger in here last night? I'm at 2%."

"Glovebox," Hunter assured, cocking his head to the right.

Emily quickly found the charger and attempted to plug in her phone just as Hunter drove his jeep through Nolan's massive front yard. He steered to the right, circling the yard before backing it in, making it all the more difficult for Emily to plug her phone into the charger.

"Making donuts again, Hunter? You know, I think you ran over his mom's petunias," Emily giggled. Being rocked back and forth in Hunter's Jeep made her feel more at ease somehow, even if dead petunias were involved.

"Nah, I didn't get near his momma's flowers. She wouldn't let me leave here breathing if I did," Hunter laughed. Somehow, when he said flowers, it sounded like one syllable instead of two.

"You know, I'm really starting to like his mom."

"Well, ha ha," Hunter exaggerated, "aren't you just the funniest thing?" The sound of the screen door opening caught his attention, and he jerked his head toward the noise. "Look, there they are," Hunter said, pointing.

"Wait. Why's Kaylee with him if she's supposed to be at my house?"

"Nolan picked her up this morning and told her folks he was dropping her off," Hunter responded, turning off the ignition before he climbed out of the Jeep to greet his friends. Emily followed suit, painting on a fake smile in the process. She assessed Kaylee's miniskirt and camisole. *Doesn't seem reasonable for hiking or a cave expedition, but whatever.*

Emily watched as Kaylee slinked past her, ignoring her presence entirely, to stand next to Hunter. “Hi, Hunter.” Emily couldn’t help but notice the way Kaylee dragged out the word “hi” as she flashed a seductive grin Hunter’s way. “What took ya’ll so long?” Then she climbed into the back of Hunter’s Jeep.

“Sup, buddy! How’s it going?” Emily watched as Nolan walked over to Hunter and raised his right hand over his head, forming it into a “C.” He waited until Hunter did the same and then the pair clapped their hands together before pulling each other into a hug with their free hands.

Emily couldn’t believe Nolan’s nonchalance over Kaylee’s flirting. *Does he not care, does he not see it, or is he just ok with it so long as he gets what he wants?*

She watched as Nolan took two overstuffed hiking backpacks and tossed them in the back of the Jeep alongside hers and Hunter’s. *Typical*, she thought, as she took in Kaylee’s cotton candy pink bag. She squinted, taking note of the lip shaped patch on the front and rolled her eyes when she read, *I can’t taste my lips. Can you do it for me?*

“What’s with you?” Nolan said, his attention turning to Emily as he pushed past Hunter to get in the back seat.

“Oh uh,” Hunter began, climbing in the driver’s side and adjusting his seat. “She wasn’t really wanting to hit up that cave at Natural Bridge, so we was talking ‘bout sticking to the one in Covington.”

She gasped as she turned to face Hunter, her teeth gritting together. “Natural Bridge?” He was full of surprises today, but none of them were good.

“Yeah, but we’re just gonna stick to Covington, so it don’t matter.” Hunter bit his lip again as he spoke.

“Aw, come on, dude! How many times have we seen that cave?” Nolan said, his hands on the side of Hunter’s arms. “Hey, Trevor told me the one at Natural Bridge is practically isolated. There’s always folks over there in Covington.”

“I wouldn’t mind getting you isolated, baby,” Kaylee said to Nolan, pulling him towards her in the backseat. She tried to concentrate on the Jason Aldean song playing on the radio to tune out the slopping sounds occurring just inches behind her head.

“I told my mom we were going to Covington,” she said, her voice firm and her eyebrows creasing together.

“Oh, come on, girl, live a little!” laughed Miss Flirts-a-lot. Her eyes managed to find Kaylee’s in the side mirror.

“What do you say, Em?” Hunter said, his eyes pleading. *Great. Outnumbered.*

“I don’t know. I don’t like changing plans up on my mom without saying something first and I just plugged my phone in.”

“So, call her when you get there,” he said, placing a sympathetic hand on Emily’s left knee, “and let’s all just enjoy the ride.”

Emily twisted around in her seat and scanned the anticipating eyes around her. They weren’t giving up until she gave in, and she didn’t want to spend the whole ride avoiding the inevitable outcome. “Fine,” she said at last. “Let’s go to Natural Bridge.” The old friends cheered in delight as Nolan grabbed Emily’s shoulders and squeezed a bit too hard.

“That’s what I’m talking. Yes! This is gonna be the best Spring Break ever! Just think... the four of us hanging out in a cave for a whole week with zero, yes, I did say zero, parents! Gonna be epic!”

Emily chewed on Nolan's words as she inhaled deeply, taking in the country air and watching a herd of cows bask in the warm afternoon sun. The week didn't have to be awful, did it? She could put up with Kaylee for that long. Maybe she didn't even have to see her much. Through the rearview, she seemed far more preoccupied with planting kisses on Nolan's neck than she was on Hunter.

"Maybe you're right," Emily allowed.

"Of course I am," Nolan laughed. "Our last Spring Break should be dope, and it will be. Seriously, who knows where we're all gonna be next year. We're seniors!"

"Cept me," Kaylee giggled.

"You'll probably be off at Harvard," Nolan said to Emily, ignoring Kaylee's comment. The way he said Harvard made her think he must have been rolling his eyes when he said it, as if being intelligent was a bad thing. "I'll probably still be working at Autozone."

"And I'll be off at Valley College," Hunter chimed in.

"Yeah, I mean come on. We're 18 now. Or most of us anyway," Nolan said, gesturing to Kaylee.

For the first time since she got in the car, Emily started to feel like she could enjoy their trip; Kaylee or no Kaylee. Still, as Nolan talked animatedly about their trip and the cave, something buried inside her didn't feel right. She choked down a huge wedge that formed in her throat, unsure of where it'd even come from. More than anything, she wanted to have a great time with Hunter, but for some reason, she couldn't shake the feeling that the universe was completely against it.

Chapter 2: We have arrived!

“Did Trevor happen to mention what was so great about this cave?” Hunter asked as he and Nolan retrieved the backpacks from the Jeep. Emily watched from the rearview mirror, hesitating to get out.

“Come on, girl,” Kaylee said, her blonde ponytail bouncing as she spoke. “We’ve got a whole week with those yummy treats back there.” She threw her thumb up, gesturing to the guys as she winked suggestively. “Let’s enjoy it!” With a little too much care, Emily opened the door and slowly made her way to the front of the Jeep.

“Got your backpack!” Hunter announced as he approached Emily, then lifted the hefty bag onto his girlfriend’s shoulders. Kaylee was right about one thing. Hunter was easy on the eyes. It was almost impossible for her to be upset with him when he flashed his boyish grin at her. *He never plays fair.* “That’s my girl,” Hunter said, lifting his right hand to cup her chin. He planted a soft kiss on her eager lips before adding more smooches to her cheeks and forehead.

“So where is this amazing cave?” she asked, smiling, as Nolan as Kaylee joined them in front of the Jeep.

“Right this way,” Nolan bowed, tossing both arms up to the side of his body in a way that reminded her of a fancy butler.

He led them to a big, wooden sign on the edge of the parking lot. On the front of the sign was a map designed specifically for hikers; the kind that showed every trail in the area and had cartoon-like markings for mountains, creeks, bridges, and the like. Immediately, and perhaps foolishly, her eyes searched for the mysterious cave.

“Not gonna find it on there,” Nolan said, guessing what she was searching for. “Wouldn’t be much of a secret if they shared it with everybody now, would it?”

“So which way is it?” she asked, ignoring the insult.

“Right...,” Nolan said, scanning the map with his right pointer, “there.” His finger landed on a path that curved up towards the middle of the map. “The Nahimana Trail.”

“How’d you manage to remember that?” Hunter chuckled as he playfully punched his friend’s upper arm.

“That all you got, man? My baby cousin can hit harder’n ‘at.”

“I jus’ didn’t wanna embarrass you in front of ya girl,” Hunter said. Emily looked on as the guys traded punches and laughed.

“It’s gonna be dark before we get up there and this backpack isn’t light,” she said.

As if on cue, Hunter lost his balance; the weight of Nolan’s punch combined with the weight of Hunter’s backpack wasn’t a good mixture as he started to wobble backwards. Nolan reached out and grabbed Hunter’s right hand, still mid guffaw, and worked to steady him until he regained his balance.

“I reckon she’s right,” he said as he worked to regain his composure. “Let’s get moving.”

Then the foursome headed out on the path, with Nolan stepping out in front of the group, acting as their guide. Emily adjusted her backpack as she took in the beautiful scenery around her. The trees towered over them in such a way that made her feel like a tiny ant in comparison. The leaves in their springtime transformation were only about halfway through the process. She couldn’t get over the brilliant shades of basil, chartreuse, and juniper, with little bursts of white flowers sprinkled in, showcasing spring. The mountains in the distance were magnificent! Living in Roanoke, even surrounded by them there, she never really stopped to appreciate them. Not like this. They’d seemed tainted by the city somehow, shadowed under a mask of smog and

lights. They surely weren't this spectacular and majestic. She was sure she would have noticed that.

The four high schoolers continued to navigate through the worn path until Nolan stopped suddenly in front of a large stone just off to the side. "That's the one!" he announced. "That's the rock. Trevor said to veer left once we found it. Then we follow the trail of stones at the bottom of the trees." Sure enough, as the group went left, the stones at the bottom of the trees were there to mark the way to the cave.

"Isn't it kinda dangerous to walk away from the path if you're in the middle of the woods?" Emily interjected.

"Nah, it's liberating!" Nolan's laughter was loud and obnoxious, bouncing mercilessly off the surrounding mountains.

"Don't you think this is a bad idea?" she said to Kaylee, desperately searching for an ally.

However, Kaylee was grinning ear to ear, and she knew it didn't matter which argument she used. The guys had already won over Miss Flirts-a-Lot.

About an hour into their hike, the group found the cave they'd been trekking for. It jutted out from the bottom of a mountain; it's opening so tiny you almost wouldn't know it was there unless you were looking for it. The woods around it were covered by moss-laden trees that aided in disguising the cave's narrow opening.

"That's it?" Hunter asked, his voice skeptical. "This is the huge cave you've been raving about?"

"The same one you said was home of the super scary urban legend?" Emily chimed in, lifting her hands to put air quotes around "super scary." To her, the cave looked like a small playhouse for a family of rabbits or baby squirrels. It was laughable at best.

“Yeah, man!” Nolan said, focusing his attention on Hunter. The high shrill in his voice made it clear the exterior of the cave hadn’t thwarted his excitement over exploring it. “Trevor said if you go back far enough, there’s a bottomless pit inside that thing.”

“Come on, Nolan. Seriously?” Emily rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, seriously.” He exaggerated the latter word a little too much for her liking. “Listen, 20 years ago, these two hikers got lost in there and one of ‘em fell in that pit. The other guy said he never heard him hit the bottom!” Nolan raised his hands by his face and fluttered his fingers in a way that reminded her of the guys in scary movies when they’re trying to freak out the female characters. “Oooooooh, spooky!” he said as he playfully tickled Kaylee’s chin.

“Babe, knock it off!” she said, smacking his arm. “You’re freaking me out!”

“Swear to God, dude!” Nolan turned his attention back to Hunter. “There were articles in the paper and everything. The dude that didn’t fall in told police about it, ‘cept they didn’t believe him. His buddy never came back, and everybody said he killed him over some chick. Couldn’t prove it though. No body, circumstantial evidence.”

“Did they ever find it?” he said, his eyes lighting up.

“Come on, Hunter, you’re not really buying this, are you?” Emily said, turning to face him. “It’s just some old, scary story to keep kids out of the cave.” She nodded her head to the side, using it to point at the cave. “And probably for good reason!”

“Nah, it’s true! Look it up, Em,” Nolan protested. “Dude’s name was Benjamin Schuester and the guy he supposedly killed was Jeff something, but no, they never found his body. If you wanna know my opinion, I think it’s still in there.”

“Ew! So, you brought us up here to try and find some dead guy’s body?” Kaylee screeched. She shook her arms and legs as if an army of ants was crawling all over her and she needed to get them off.

“There is no body, Kay,” Emily said. “He’s just trying to scare you.”

“Well, it’s working.”

As the group stood by, gawking at the entrance of the cave, she realized she couldn’t have been happier. The way Nolan went on and on the whole drive there had legitimately frightened her. But now, listening to the ridiculous “urban legend” barely two decades old and seeing the size of the cave, she couldn’t believe she’d let him scare her at all. It was stupid. The poor cave looked like it was barely big enough for one person to squeeze into, let alone four. Maybe that’d be enough for Nolan and Hunter to call off the trip and head to Covington.

Covington! Crap! I forgot to text Mom. Emily reached into her jean shorts, retrieving nothing. *Did I leave my phone in the Jeep?* She remembered nearly dropping her phone on the way to plug it in when Hunter was practically spinning around in Nolan’s driveway.

“Hunter, can I use your phone? I forgot to text my mom.”

“I didn’t bring mine. Last time I brought a cell phone on a hike, it ended up in the bottom of the river,” he chuckled at the memory.

“Dude, I remember that!” Nolan laughed, high-fiving his friend over the inside joke.

“Here. Use mine,” Kaylee said as she punched in, what Emily assumed, was the code to unlock it. Then she held the phone out in front of her.

“Um, thanks,” Emily said, taking it. She dialed her mom’s number, but nothing happened. “No service?” Her eyes darted to Hunter’s as perspiration began to build on her forehead. “Are we that far out?”

“Guess so,” he shrugged.

“Can I try yours?” she asked Nolan.

“If hers doesn’t have service, mine won’t either.”

“I can’t believe this. I need to go back to the Jeep and call my mom,” Emily said, returning the borrowed phone to Kaylee’s freshly manicured and outstretched hand. “I can’t go all week not telling my mom where I am.”

She turned on her heels, fully committed to walking back to the Jeep, even if she was walking alone.

“Em, come on,” Hunter said, grabbing her shoulders. “It took us over an hour to hike up this trail. You really wanna spend the next two hours going down and back again when we could be exploring whatever’s in there? ‘Sides, it might be dark by the time ya get back.” His blue eyes were unconvincing.

“Yeah, Em. And you’re what? Eighteen now, right? Legally, you ain’t gotta tell her nothing,” Nolan chimed in. “Shoot, I hardly tell my momma anything anymore.”

“I know, right,” Kaylee agreed, grabbing for his hand. She deliberately placed it on her bottom and rose on her tiptoes to kiss him. Watching them made Emily uneasy and she turned to face Hunter.

“You know me and my mom aren’t like that,” she whispered softly where only Hunter could hear. “And what if she tries to call me and it goes straight to voicemail? She’ll be worried. It’s only been two years since we lost my dad. I can’t do that to her.” She watched his eyebrows lower as his lips pursed together. He nodded and released her. Without his interference, she started down the path that led back to the Jeep.

“Aw, come on, Em,” she heard Nolan call out from behind her. She continued down the path, ignoring the sound of his footsteps closing the gap between them. It didn’t take much time until he was standing in front of her, his upper lip a mess of Kaylee’s pink, glitter lip gloss.

“Sides it being a long hike down and back,” he said, catching his breath, “we can’t go in there without you. Hunter will wind up waiting for you to get back and I can’t leave my boy behind. You not gonna make us sit out here for two hours or more waiting ‘til you get back, are ya?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Life never is, darlin, but come on. I’m not gonna let nothing happen to you and neither is Hunter. Your mom ain’t got nothing to worry about.”

“But she will!” Emily argued, her voice climbing an octave. “You don’t know her. We only have each other.” She bit her lip immediately.

“Tell ya what. Give it a day and I’ll hike down there with you in the morning. I bet she ain’t even ‘specting to hear from ya today anyway, is she?”

She stopped to consider his point of view. “Technically, no,” she allowed.

“Technically? Em, did you even tell her you’d call today?” Nolan crossed his arms as he spoke.

Something buried deep inside told her he already knew the answer to the question. Even still, he waited for an answer. Suddenly, Kaylee’s blonde hair flashed behind his chestnut-colored eyes, grabbing Emily’s attention. She watched, wide-eyed, as Miss Flirts-a-Lot inched closer and closer to Hunter. Somehow, Kay’s already broad smile grew wider when Hunter turned in response to whatever she’d said. The idea of leaving her alone with Hunter, even if Nolan was with them, made Emily’s stomach turn.

“Ok, I didn’t tell her I’d call today,” she allowed, her eyes meeting his. She tried to focus on the conversation as opposed to whatever was going on behind his head.

“When you supposed to call her again?”

For the second time, she got the feeling he was asking a question he knew the answer to. Only this time, she noticed the way his eyes were darting to the right and how the perspiration started to build on his forehead.

“Is there some reason you don’t want me to call her?” Emily accused, not sure what she was accusing him of.

“Are you serious? What got you thinking that?” He crossed his muscular arms against his chest, his eyebrows raising almost animatedly for how much he was exaggerating his expressions. “I’m not gon’ lie, I’m not crazy bout sitting out here for two hours or hiking this trail a second time today, if that’s what it comes down to, but I ain’t got no other reason ‘sides wanting to go in that cave and see what she’s got to offer!” His voice rose in what she could only guess was excitement. She could only assume his overkill of emotions was nothing more than a childlike boy stuck inside the body of a grown man, desperate to get out. Knowing Nolan, it was more logical than him hiding something.

“Friday.”

“Friday? What’s Friday?” he asked, his eyes layered with confusion.

“That’s when I told her I’d call.”

Understanding painted his features. “Ok, so what difference does it make if you call her Friday or you call her now? You’re still gonna be here and she’s still gonna be home, right? Basically, I just need to make sure I keep you alive ‘til Friday.” His childlike grin spread across his face, pink, glitter lip gloss still untouched, and she struggled not to smile.

“I mean it’s just a cave. What could be in there?” he continued, putting his thumb up to his chin in an obvious, mocking manner. “You thinkin’ quicksand, huh?” His eyes widened in mock horror as he threw himself to the ground. With absurd animation, he flailed his arms wildly and screamed for help. Before she knew it, she was laughing hysterically and begging him to get up.

“You win, Nolan! You win!” she giggled, and he settled down almost immediately. He grinned and shot his right hand up, signaling her to grab it and help him off the ground.

“Ya’ll alright?” Hunter laughed as she pulled Nolan to his feet. Then they strolled back to where their friends stood.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” a voice called out from behind them.

Chapter 3: We're Going in...

The group turned, alarmed, to see a lone hiker, sizing them up. Emily guessed early 40's as she stared at the mysterious, thin-framed man. He gazed disapprovingly at the foursome as his wavy, dirty-blond hair that ran down to his shoulder blades, blew lightly in the breeze. His open Hawaiian shirt revealed a handful of curly chest hair as he stood almost stoic, a frown plastered across his surprisingly handsome features. He had his right thumb curled into a side belt loop of his light blue jeans which were covered in holes and loose, white strands. On his feet, he wore old, brown sandals that seemed unfitting for hiking.

"And you are?" Nolan asked.

"Doing you a favor, kid."

Emily watched as Nolan's eyebrows moved from raised to almost a scowl. Despite his clownlike behavior, there was a side of him that, she believed, wanted to be taken seriously.

"Do I look like a kid to you?" He had a way of making the word *kid* sound like the absolute worst of profanities.

"Yup." The stranger popped the "p" and his initially serious face was plastered in a comical smile. He knew he was infuriating the teenager. And he liked it.

"You got somethin' against this cave?" Hunter interjected, placing a hand on his friend's chest.

The stranger turned his attention from Nolan to Hunter, his smile morphing into a thin line. "No, but I got something against you going in it. It's not safe." He zeroed in on Emily's face and for a moment, she believed he was only talking to her.

"Why is 'at?" Nolan asked.

“For starters, not everybody that goes in there comes back out. There was two guys that went in there maybe 20 years ago, but only one came out.”

“That story’s true?” Nolan said, his lips spreading into a smile.

“Nobody knows what happened to his buddy,” the hiker continued, ignoring the question, “but they never found him. And his friend, last I heard, ain’t been the same since.”

“How do you know all this?” Emily asked, swallowing a huge lump that had formed in her throat.

“One of my neighbors is Jeffrey Mack’s aunt.”

“The guy Ben killed?” Leave it to Nolan to get excited by the new information.

“Ben didn’t kill anyone,” the stranger hissed, his eyes wild with a peculiar intensity. His expression, as he gazed at the group of teenagers, morphed as his expression softened. It reminded Emily of all those cop shows she watched with her mom when the bad guy gives away too much information in the interrogation room, then tries to change his story. “Listen, Jeff’s own momma defended Ben, so something else happened in there.” The hiker paused, bringing his thumb and pointer finger to his chin. It looked like he was deciding whether or not to tell them something.

“What is it?” she prompted. “What do you think happened?”

The hiker raised his brown eyes to meet Emily’s and his expression behind them left goosebumps on her arms. It was a weird mixture of deadly fear and desperation. “I don’t know what happened. All I know is Ben swore Jeff ended up in a pit the police never found.” The hiker turned his head and stared at the cave the same way Emily stared at her father’s face just before he died. It brought a tear to her eye as she recalled the memory. “Worse part is their story isn’t

the only one trapped inside the walls of that cave. Over the years, there's been plenty of rumors going around about people going in, but not coming out."

"So why are you here?" Nolan asked. To Emily, it sounded like an accusation.

The stranger turned to face him. "I tell you one thing. It's got nothing to do with that cave. I'm on my way up that side of the mountain." He pointed to a barely visible worn path on their left. It ran alongside the cave for a few feet before jutting up another mountain. For the most part, the path looked clean with only a few trees to navigate through until it curled up behind the mountain, obscuring the view. "Then I noticed you heading in there and figured I'd do my good deed for the day."

"Consider it done, fella. Thanks." Nolan said, waving.

"Hunter, maybe we should listen to him," Emily urged, grabbing his hand and squeezing. "Suppose it is dangerous."

"So how do you know about this stuff, Mister? You been in there?" He turned his blue eyes to the hiker.

"Don't live far, small town, grew up here. Not much to tell. You hear enough stories; you see enough tears... Not everyone has to *do* to learn."

"So, you don't know what's in there," Nolan declared.

"Babe," Kaylee whispered as she grabbed his arm, "Come on, it's totally not worth it."

"Is there something you're not understanding, boy? You don't have to know why the anvil keeps falling to avoid standing underneath it." the stranger said, his eyebrows pulling together in a near scowl. "Just do yourselves a favor and don't go in there."

"Come on, Hunter. We don't even know this guy and he just happens to show up as we're about to go in?" Nolan said, before turning to the stranger. "What are you, a park ranger?"

“No, I’m the one trying to keep you kids off the 7 o’clock news.” His voice climbed an octave as he spoke, and his face reddened in what Emily could only assume was fury.

She turned to Hunter, fearing his resolve was wavering. “Hey!” she nearly pleaded.

“Come on, man,” Nolan laughed, “What could be in ‘ere that you or I couldn’t handle?” Normally, she would have agreed with him. Both boys were tall and muscular, and Nolan could easily pass for a bodybuilder. Still, there was something in the stranger’s voice that made her uneasy.

“Well, is there something we oughta be lookin’ out for?” Hunter asked, turning to face the hiker. Her stomach dropped.

“If you were smart, you’d look out for yourselves and just leave.” The hiker let out a deep sigh as his eyes zeroed in on Hunter’s. “Just do yourselves a favor and don’t take anything out of that cave that’s already in there. Nothing. Don’t matter if it’s an old book, a stack of bones, or a rock. Don’t take it. Don’t even refill your water bottles in there.”

“There’s a freshwater source?” Hunter interrupted.

“You got wax buildup in your ears or something?” The stranger said, a renewed anger covering his face. “I said, ‘don’t take anything!’”

“Ok, ok. Sorry,” Hunter said, raising his palms up in surrender. “Don’t take anything. Got it.”

The stranger stared at him, his mouth puckering and his eyebrows coming together. “Don’t. Take. Anything,” he snarled.

“What is it, like a cave of wonders or something?” Nolan laughed. “Ok, Jafar! Thanks for the warning!” He doubled over, amused by his own joke as Kaylee joined in.

“You’re making a mistake,” the stranger said to Emily and Hunter. “I wouldn’t go in there at all, but you’re taking a guy with you whose either gonna get himself killed or one of you.” He shook his head again and it seemed as though he was agonizing over something.

“Should I call somebody for you?”

“Maybe he’s right,” Emily said. “I mean, we can at least give him my mom’s number and he can call her. Tell her where we are, and she can tell everyone else’s parents.”

“Have you forgot how much trouble Kaylee’s gonna get into?”

“You should worry about the trouble you’re gonna get into,” the stranger said. Something told her that he wasn’t talking about their parents.

“Yeah, like, my parents would totally freak if they knew I was out here. Like, for real!” Kaylee said, her voice sounding strained for the first time.

“Come on. I really think this is a bad idea,” Emily pleaded.

“We’re gonna be fine, sugar,” he said, a huge smile painted on his cheeks. There was no winning him over. Any of them.

She suddenly thought about Christmas break when she and her mom binged their favorite tv show. In her mind, she imagined herself as her favorite cast member who was public enemy number one before he got voted off the island. She could almost see the host putting out his flame and telling him the tribe had spoken. Only now, she was the odd man out.

“Are we going in or what, Hunter?” Nolan prompted.

“Lead the way!” he said, grinning. Just like that, her voice was silenced as the other three headed into the cave without her.

She stood outside as the loud rumblings of teenage boys and Kaylee’s giggles boomed from the interior. It sounded like their voices were connected to an amplifier that echoed off the

walls as they played around with the different sounds they could make. Her eyes turned back to the stranger who gazed at her with a soft expression. Their unspoken words lifted her spirits somehow, like maybe she wasn't alone after all. Maybe this strange man knew exactly how she was feeling and wanted to help but didn't know how.

“Should I call someone?” he repeated.

Her insides were in knots. If she said ‘no’ and something happened, she'd regret it. If she said ‘yes,’ Kaylee's parents would find out and Hunter would never forgive her, and he was the first person who understood what she was going through since she lost her dad. She stared at the grass by the stranger's feet, unwilling to meet his eyes, and shook her head ‘no.’

“You coming, Em?” Hunter called out, prompting her to lift her head toward the sound of her name.

“Don't take anything,” the stranger warned again in a whisper. “Just don't take anything and you should be fine.”

“Yeah, of course,” she called out to Hunter, her eyes locking on the strange man. He nodded and she knew he understood. She was answering them both.

Chapter 4: The Cave

Emily cautiously entered the cave as Nolan, Hunter, and Kaylee continued to yell inside. It reminded her of the Grinch when he experimented with the sound of his own voice, and she could almost hear the words, “you’re an idiot!” bouncing off the cave walls. It wasn’t too far from the truth, given the potentially moronic decision she’d just made. She tried to ignore the way her stomach churned as she squinted to see her friends. She was looking straight down an almost-perfect, circular shaft that, once the threshold to the cave was crossed, jutted almost straight down about 25 feet before offering a flat surface to walk on.

“You want some help?” Hunter called out, appearing at the foot of the shaft. Without waiting for an answer, he began making his way to the mouth of the cave where Emily stood, half-crawling at times to get there.

“How big is it?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I ain’t gonna lie, it’s pretty big, but you’ll love it.” His blue eyes sparkled as he took her hand in his. Slowly, he guided her down the rocky entrance until they were at the bottom.

She inhaled deeply as she took in the cave’s unusual massiveness. Hunter wasn’t embellishing. From the outside, it looked barely large enough for one of them to squeeze into. The inside, however, was astoundingly different. The high walls didn’t seem to match the chipmunk-sized exterior. She immediately thought about her grandmother’s three-story-house in Roanoke. Easily, she could fit three or four of them inside the cave if she stood them next to each other.

“How can this be?” she said out loud. Her wide eyes continued to scan the cave. As she marveled at the beauty and potentially dangerous surroundings that encompassed them, she took

note that everyone had tossed their backpacks to the ground beside the shaft. Suddenly, she felt the weight of her own and followed suit, removing her backpack, and tossing it next to Hunter's.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She walked sluggishly toward the center of the cave where the sunlight was passing through a massive hole in the roof, highlighting the dust motes dancing in the air. The spot where she stood in the middle of the cave's foyer was almost perfectly round and reminded her of a billionaire's house whose walls seemed to reach the sky. The cave then branched off into three separate paths, all of which sprung out from the cave's front room. Each path's entrance was marked with its own half-circle doorway made of rock. Meanwhile, the ground at her feet was covered in small pebbles and broken beer bottles. She slowly navigated through them as she worked through two very different kinds of fear: the fear of falling and the fear of the unknown.

"It doesn't match the outside, does it? Come on, this is enormous!" she shrieked. The explorer in Emily was thrilled at the find, but her logical side was determined not to let her enjoy it.

"It's definitely bigger'n I thought," Nolan chimed in. "Trevor didn't say nothin' bout this." He walked alongside the walls of the cave, his left hand moving against the rocky formation.

"You gotta be kiddin' me. Shoot, it'd be the first thing I'd tell people," Hunter said, moving next to Nolan.

"You ain't lyin'," he agreed. "I betcha he never come in here."

"Maybe he did and chickened out," Hunter laughed.

"I bet so," Nolan chuckled. "You reckon he met up with ol' Jafar out there and went running back to his pickup?" The boys laughed uncontrollably.

Emily, annoyed by their nonchalance, looked over at Kaylee. Strangely for the first time today, she wasn't laughing along. Her hands were on her hips, and she shook her head from side to side. There was something about her in that moment that made her seem so real and genuine. She was... vulnerable. She raised her green eyes to meet Emily's, her sincerity almost overflowing. Her expression both confounded and frightened Emily. In that one instant, Kaylee was a completely different person. A reasonable one. A real one not masked in perfect clothes and makeup. She feared the cave as much as Emily did. There was no doubt about it. Maybe even more so. However, the reasonable girl evaporated the second Kaylee realized she'd let her guard down. Her eyes suddenly lit up in faux joy as she turned her attention to the guys and laughed along, uncrossing her arms in the process.

"I reckon the cave does look big," Hunter said once he stopped laughing, "but it's probably cuz we're walking down into it and the rest of it's somewhere back behind the mountain. We probably shoulda walked around outside first to see what we was getting ourselves into."

Fearing she'd just lost her unlikeliest of allies, Emily turned her attention back to the cave, allowing her eyes to take it all in. Its walls were a mixture of gray and charcoal, yet they seemed to sparkle like someone had used mod podge and fine glitter. Just under the hole where the sunlight burst through was an old, gray metal bucket on the ground, filled to the brim with what could have only been rainwater. Then, she focused on the paths. Beyond the hole in the ceiling lay two of them: one, almost straight ahead, was lit by the same sunlight beaming through the hole in the center, but the light, she guessed, couldn't reach too far down the trail. The other path was much further back, to the left, and it was the one path she wanted no part of. It was dark, ominous, and reminded her of old, black-and-white movies where the vampires turned into

bats at night and slept in creepy caves. She bit her lip as she stared at the frightening path, seeing almost nothing after about 5 feet in. In her mind, she could picture Nolan almost salivating over it.

To the right of where they stood was the third path that slanted off on its own. It was much better lit than the one that cut through the center beyond the hole. That path, though overrun by stalagmites, was oddly lit by an unseen blue light source. Immediately, she hoped the guys and Kaylee saw the same potential in it that she did. She looked back at the vampire path as if it had called out her name. Just looking at it gave her the creeps.

“Maybe coming here wasn’t such a good idea,” she said, giving it one last-ditch effort. “This place,” she said, looking back over her shoulder at the vampire path, “is worse than anything my nightmares could come up with.”

“Sugar, I’m not gonna let anything hurt you, okay?” Hunter said as he closed the gap between them. He reached for her hands and looked deep into her eyes, his baby blues penetrating hers.

“What about everything that hiker said?” she pleaded as she worked to look beyond his charm.

“Who? *Jafar*?” Nolan chimed in, making a mockery of the name. “I wouldn’t worry about that guy. He was nuttier than a squirrel turd.”

“I think my baby’s right,” said Kaylee. “That guy looked pretty weird to me, too. Hot, but weird.”

“Hot?” Nolan asked, turning to his blonde girlfriend. The way he pronounced it sounded more like *hawt*. He tried to make his voice ring with annoyance, but the goofy grin and suddenly crossed eyes made it clear he wasn’t angry. “I’ll show you hot.” He bolted for Kaylee as she

shrieked and ran in the opposite direction. As slow as she moved, she must have wanted him to catch her. When he did, he pulled her to the ground and tickled her ribs as she squealed in delight.

As Hunter watched and laughed along with his friends, Emily pulled her thumbnail to her mouth and started biting it. Despite the chill in the cave, she felt sweat building on her forehead as the stranger's words played on repeat in the back of her mind. *I'm the only one taking it seriously*, she thought, as Nolan and Kaylee's tickle-me game morphed into a make out session. *Or the only one willing to admit it*. In her mind, she held on to the expression on Kaylee's vulnerable face before she was caught looking.

Hunter turned back to Emily and his wide, glossy eyes shifted until his eyebrows creased together and his lips hardened. Then he grabbed both of her hands in his, closing them into a fist, and brought them up to his chest. "We're gonna be just fine, Em. You'll see." Then his mouth curled into a smile as he pulled her hands to his lips and kissed each one.

The part of her that wanted to believe him was overshadowed by the side of her still rattled by the stranger's warning. Whatever he was talking about, she would listen. What choice did she have?

"Ya'll comin or what?" Nolan said as he made his way back to his feet. He dusted off his long, multi-colored shorts before helping Kaylee off the ground.

"Whatcha say?" Hunter asked in a voice so soft it could have only been intended for her ears.

"Bring it on, I guess," she said, shrugging her shoulders. Then Hunter, eyes bright and brimming with childlike enthusiasm, snatched her off the ground and lifted her high in the air.

"That's my girl!"

As he spun her in circles, she chuckled gleefully and held tightly to his chiseled biceps. For a moment, she forgot her fear and the curious stranger. At least until Hunter put her down again and she was facing the vampire path. She gazed at the dark trail, her heart racing, as she thought about the mysterious stranger.

Don't take anything, he'd said. The words had sent chills down her spine and left her believing every word. In hindsight though, it was a simple request, wasn't it? How hard would it be to just not take anything? The more she thought about it, the more simple it sounded, so was there really a reason to worry about it? She'd never been a thief, unless you count the time she'd stolen gum from the grocery store when she was five before she knew better. The memory made her cheeks burn as she thought about her dad holding her hand and making her return it and apologize.

Suddenly, her anxiety seemed unreasonable. Whether she or anyone else believed the mysterious stranger, all they really had to do was leave the cave alone. *We can do that*, she decided. As Hunter took her hand, the rest of her anxiety melted away as visions of a fun Spring Break, or epic, as Nolan had called it, felt like more of a possibility than ever, even with uninvited guests tagging along. Watching the way Kaylee clutched to Nolan's side made Emily believe that Kay's week was already planned out and surely wouldn't require any of her or Hunter's attention.

"Let's explore!" Emily said, excited for the first time.

"That's right," Hunter said. "Where you figure we start?" He put his hands on his hips and scanned the cave.

"I don't know about ya'll," Nolan said, "but that path back 'ere has my name written all over it."

She followed the direction of his pointing finger to the one path she knew he'd be gunning for.

"No way, babe. Too creepy," Kaylee said. "It looks like bats are gonna fly outta that thing any minute. Besides, it's gettin' pretty late, isn't it?"

Nolan pulled his cell phone from his pocket and looked on the front screen. "It ain't but jus' a little after five. We got another two hours of sunlight easy."

"That doesn't really give us time to explore though, does it?" Emily chimed in, glad that Kaylee was against the expedition. "Besides, we've only got two extra packs of batteries; one for each flashlight. Don't you think we should save them?"

"I got a helmet thingy from Walmart in the bike section," Kaylee said. "It's got a light in the front, but I don't know how to use it."

"Um, yeah, I brought my caving headlamp and a few extra batteries. They're already charged, so I'm good to go." Again, Emily was biting her thumbnail. "You know, I think I'm gonna pass on that dark path, too. It looks kinda creepy."

"I think I'm gonna have to side with the ladies," Hunter said, his eyes fixed on Em.

"Smart man," she smiled.

"Ya'll bunch of scaredy cats," Nolan said, kicking the dirt at his feet.

"Why not try that one further back? That one past the sunlight? Looks pretty well-lit already. Maybe not as much as that one," Hunter said, cocking his head to the side where the path with the blue light was, "but enough to where we ought to be able to see with their helmets and our flashlights. Plus, I brought my caving headlamp, too. You bring yours?" His face was on Nolan as he spoke.

"Yeah, I got mine," he huffed, but he refused to meet Hunter's eyes.

Then the foursome, each grabbing a water bottle and helmets, left their bags behind to head down the middle trail. Hunter and Nolan led the pack, each manning one of the only two flashlights they had in tow. The best friends pulled slightly ahead of the girls, leaving Emily to walk alone with Kaylee.

“Um, so how long have you been going out with Nolan?” she asked as she chewed on her left pinky nail. She still had remnants of navy-blue polish on them from where her mom had painted them a week before and suddenly, she was spitting out the papery acetone. “Ew, sorry.”

Kaylee smiled and said, “Oh I know, right? I do that all the time. I’m such a biter!” She held her manicured nails out in front of her, showing them off. “Mainly why I go to the salon. Ever try to bite through acrylics? You’ll break a tooth.”

To her surprise, Emily laughed along with Kaylee. “I hate acrylics. I always forget to go back and end up ripping them off on my own.”

“Ouch! Do you secretly enjoy pain?” Her nose scrunched up and her eyes widened. She stopped suddenly and pulled her scrunchy out of her hair. Then she ran her fingers through the silky blonde locks, and reassembled her do, yanking it up into a messy bun. “That’s better. Don’t you hate it when your hair tickles the back of your neck?”

“I kinda do, actually,” Emily said, pointing to her shoulder-length hair. “I don’t like my hair long, so I keep it right above my shoulders or long enough to put in a ponytail.”

“I only put mine up when I have to. Scrunchies totally mess up your hair, but I seriously hate to have it itching the back of my neck all day, especially in the summer. But Nolan likes it when I put my hair up, so it’s totally worth it,” Kaylee said, her eyes boring into the back of his head.

Nolan was animatedly talking to Hunter as the two kept a fair distance from the girls. Emily guessed they were sharing some old football story or childhood memory. With Kaylee's eyes fixed on them, she suddenly felt like a fourth wheel. Of everyone in the group, she was the only one who didn't have a long history with anyone. They'd all grown up together and seen each other through everything. Kaylee and Nolan were around when Hunter's sister died, making them an infinite part of his story. As awful as that must have been for him, she still wished she could have been there when it happened to hold his hand and tell him it'd be okay the same way he did for her when she first moved to West Virginia and was still grieving the loss of her dad.

"Dude! Check this out!" Nolan suddenly said, interrupting her thoughts.

She looked up and followed the sound of his voice about twenty feet ahead. The girls rushed to his side as he held his flashlight just inches from the side of the cave wall. Between the flashlights and everyone's helmets, the gray wall was almost shining with light. Emily stood with her mouth open as she took in the find. On the wall, in beautiful Native American hieroglyphics, were drawings that had to have been done hundreds of years ago.

"It's amazing!" she said. "It looks just like the drawings in our history book."

"I bet it's older 'n that!" Nolan said as he went to wipe dust from the walls.

"Naw, don't touch it!" Hunter said. "You might rub it off or somethin'."

"Long as it's been here, I don't think so."

"No, he's right," Kaylee said. "Better leave it alone."

"Does anyone know what it means?" Emily asked. "If it means anything?"

She stared at the beautiful drawings on the wall without so much as flinching. Higher up the wall were drawings of bears, a deer, and a man that held no obvious features. It was merely a stick figure holding an arrow, but it made her heart race. Underneath the drawings were other

figures that seemed foreign, even for the Native American hieroglyphics she'd studied in school. To her, they looked like words the way the lines were drawn, some of which cut across other lines or swirled around. But if they were words, then what were they trying to say and what did it all mean?

"Could just be your run-of-the-mill, Native American art," Nolan guessed, reading her thoughts as he banged the side of his flashlight. "Think the batteries are dying."

"Did anyone think to bring any extras?" Emily's eyes went straight to Hunter. His answering gaze was a mix of guilt and apologies. "Probably should get going then."

"Probably right," Hunter allowed. He started back in the direction they came from, quickly getting tailed by Kaylee.

"You look like you're a million miles away," Nolan asserted. She turned to face him, surprised he'd even noticed.

"I love history."

"I know," he smiled, raising an eyebrow. "Kinda nice being in here, ain't it? Alone? In the dark? The whole world a million miles away?"

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Ya'll coming or what?" Kaylee's voice broke through the silence. To Emily's surprise, she sounded angry, like they were holding her up somehow.

"They're drawings, ya know?" Nolan smiled.

"Whatever you say," Emily responded, shaking her head.

Chapter 5: A New Discovery

A bright ray of sun pierced through the hole overhead, taunting Emily as she allowed a deep yawn to escape from the back of her throat.

“Didn’t sleep good neither, huh?” Hunter asked. She craned her neck in his direction.

“Not really, no. Those drawings were cool, but I got a weird vibe from that stuff underneath it. No matter what Nolan says, I still think they’re words.”

“Maybe,” Hunter allowed, looking away.

“Sorry I cut the trip short yesterday. I really did wanna finish the path and see if there were more drawings.”

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t have forgot the batteries. Wasn’t worth the risk. And hey, we’ll get the rest of the way down that path eventually. Got six more days!” Hunter said as a smile spread across his face.

“Ya’ll ready to check out the rest of this cave?” Nolan said, appearing out of nowhere. Kaylee followed close behind, adjusting her flannel. Suddenly she was relieved they slept in different parts of the cave.

“I’m ready, baby,” Kaylee said, pulling him toward her and giving him a quick peck on the lips.

“Why not?” she said as she wriggled out of her cocoon and made her way to her feet.

“Which path we takin’ today?” Hunter asked as his gaze moved from Emily to Nolan.

“I still wanna see that bad boy!” Nolan said, pointing down the darkest path in the cave.

“Can we maybe save that one for another day? Hunter, I really wanna look at that one. The really bright one.” Emily said as she nodded toward the path on the immediate right of the cave’s opening. It was the one she’d been curious about since they entered the cave the day

before. It was the one that was well lit with a mysterious, pale blue glow that seemed to come from out of nowhere. Further down the path, almost out of eyesight, she could see stalagmites protruding out from the ground.

“Yeah, I kinda wanna see that one, too, Nolan,” Hunter said. “We probably wouldn’t need helmets or flashlights.”

“Speaking of which, anyone know where that light is coming from?” she asked. “I don’t see any holes in the roof like in here.”

“It’s hard tellin’,” Hunter said. “Might be an opening on the other side of the path where the sun’s getting in.”

“But why is the light blue?” Kaylee asked as she crossed her arms across her chest.

“Couldn’t tell ya,” Hunter allowed.

“What about them rocks stickin’ up out the ground?” Nolan protested. The way he asked the question, it was like he was searching for excuses to omit it, rather than out of concern. When he glanced around the group, she turned her eyes away.

“Shouldn’t be too bad to get through. Just imagine it’s a game of Twister,” Hunter said, smiling.

Emily looked over at Hunter and his returning gaze was playful.

“We like Twister, right, baby?” Kaylee said, inching closer to Nolan. She couldn’t tell if Kay was flirting or trying to convince him. *Maybe both*, she thought. Suddenly Kaylee’s flirting was an advantage instead of another annoying habit.

“I kinda wanted to go down that path, too,” she said, still looking at Hunter. “See where that blue light is coming from.”

“Whatever,” Nolan said, “but if anybody gets hurt on them rocks, don’t come cryin’ to me about it.” He spun on his heels and quickly marched ahead, both of his hands in fists.

“Wait up!” Kaylee said as she took off jogging.

“Guess that just leaves you and me,” she said. “You think they’ll wait for us?”

“Probably not. Don’t matter no way. Nolan needs to blow off some steam,” he said.

“Why’s he like that?” She shoved her hands in her jean shorts. Nolan’s frigid attitude seemed to make the 56-degree-cave colder somehow.

“Aw, he been like ‘at long as I’ve known him. Single child syndrome, they call it.”

“So, he likes getting his way,” she guessed.

“Every time.” He grabbed her hand from her pocket and squeezed it.

They walked slowly together until they reached the stalagmites where Nolan and Kaylee stood. Whatever the nature of his conversation with Kaylee before they got there, it had led to them kissing. *Guess we should have walked quicker.* Given the intensity of the lip lock, she was sure Nolan had forgiven them for choosing the path.

She looked down at the earthly protrusions springing from the ground and couldn’t help but notice how sharp and close together they appeared, almost like they were made to be weapons of war rather than a random formulation of the earth. She’d seen stalactites and stalagmites before when she explored *The Lost World* cave in Lewisburg with Hunter a month or so before. Unlike the ones in front of her, those looked dull and soft on the ends. The only thing she feared then was how heavy one might be if it fell on you. These, however, were different somehow. Dangerous.

Overhead and further down the path was a collection of stalactites she hadn’t noticed before. Aside from the potential hazard, they were pretty to look at. The stalagmites coming from

the ground were drizzled with tiny drops of moisture that made them glisten in the unseen light source, while the stalactites above were also sprinkled with droplets, all coming down to the pointed part of the light brown rocks. It reminded her of the tip of an icicle. Looking down at the obviously dampened earth that held the stalagmites in the ground and the challenge it presented on their expedition, suddenly she wasn't sure coming down the path was the best idea. The longer she looked at the collection of stalactites and stalagmites, the more sharp they seemed to become, almost like they were trying to warn her not to venture down the mysterious path.

She watched as Nolan pulled away from Kaylee to face them. He looked at Hunter first, then Emily, reading her expression. "Hey, ya'll are the ones who wanted to take this path, 'member?" His grin was smug.

"We can go back if you'd rather," Hunter said, turning to Emily.

"No, I'm fine. Let's do this." In the back of her mind, she wondered if her words sounded as assertive as she meant them or if any of the three people surrounding her could hear the fear laced in her voice.

"Yeah, baby, let's do this!" Kaylee said with a bit too much enthusiasm.

Then the foursome crawled, wiggled, and ducked their way through the maze of rocks both jutting sticking down and climbing up from the cave.

"Now I know what a Plinko chip feels like," Hunter said.

"Plinko?" Emily asked as Nolan and Kaylee burst into laughter.

"Don't tell me you ain't never watched *The Price is Right*," said Hunter.

"You know? Drew Carey?" Nolan said. "Remember in second grade when we all got the chicken pox?"

"Aw yeah, man!" he laughed. "We all got addicted to that show."

“That was when the silver fox was hosting it, baby,” Kaylee chimed in.

Emily, who was holding tightly onto a slippery stalagmite for balance, could only shrug her shoulders as the trio traded memories back and forth, laughing at jokes she would probably never understand.

“Oh hey, you’re not supposed to touch those!” Hunter called out.

Hunter’s strained voice caught her off-guard, and she jerked her head toward him just as she grabbed on to another stalagmite. She overcorrected and missed the rock, throwing her off-balance as she began to fall sideways. Panicking, she tried to reach for another rock to regain control of her falling body, but only the tips of her fingers brushed against one. As she dropped, her upper right thigh got snagged on the side of the cave wall. She wrestled to grab the wall for balance but failed as the sharp rock tore at her skin. Hunter’s eyes widened to the sound of ripping flesh as she let out an ear-piercing scream.

He rushed to her side, careful to avoid falling, as Kaylee and Nolan cautiously worked their way toward them.

“Are you alright?” Hunter asked, his hands moving wildly over Emily’s injured thigh, but his question was immediately answered in the pouring crimson and her wincing face.

“It probably looks worse than it is,” Nolan said, joining them, his voice almost nonchalant.

“I can’t look, baby,” Kaylee said, covering her mouth and turning away. “Blood makes me gag.”

Hunter pulled off his flannel, leaving just his t-shirt on, and covered her leg with it, pushing hard against the wound.

“He’s probably right,” she said, her face mangled. “I don’t think it’s that deep, but it really hurts.”

“That scream told a different story,” Hunter said. “Hey, Nolan, I left the first-aid kit back in my bag. Can you grab it so I can clean this an’ wrap it up?”

“Seriously, man? I told ya’ll we shoulda went down that other path.”

“Knock it off,” Kaylee said, turning toward him and shoving him lightly. “She’s hurt.”

“What?” he asked innocently.

“I’ll get it,” Kaylee volunteered as she rolled her eyes at Nolan.

“Thanks,” Emily whispered, surprised by the gesture.

“No biggie. I’m not good with blood anyway.” Then she twisted her way back down the path in the direction of Hunter’s backpack.

She watched as Kaylee’s blonde ponytail maneuvered back down the path toward their campsite. Warm liquid continued to soak into Hunter’s shirt as she turned her attention back to her leg. His hands were glued to her knees, but his eyes were fixed on Nolan’s in a way that reminded her of a lioness before she devours her prey.

“I can’t believe you, man,” he said, shaking his head side to side. “Would you want me to be like ‘at if it was Kay?”

“It’s probably fine anyway,” she interjected, sensing a confrontation. “I think it was probably more fear and initial shock of pain like when you first get hurt, you know?”

“Here, let me at least look at it,” he said, pulling the shirt away from her thigh. It continued to bleed, but the wound wasn’t as deep as she first believed. However, it stretched down her thigh a good five or six inches. “Well, you’re definitely gonna have a nice bruise to

brag about later and I think that rock might keep some of your leg as a souvenir, but it don't look too bad." He replaced the shirt and continued to put pressure on Emily's leg. "Any better?"

"I think so," she said. "I'll be happier when it quits bleeding."

"That makes two of us, but I'm glad all that time volunteering at the hospital is paying off," he said as he continued to put pressure on her leg.

She looked down at him with a warm smile, but his eyes wouldn't meet hers. There was something buried behind them that matched the way her mom looked at old photos of her dad. Then it hit her. Hunter once told her he started volunteering after his sister's accident. She'd been thrown from her car after losing control on a back road and sustained several injuries before she died. One of her wounds was a deep gash down her right thigh. Suddenly she felt guilty for her clumsiness.

"It's already feeling better," she said, hoping to distract him.

"So, it's not deep, right?" Nolan asked. It almost sounded like he was trying to make peace and she wondered if his mind had gone to the same place as hers or if he just didn't want to spend the next several days fighting with Hunter.

"You know what, Nolan..." he began, but his voice had a hiss in it, "I..."

"Hey, look! She's already back with the first-aid kit," Emily interrupted, trying to dodge another bullet. "Man, that girl runs fast."

"Here you go," Kaylee said as she stretched the kit out to Hunter. When her fingers didn't immediately find his, she turned her head slightly toward Hunter and searched for his hands with her eyes closed. However, his attention was on Emily's leg.

"Hunter. The kit," Emily said as she nodded in Kaylee's direction. He grabbed for the kit, but her patience had reached its breaking point. She opened her eyes, only for a moment, to

search for Hunter's hands, but somehow, she found Emily's bleeding thigh instead. Immediately, her face turned green. She tried looking away, but it was too late. "Kay!" Emily shouted, reaching helplessly for the manicured hand. It was enough to get Nolan's attention and he bolted toward the blonde-haired beauty, catching her before she fell backwards onto a stalagmite.

"I got you, baby. I got you," Nolan said as he lifted Kay into his arms. Her eyes were closed, and her head bobbed lifelessly up and down as he carried her through the maze, his eyes searching for what Emily assumed was a place to put Kaylee down. Finally, he found a spot and set her on the ground, resting her head in his lap as he brushed tiny strands of hair from her face. "Can you reach my water bottle, Hunter?"

Hunter searched the ground and, finding the bottle, tossed it over to his friend. "Catch!"

"Thanks, bro," Nolan said, turning his attention back to Kaylee. "Come on, baby. Open your eyes and drink some water. Open your eyes."

"Is she alright?" Emily asked, momentarily forgetting about her leg.

"She'll be fine. She just ain't never been good with blood is all. And her pops is a doctor. Go figure!" Nolan said as he ran his thumb across Kaylee's forehead. "Come on, baby."

"You girls are dropping like flies down here," Hunter said, still putting pressure on her leg.

"So, what's the diagnosis, doc?" she asked.

Hunter opened the first-aid kit and fiddled through it until he found the peroxide. Then he removed the bloody flannel from her leg and looked over the wound again. "It really ain't as deep as I thought it was. I can't see tissue or nothing. Pretty standard scratch. Little deep, but not enough to carry you to the ER. It probably would be better to get it checked out though."

"I think I'm okay now, really."

“You sure?” he asked, his hand resting on Emily’s knee. “I really think it’d be better to have it looked at.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” she said as she placed on her hands on his. Then she turned her attention to Nolan. “How’s Kay?”

“She’s starting to come around,” Nolan said.

“What’s going on?” Kaylee whispered.

“Aw, you just decided to take a little nap, I reckon,” Nolan smiled. “Wanna try and sit up? Drink some of this water?” He steadied her as she sat up and pressed her back into his chest. “Here.”

Kaylee took the water and slowly began to sip.

“That’s my girl,” Nolan said.

As he tended to Kaylee, Hunter put the peroxide back into the first-aid kit and dug around until he found a box of band-aids. Then he held up the too-small adhesives as he looked back at her thigh. His eyes were playful as he met Emily’s.

“You’re not gonna find one in there long enough to cover it,” she giggled. “Just throw some alcohol over it and I’ll wrap it up in one of my shirts or something when we get back.”

“I think I’ve got an elastic bandage in here somewhere,” he suggested as he moved things around in the kit.

“Totally unnecessary,” she said. “It’s not even bleeding now. You alright, Kay?”

“Yeah, I’m good now,” Kaylee said as she continued to sip the water.

Hunter grabbed the alcohol from the kit and set it on the ground beside him. “Here it is.”

“What?” Emily asked.

“Butterfly bandages. I’m not having you throw some dirty shirt over your leg. Last thing you need is to get it infected. I don’t know if any of these bandages would stick anyway, but the butterflies ought to work.” He pulled the bandages out and handed them over to Emily before grabbing the alcohol off the ground. “Be still while I pour this on, ok? Now, this is gonna sting.”

“Do it fast,” she said, squishing her left eye closed and turning her head to the right as Hunter poured. “Ow!”

Kaylee jumped at the sound and grabbed Nolan’s arm for support. Then she leaned forward as if something caught her attention. “Babe, you see that?”

“What?” Nolan asked, turning.

“Over there.” she pointed a few feet down the path where something was sticking up from the ground.

“What is it?” Emily asked. Hunter dabbed at the alcohol and then grabbed for the bandages, taking them out one by one and carefully opening them. He placed them down the side of her leg as she watched Nolan and Kaylee slowly rise from the ground and make their way to the mysterious object.

“It looks like an old metal tin,” Nolan said. Then he and Kaylee wriggled their way toward the find, with Emily and Hunter following close behind.

There, up against the cave wall and halfway buried in the ground, was the corner of an old, metal tin, sticking up from the ground. Nolan squatted down and started digging around, determined to force it from the ground. After a few minutes, it was free and he was back on his feet, struggling to open it.

“Let me, babe. I’ve got nails,” Kaylee said as she took it from his hands. She dug her French-manicure beneath the slim top and pried it open with her middle nail. Inside was an old,

red book. It looked like one that was published in the 1800's when the bindings were almost cloth-like. The red coloring was nearly brown, and the binding looked like it was barely held together by the tattered binding. It had long white strings hanging from the corners and the pages looked almost yellow from the sides. In all likelihood, that old tin can was probably the only reason it the book as well-preserved as it was.

Nolan grabbed the book like a kid snatching up the last ice-cream cone in a convenience store. His eyes widened and he was almost salivating the way he held the book out in front of him.

“Wait, that guy said something about not taking anything out of the cave, including a book, remember?” Emily said. But it was no use. Nolan was already turning the pages.

“I ain't taking it. I'm reading it!”

“What is it?” Hunter asked.

“We fixin' to find out.”

“Careful with that thing. No telling how old it is,” Hunter said.

“What's it say, babe?” Kaylee asked.

“It's some kind of journal. Listen to this...

December 19, 1864

My wife, Halona, continues to suffer with this illness for which they have no name. If I fail to find a cure soon, I fear she will not make it much longer, but I cannot bear to tell her. I am a desperate man. Please God, help me save my dear Halona!

“That’s really sad,” Kaylee said. “Do you think he ever found a cure?”

“There’s more,” Nolan said, flipping over a few more pages.

February 3, 1865

Halona continues to hold on, but I have not yet found a cure. Her mother speaks of a cave with healing powers, but I am reluctant to believe such a thing exists. Still, I have no choice but to try, as nothing else has been able to save her.

“You think this might be the cave?” Emily asked, perplexed.

“If this cave had healing powers or whatever, why would that dude outside be so freaked out about us coming in here? Nah, it’s just some old, Native American folklore,” Hunter said.

“This is his last entry,” Nolan announced.

March 27, 1865

Halona is strong, but she is running out of time. I have promised her mother to visit this cave of healing powers, but she burdens me with the legend of their tribe, insisting I read the tale and take it with me, for in failing my quest, her daughter will surely die. She says the cave is cursed and I must bring my Halona to the waters if she is to survive down the trail of mysterious light until I reach the end. There the magic will be.

Nolan flipped to the back of the journal, undoubtedly searching for the piece of paper that told of the legend. Sure enough, he found it.

“Ya’ll ain’t really buyin’ this stuff, are ya?” Hunter said.

Emily's heartbeat quickened as Nolan opened up the single sheet of paper to read the legend.

Chapter 6: The Legend

The legend of the Magic Cave goes back hundreds of years ago when the white man came to our land. Believing they wanted no more than shelter from the cold, my great-great-grandfather of the Tahoma tribe gave them a warm place to sleep. Soon, the white man wanted more. They saw our food was plenty and our land was strong. A great war broke out, but my people fought back. We lost many men in battle until finally, a treaty of peace was declared, and the white man agreed to stay off our lands.

Mother Nature, kind and gracious, gave us a way to protect our people. She carved out a cave from rock at the foot of our shortest mountain, seeking to disguise the enormous cave which lied beneath. Not only did the cave provide shelter, but two very different paths for two very different purposes. Down one, marked by the rays of the sun, our people could store resources to see us through in times of famine. Down the other, marked by a mysterious blue glow, lay a pond of crystal waters.

These waters, blessed by the gods, were self-restoring and held magic healing properties which must only be used under the direst of circumstances, for in abusing its power, the waters would run dry.

For many years, the Tahoma tribe abided by Mother Nature's instructions, using the magic of the water when it was most needed to heal our children or spare the lives of the young and wounded.

Soon, the tribe grew strong, as we were for many years when my father, Chief Tyee, became leader. But a new enemy was lurking. The Inadu tribe, greedy and envious of the magic cave, conspired to overtake our people. One night, as our tribe lay sleeping, the Inadus snuck into the magic cave with many baskets, filling them and taking them back to their land.

As the sun rose, the Inadus sent men to block the entrance of the cave. The rest attacked the tribe. My people fought back once more, but we were met with an impossible task, for the Inadus carried with them sacks of the magic water. Each time our people drew their blood, they poured the magic water on their bodies, healing themselves instantly. The tribe was powerless against them.

My father heard the cries of war and rose up from his slumber, but he was too late, for many of our tribe had fallen. Seeing their bodies on the ground, he flew into a rage and blindly charged at the Inadus.

Then I, Orenda, his only daughter, looked on as my father was slain before my eyes. My heart was immediately broken. I rushed to his side and wept openly as I held his lifeless body in my arms. As my tears fell, I whispered in his ear, "Do not worry, Father, for I will find a way to protect our people."

I reached for his deerskin sack and captured his oozing blood inside it. Then I ran to the cave where the Inadu tribe was already fighting against our people. As the battle went on, I crept silently past them and to the magic lake.

As I sat on my knees in front of the cold water, I could not stop the tears from falling down or the anger growing inside my heart. I poured my father's blood into the water and begged the gods to curse it so I could avenge my father's death. For the sake of my father and our people, I begged Mother Nature not to dry up the lake, rather allow our tribe the chance to restore ourselves once more. I tried to ignore the rage that burned inside, but the greed of the Inadus had led to the spilling of innocent blood, and I could not contain it. I demanded the gods punish all those with greed in their hearts, for I had seen the evil and destruction that came from it.

Suddenly, I felt a great earthquake as Mother Nature carved out a third path inside the cave. The new path was dark and sinister and, at the end, held a bottomless pit that was chiseled out in a matter of seconds as a great thunder rang out. Then each member of the Inadu tribe who abused the water's power fell to their deaths. Their bodies were instantly separated from their souls, and they were forced to watch their own lifeless corpses being fed to the ground. Their souls were dragged into the bottomless pit. After Mother Nature captured them all, she closed the pit and held them there, where they would be forced to remain for all eternity.

After she granted my request, Mother Nature warned to never to abuse the magic waters inside the cave, as the curse would only grow stronger as the years passed. For those who were warned and chose disobedience, abusing the water's power would not end in sudden death, as it did for the Inadus. Their deaths would be felt with great suffering which their souls would carry with them to the bottomless pit.

Thereafter, all who failed to heed the warning would be the lucky ones, for although the curse would still strike them down and carry their souls to the pit, they would not feel the stab of death, but would hear the suffering of those who did. The only way to avoid the curse was to never abuse the waters or remove it from the cave.

I took the warning with great seriousness and shared the message with the tribe. As before, I never abused the magic. Nor did the rest of my tribe, for we knew of the dark future before us should we abuse the water.

The cave remained a part of our tribe and provided us healing for many years after the war with the Inadus ended. While we were able to rebuild our tribe once again, it was never the same after my father was killed. When the white man returned to settle our lands, leading to another war until the Trail of Tears, the legend of the magic cave was forgotten by many. Those

who did remember or those who heard the stories began passing them down to their children, giving them the same warning we were given so many years ago. Never abuse the magic waters inside the cave, for in doing so will lead to certain death and an afterlife of torment in the bottomless pit.

Chapter 7: Nolan Ruins Everything

“Wow.” Emily whispered as she pulled her hands to her face and covered her mouth. Suddenly her stomach was so queasy it reminded her of the time she ate too much at Red Lobster. Afterwards, her parents broke the news her dad was sick. She flinched at the memory.

“Aw, it can’t be true or nothin’,” Hunter said.

“Well, they wrote it awful good,” Nolan countered. “And ol’ Jafar out there was pretty set on keeping us outta here.”

“Aw, babe. He was just trying to help us,” Kaylee said as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Or he’s making a killin’ off the water in here!” he said, turning to face Hunter whose returning gaze was frozen in disbelief. “Didn’t he tell us not to refill our water bottles? Our Water. Bottles.” The way he deliberately separated the words made Emily more uneasy, as Nolan’s intentions were becoming more evident.

“Nolan, man, you can’t seriously think that legend is real! That book was probably planted here by some dumb teenagers trying to freak people out.”

“Or scare people away so Jafar out there can make his millions,” he answered back, “but there’s one surefire way to find out.” He folded the paper up and returned it to the back of the book before returning everything to the metal box.

“How’s that?” Hunter asked.

“Well, that little ol’ piece of paper said the path to the water was lit by a mysterious light, right?” Nolan held his hands in the air, putting air quotes around “mysterious light.” “Well, this path has a weird light to it and Lord knows where it’s coming from. I say we follow it out and see if the water’s down there.” His sudden interest in the path was almost ironic.

“We should put the box back where we found it,” Emily whispered, her voice quivering as she spoke.

“Em! I am shocked.” Nolan placed a flat palm across his heart in mock astonishment. “I thought you weren’t buying into scary stories.”

She bit her lip and threw a furious look in his direction. “I don’t know what I believe, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.” Her eyes welled with peculiar tears, and she swallowed to choke down the knot that had formed in the back of her throat. “That guy said not to take anything, so don’t take anything.” Hunter put his hand on her shoulder as she spoke, and Emily assumed it was his way of agreeing with her.

“Yeah, babe. She’s got a point.” Kaylee’s eyes met Emily’s for the first time in the conversation and there was a warmth in them that surprised Emily. Maybe Kaylee understood her better than she thought or maybe she’d been on the receiving end of Nolan’s teasing one too many times. Emily mouthed the words “thank you” as she wiped the fresh tears away. It hadn’t escaped her attention that Kaylee’s support was revealed only after Hunter took her side, but she still appreciated the camaraderie.

“Fine by me.” Nolan shrugged his shoulders, then plopped the metal tin back on the ground. “Shall we?”

“Are you okay to walk on that leg?” Hunter asked as he moved his right arm down to her waist.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“Great! Let’s go!” Nolan’s enthusiasm could almost be infectious if he wasn’t so obnoxious.

He led the way down the path of stalactites and stalagmites for only a few feet before the earthly protrusions faded off into nothing. Kaylee practically bounced her way down the path beside him and Emily couldn't help but wonder where her excitement came from or if it was just a mask to keep Nolan interested.

She turned to face Hunter as they walked down the nearly cleared path, but he only met her gaze a couple of times. His eyes were busy on her leg and Emily couldn't help but feel lucky he'd chosen her to be his girlfriend. Since they'd met, he'd been attentive and protective of her. It almost reminded her of her dad. Seeing his face in her mind brought the lump back to her throat and she tried to focus on the path to keep the tears at bay.

"You okay, Em?" Hunter asked, his baby blue eyes full of concern. "You look about a million miles away."

"I was just thinking about how much you remind me of..." She paused, feeling the lump growing to an unbearable size. "Someone."

He turned his gaze downward and his mouth formed into a thin, hard line. It was almost like he could read her mind. "You miss him."

"I do. But it's nice to have someone who helps me remember him." She stopped walking, prompting him to come to a halt. She put her weight on her uninjured thigh and held tightly onto his hands.

"I know what you mean. You remind me a lot of Rachel. The hair, anyway." He smiled and lifted his right hand to the left side of her face, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "You don't look like her or nothing." Suddenly his eyes were big as golf balls and he locked his teeth together, creating an upside-down smile with his lips. She laughed at the expression, appreciating his efforts to ease the tension.

“Thank you for planning this trip,” she said, her mood shifting over to something more romantic.

“And for letting my best friend crash it?” He looked down at the ground, suddenly unwilling to meet her eyes.

“I guess I can forgive you for that.”

“I appreciate that. I really do,” Hunter said, meeting her eyes again. “Can I make it up to you?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Emily asked, raising her eyebrow suggestively as a half-smile formed on her lips.

He raised his eyebrows, and she knew he understood her unspoken request. He leaned in close to her, his warm breath caressing her cheek before his lips found hers. His hands curled around her back as her hands moved to his face and pulled him in closer. Their lips moved against one another, increasing in passion as the seconds passed.

“We’ve got a whole week here for ya’ll to do that!” Nolan called from several feet ahead of them. “Come on! We found it!”

Just like that, her romantic moment was ruined by Nolan as she reluctantly pulled away from Hunter’s kiss. She inhaled deeply and bit her lower lip.

“Well, at least now I understand why you wanted it to be the two of us,” he admitted, pursing his lips together.

“I wasn’t going to say, ‘I told you so.’”

“Don’t have to. Nolan just did it for ya.” He rolled his eyes and readjusted his body to stand next to Emily as she walked. “I reckon he is a buzzkill sometimes.”

“You lovebirds comin’?” Kaylee yelled out, a huge grin spreading across her face as she turned to face Nolan.

“Yeah, you lovebirds comin’?” Nolan repeated, prompting Kaylee to laugh at her own joke. Emily wondered why the joke was funnier to Kay when Nolan said it.

Hunter put his right arm back around Emily’s waist as the two made their way toward Nolan and Kaylee. They were standing at what appeared to be a dead end at first glance, but as they got closer, she realized it was a corner and the path made a sharp right down the continued path. The light grew in its intensity the closer they got to the turn. It was almost glowing once they were able to see down the path where it twisted around.

“Come on, guys!” Nolan jumped up and down like a toddler about to enter a Dairy Queen. Kaylee’s enthusiasm matched his as she bounced up and down next to him, her eyes planted on him the whole time.

Once Hunter and Emily were next to them, the foursome made their way around the curve in the path. When they passed it, the trail stretched out even longer. She would guess 200 feet or so as she continued to lean into Hunter unnecessarily, but he obviously thought she needed the support, and she wasn’t willing to argue with him. Every now and then, he asked her if she was ok and she’d reassure him she was fine, but his grip kept tightening around her waist.

As the group walked down the slippery path, the light continued to get brighter and brighter with each step. Emily wanted to be excited about the adventure, but the closer they got to the blinding light, the more she thought about the mysterious stranger outside the cave and what his warning could mean. Clearly the legend in the book made sense if it was all true, and it would certainly explain the disappearances that no one else could. After all, who would believe in a cave with magic waters and the power to heal? Even saying it in her head sounded crazy.

What would those words sound like in the ears of a stranger? Or police officer? She was queasy again.

“What’s wrong?” Hunter asked, stopping suddenly to assess her. His eyes moved all over her, as if searching for an injury.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” she said.

“Does your leg hurt?”

“No, I’m ok. I guess I’m just curious what’s on the end of this path.” For the most part, that was true.

“As am I, Hunter!” Nolan complained. The way he said it reminded her of a five-year-old who just had his favorite toy taken away by his mother.

“Me too!” Kaylee agreed. She watched as Kay squeezed Nolan’s hand. Then Kaylee craned her neck to meet his eyes, but Nolan was paying more attention to Hunter than he was to her. Kaylee’s body language left no room for misunderstanding. She was annoyed by Nolan’s unwillingness to meet her gaze, leaving Emily bewildered as to why any girl would work so hard for a guy’s attention. Especially when his attention always seemed to be focused elsewhere.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Emily agreed. At the very least, she wouldn’t have to hear Nolan complain anymore.

They started moving again, with Emily and Hunter lagging behind.

“Aw, check that out!” Nolan said excitedly. Emily squinted to block out some of the brightness of the light until she made out a body of water ahead. Nolan and Kaylee ran ahead to explore.

Emily and Hunter took their time, moving carefully down the path until it opened up into an enormous, circular room that was about half the size of a football field. The walls looked

much the same as all the others in the cave, as did the floor. However, the main exception was the large, round pool of water right smack dab in the middle of the room. There was a path that walked around the strange pond and an odd glow that filled the side walls of the pool, lighting up the entire room and making its way through the path they'd just hiked down.

“I guess now we know where the light was coming from,” Hunter said. He covered his mouth with his hand.

“How can this be?” she asked. She walked to the edge of the path and stared down into the crystal blue waters, her mind racing as she pondered the location of the mysterious light.

“Babe,” Kaylee began, her voice shaking, “does this mean that legend is real?”

“There's only one way to find out,” Nolan said.

Emily could barely hear them speaking as she stood on the edge of the water. Suddenly, she felt someone shove her from behind as she went sailing toward the pond.

Chapter 8: The Dream

The water was like ice.

Emily's body was pierced by the liquid that engulfed her. Her immediate submersion into the arctic lake shocked her, causing her to inhale sharply... under the water. Her lungs filled with liquid ice as she struggled to rid them of the fluid inside her. But there was no air to support her. She was choking. No. She was drowning.

She flailed her arms wildly, panic overtaking all her other senses. It was like she'd forgotten how to swim. She could hear Hunter splashing nearby. She heard the strain and tension in his voice when he called out her name above the surface. Emily was desperate to swim to him. She frantically stretched her hand out, praying her fingernails might accidentally – and miraculously – stumble onto his somehow, but she kept coming up short. Still, she continued to choke down the icy water. Then, strangely, she began to dream.

It was an odd dream. At first, there was nothing but peace as she drifted off to sleep. It was such a tranquil rest, she had no desire to end the slumber and so, she didn't try. The first person she saw in her dream was her grandmother. The relief washed over her as quickly as her recognition of her dearly departed Mawmaw. The last time they'd seen each other was right before her heart attack when Emily was eleven. Her mom had taken comfort in its quickness and the fact that Mawmaw was sleeping. To see those old, familiar blue eyes staring back at her caught Emily off-guard. Mawmaw looked the same as she remembered, only somehow, she was more beautiful. She had the same crow feet painted around her eyes, only they weren't as deep into the skin as she remembered. Her eyes shone of pure cerulean with no hint left of the milkiness they once held. Her cheeks were rosy, painted like that of a 20-year-old, rather than a 79-year-old woman. She looked... breathtaking.

She struggled to find the words as Mawmaw shone bright like an angel sent straight from Heaven. Her heart beat loudly against her chest as she took in the sight of this glorious creature before her. Tears brimmed over her cheeks as she ran into Mawmaw's arms. She clutched tightly to her flowing, white garment, realizing no words were needed. Just to be held again, just to feel her grandmother's warmth against her skin was enough.

Their wordless encounter was suddenly interrupted by the footsteps of another. She lifted her eyes toward the sound and saw her grandfather walking toward them. She wasn't sure how she knew it was him because she'd never gotten a chance to meet him. She'd only seen his pictures. He died following a stroke years before Emily was born but now, here he was. He smiled at her and stretched his arms wide, as if inviting her into them. She couldn't resist, so she released Mawmaw, keeping hold of her hand as the two went running in his direction.

Before she reached her grandfather's arms, she saw someone else in her peripheral view: her father. She could hardly breathe. Unable to contain her emotions, she exploded in a sudden burst of hysterical, elated sobs. It felt like so long ago since she'd seen him, and now, here he was, looking healthy and happy. Her knees grew weak as some combination of disbelief and pure joy consumed her. Suddenly she realized it was the strength of her grandparents that kept her on her feet as they worked to steady her. She studied her father's perfect, angelic face as she wept in the arms of her late family.

A new emotion found her as she realized he wasn't happy to see her. Rather, he seemed upset; annoyed even. She wanted to comfort him, to envelop him in her arms and take away whatever thing was causing him pain. Her eyes searched her grandfather's, as if to plead with him for answers, but he, along with Mawmaw, vanished before her eyes. Panicked, she realized she couldn't afford to grieve them. She didn't have time to. What if the same thing happened to

her father? What if he vanished, too? She bit her lip and slowly turned to face him as fresh tears welled in her eyes.

“What’s the matter, Daddy?” Her voice was pleading as she rushed over to him. “Tell me.”

“Stop!” He called out, throwing up his right palm in a way that reminded her of a crossing guard helping kindergartners cross the street. “If I hold you now, I’m not sure I could let you go.”

“I don’t want you to, Daddy.”

“No, Emily, you can’t.” He lowered his hands, but his face remained serious.

“Why not?”

“It’s not time yet, baby. Your mom needs you.”

“What do you mean? Where is she? What’s wrong?” Her questions poured out, one after another as her voice cracked.

“Just go back to her, Em. Go back.” The corners of his eyes crinkled in such a familiar way, it brought on a new wave of pain in her chest. He was saying goodbye.

“No, Daddy! Don’t go!”

“Go back, Emily,” he instructed, as his body began to fade away. “Go back.”

“No, Daddy!”

“Go back, Emily.”

And then, he was gone.

At the same time, she could still hear him saying her name. No, not saying it. Shouting it!
“EMILY!”

She couldn't understand why he was screaming at her now. She couldn't even see him anymore. She looked all around, but he wasn't there. "Daddy?"

"EMILY!" he shouted again. She realized it wasn't her father's voice she was hearing now. It was Hunter's, but he sounded so far away. As she so greatly feared, her father had vanished. Had the presence of her grandparents and father all just been a dream? She couldn't decide if she was locked in her own subconscious or if any of it had been real.

"Hunter?" She tried to speak, but she couldn't hear her own voice. Somehow, she knew no one else could either.

"EMILY!" Hunter continued to scream out her name, but she couldn't respond. *At least he sounds closer now.* She continued to look for him, seeing nothing but the back of her eyelids.

"I don't know how to find you, Hunter!"

"Come on, Emily. Come on!"

Ouch! What's he doing to me?

She felt the weight of his hands pushing into the top part of her chest just between her rib cages. She realized her eyes must still be closed, and she worked to open them as he continued to beat on her torso.

"Come on, baby," he said. She felt him plug her nostrils as his lips came down on hers. He forced air into her lungs as she suddenly figured out what was happening.

Many things happened simultaneously. Her realization seemed to remind her body there was water inside her lungs where it shouldn't be. Intuitively, her stomach heaved, and water began gushing out of her body through her mouth.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he said, relief evident in his voice for the first time. She felt him push her over onto her side as she continued to vomit in waterfalls of icy fluid. It was painful, almost violent the way the water forced itself out of her body.

Her eyes opened almost immediately, and she searched for Hunter’s face in the middle of the aggressive spewing of liquid. Laying on her side, she continued to vomit as he pounded on her back. “Good girl, good girl.” There was an ache in his face he was desperate to mask with words, but he didn’t fool her.

To her, it felt like hours rather than minutes that passed when she finally stopped throwing up. Still on her side on the ground, she rubbed her throbbing, burning, raw throat as she gazed at the lake of water on the ground that had escaped from her body. It almost didn’t seem possible for that much to have been inside her, but somehow, it was. The proof was on the claylike floor.

“Do you think you can sit up now?” Hunter’s tender voice asked. “I don’t want you laying on the cold ground.”

“Is she gonna be ok?” Kaylee’s voice whimpered somewhere behind her.

“Oh yeah, she’ll be fine,” Hunter’s voice was more reassuring now. Emily was relieved to see his face match his tenor. “Can you sit up?”

“I think so,” she whispered, her voice sounding like she’d been gargling with sharp rocks. She worked to straighten her body against the wall as Hunter grabbed hold of her hands and tried to help her maneuver.

“Go slow. You don’t wanna sit up too fast. Might make ya lightheaded.”

She slowed her movements deliberately and worked to come to a sitting position. As she was adjusting, she noticed a smooth wall near them and scooted until she was resting her back against it. "I wanna sleep now," she yawned.

"Nah, Em. You can't sleep yet. We're not totally out of the woods. Let's get you warmed up."

Suddenly, she could feel the chill of the cave as goosebumps raised on both her arms. Her body shook as Hunter sat beside her and wrapped his arm around her, stroking hard against her flesh.

"We need to get a blanket around you. Be best if you took off those wet clothes. We could raise your body temperature quicker that way," he said, biting his lip. When she looked in his eyes, Emily could almost see tears in them.

"You're soaked, too," she said, pulling her knees into her chest. She curled into her own body, as if to better trap the heat in.

"Gonna have to take yours off, too, man," Nolan jumped in, but his voice sounded suggestive, rather than helpful.

"I realize that, Nolan. Thank you." The way he said the words made her believe he wasn't grateful at all for Nolan's advice. There was an iciness in his tone that might have been colder than the water he rescued from.

"Let's go back," Kaylee interjected, her face serious. "Build a fire."

"I need to get her back to that front room anyway," Hunter said. "Make a fire, put her under some blankets 'til she warms up. Get her in dry clothes."

“Here,” Kaylee said as she started to unbutton her flannel. “I’ve got a cami under this anyway. It don’t match her outfit, but it’s dry.” She tossed the shirt over to Hunter who caught it and used it to cover Emily’s arms and torso.

“Thanks, Kay,” she whispered.

“Yeah, I really appreciate it, too,” Hunter said as he rubbed her arms with his enormous hands. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“No worries,” she said. To Emily, Kaylee’s answering smile held just a little bit too much affection, but she couldn’t help but be grateful for the dry shirt, too. Kaylee was a puzzle that Emily was working to put together.

“You ready?” Hunter said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

She looked over at Kaylee, her emotions conflicting. She wasn’t sure how she felt about the camaraderie that seemed to be building between them, but she still didn’t like the way Kay’s eyes focused on Hunter. It was like he was a conquest, rather than Nolan’s off-limits best friend.

She followed Kaylee’s gaze to Hunter and was surprised when she didn’t see him looking back at her. Rather, his cold, intense eyes were rested on Nolan. The way he stared at his best friend reminded her of the way a shark eyeballs his dinner right before he eats it.

She stared at Nolan, but to her surprise, he wasn’t looking back at Hunter. Rather, his eyes were fixed on Emily in a way that made her uncomfortable. But he wasn’t looking at her the way guys usually look at girls they’re attracted to. He was looking at her like a child in the middle of an ice-cream store who could have anything he wanted.

When he didn’t immediately look away, she started to wonder if he was looking at her face at all or if, perhaps, he was looking at something on the ground next to her. She tried to

follow his stare that led somewhere near her right thigh. It was then she remembered the legend about the water and the enormous scratch on her leg. Could it be that he'd pushed her in just to see if the legend was true?

Reflexively, she gazed down at her leg to see the scratch on her thigh. Amazingly—or perhaps, not amazingly at all—the wound on her leg had vanished.

Chapter 9: Party's Over

“Hunter looks pretty mad, babe,” Kaylee whispered from about 10 feet behind Emily and Hunter. “You shouldn’t have pushed her in like that.”

After a short walk, the foursome had made their way back to the front room of the cave. As soon as they arrived, Hunter held up his sleeping bag like a curtain while Emily changed into dry clothes. Then, he laid down his sleeping bag for her to sit on while he used hers to wrap around her slender body. Finally, he built a fire beneath the hole in the cave’s ceiling, slightly away from the bucket of water still on the ground. Now, he was sitting next to her, keeping her warm. Kaylee and Nolan kept their distance after the silent hike back. Or, mostly silent. The only exception being Kay rambling off every couple of seconds.

“Did you see her leg?” Nolan could feel his mouth salivating ever since Hunter pulled Emily out of the water.

“Her *legs*?”

Kaylee’s plurality and attention to detail to such a short word caught him off-guard. Her tone was familiar and one he wasn’t looking forward to defending. Rolling his eyes, he turned from the happy couple to face his girlfriend. She stood with her hands on her hips and her mouth puckered, like she’d just sucked on a lemon.

“Leg, Kaylee. Leg.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She removed her hands from her hips and crossed her arms across her chest. There were times, like this one, he wondered why he invested his time in such a spoiled, yet insecure brat. Her youth was evident in every situation they encountered, and the girl got jealous at the drop of a dime. Yet the hypocrite was chomping at the bit for a piece of Hunter, no matter how much she tried to deny it. Shoot, even Emily could see that. No wonder

she looked mad when Hunter picked them up. But, unlike Emily, Nolan wasn't worried about Hunter and Kaylee. Even if he hadn't been best friends with the guy since they were little, he'd never go for her. Easy wasn't his type. Kay could try all she wanted. In a way, it amused him. The harder she tried to win Hunter over, the more she was turning him off. As he thought about how many times the guy must have rejected her already, he laughed in spite of himself. *Serves her right.*

“Her *leg*, dum dum. As in one.”

“Dum dum? For real? You know I hate it when you call me that!” she unlocked her arms, put her hands in fists, and stomped her foot on the ground. She looked like a three-year-old who couldn't have her favorite toy.

“I thought you was mad about me looking at her legs which, by the way, are kinda hot.” *It's not a lie.* “Or are you mad I called you dum dum? Which is it?” If she wanted to be difficult, then so could he.

“What's wrong with you?” she demanded. From the looks of it, she was probably fighting off tears, but so what? She started it. If she was going to accuse him of looking at another girl's legs, he may as well do it. Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to keep the argument going. There were bigger fish to fry.

“Ain't nothing wrong with me! You might need to get your ears cleaned though. I said leg. Not legs. As in, did you see that gash down her leg?”

“There's nothing wrong with my ears.”

“Did you see it?” he prompted.

“Yeah, why?”

“Did you see that it was gone when he pulled her out of that water.” Saying it out loud made him forget Kaylee’s immaturity. He could feel the excitement building in his chest, and his face almost hurt from smiling.

“What?” she rolled her eyes and shook her head side to side. “No, it wasn’t. You’re just trying to freak me out because of that stupid journal we found.”

“Go look if you don’t believe me! I’m tellin’ ya, Kay, it was gone!”

“Yeah right. What am I supposed to do? Just walk right up to her and say, ‘Hey, Em. I know my boyfriend tried to drown you and everything, but can I see your leg?’ She’ll be all over that one. Or maybe she’ll be like, ‘why?’ and I’ll be like, ‘I wanna see if that lake has magic powers. Ya know, like those wizard movies with that kid: Gary, Barry, Harry... whatever his name was?’”

“You think you’re funny, don’t ya?” The sweat on his forehead was building as he looked back at Emily and Hunter.

“What is your problem?” she fumed.

“My problem,” he began, turning his attention back to his girlfriend, “is that I’m trying to tell you something crazy happened back there and you don’t wanna hear it.”

Rather than respond right away, he watched as her eyes darted right, just over his shoulder, to where Hunter and Emily were sitting. “What? What are they doing now?”

“Hunter’s coming over here.” Kaylee answered, looking back at Nolan.

“He mad?”

She looked to the right again before focusing her eyes on Nolan. She revealed her teeth when she stared back at Nolan, but not in a way that looked like she was smiling. Rather, it reminded him of the time she drove his pickup and ran into a stop sign. It was the, ‘oh crap!’

face all over again. Something told him the conversation he was about to have wasn't going to end well.

“Are you crazy, man?” Hunter said through gritted teeth as he approached them. “What was you thinking?”

“Hunter, hey,” Nolan said, putting both palms up in front of him as a sign of surrender.

As soon as he turned around, Hunter was already in front of him. In what seemed like seconds, he threw both of his hands up between Nolan's *surrender* pose and slapped them down from the middle, like he was tearing open a set of double doors. He felt his heartbeat quicken as Hunter put his apelike hands on Nolan's chest and shoved forward. The force was such that he wound up on the ground with Hunter still charging him like a bull going for the red cape.

“Hunter, wait!” Kaylee said, putting herself between them. “Come on, ya'll are best friends. You don't wanna fight.” He leapt to his feet as she stretched her arms out between them, one hand facing Nolan and the other facing Hunter.

“Oh, I think I do,” Hunter said, his eyes bloodthirsty. “Get out the way, Kaylee.”

“Come on, man! It was a joke!” he said, his voice climbing an octave.

“That's a load of bologna and you know it! You just wanted to see if that legend was true, and you used her as your little guinea pig!” His face was red with fury and his bulging muscles were somehow bigger when he was angry. “You coulda killed her, man. She coulda drowned! Don't you care 'bout nobody but yourself?” He seemed to be dancing around Kaylee, waiting for that one second for her to be distracted.

Nolan's mind wandered to the time he sat outside Raleigh General Hospital after Rachel's accident. He had been deliberating whether or not to go inside, terrified of hospitals since he broke his arm in little league. As he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel of

his pickup, his eyes scanned the surroundings. Across the street, right beside a church, was a wooded area where some poor, dead animal was lying. Given its size and bushy tail, he assumed it was a squirrel. Two hideous vultures stood next to it, each taking turns picking rotten flesh from the carcass. Rather, they were trying to take turns. The vulture on the right, Nolan remembered, was more aggressive than the one on the left. Each time his feathered friend bent over for a nibble of the squirrel's insides, the one on the right snapped at it, determined to feast on the corpse alone. Hunter's eyes were reminiscent of the mean vulture. If only there were a second vulture now. Not one to take the prey for himself, but one to distract the other vulture.

His heart pounded in his chest, and he wondered how long it would take Hunter to find an opening around Kaylee. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean for her to get hurt or nothin', but she's fine now, right?"

"You think cuz she didn't die, I owe you some kind of gratitude?" His face poured with sweat inside the chilly cave as Nolan's pulse quickened.

"What about her leg? I know you saw it!" The way he said it, it sounded more like an accusation than an assessment, even to him.

"I don't care nothing about that legend, man. I care that she coulda died and the only thing you're worried about is some old ghost story!" He continued to dance around Kaylee, his face reddening as he spoke.

"You did see it!" He knew he came off as recriminatory, but he didn't care. The legend was real, which meant that water was a gold mine!

"Wait, so the water did heal her leg?" Kaylee interrupted.

"Ya'll are unbelievable. Both of you," he said.

“Hunter, don’t you see? This cave could be worth millions. Billions, even! We’ve uncovered the fountain of youth, man. The cure to cancer! You know what people would pay for that?!”

“That is true. And we could save *lives*. Isn’t that what you want and why you volunteer at the hospital?” Kaylee said. Nolan smiled, knowing she had tapped into his weakness. “And what about Rachel?”

His eyes widened at the mention of his sister. It was a subject Nolan knew not to talk about, yet here was Kaylee, bringing her up by name. She’d started down exactly the right path only to U-turn at exactly the wrong one. Game over. There was no convincing him now. Kaylee had ruined that. *Just like everything else she touches.*

“Don’t. Ever. Mention. My. Sister.” He stabbed a finger in her direction as he spoke. “She’s got nothing to do with this.”

“But just imagine if you’d had that water when she had that accident. It could have saved her, right?” Kaylee said, turning from Hunter to Nolan. When her eyes met Nolan’s, he tried to shoot her a look that said, ‘knock it off!’ before she looked back at Hunter. “I mean, that would have been great, right? And we could help other people, too.”

“Let it go, Kay,” Nolan said.

“But—”

“Let it go.” This time, his tone was more stern. He saw no reason to continue the fight, especially if Hunter was willing to walk away and he was sure he was. He couldn’t stand talking about Rachel.

He focused his attention on Hunter. The look on his best friend's face almost made Nolan feel guilty. He turned to Kay, then back at Nolan, as if trying to figure out the right words to say and who he should say them to.

As he deliberated, Nolan thought about what Kaylee was trying to do. It was the same plan he had: convince Hunter the cave was worth a fortune, then try and figure out a way to sell the water. There had to be some antidote or way around the whole, "don't take the water out of the cave rule." That's when it hit him. That part of the legend was a lie. A big lie. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was. As the only one who had seen the letter and held it in his hands, he started to realize that the writing toward the end of the legend was slightly different than the handwriting at the beginning. What if someone came along and made that part up, just to deter people from taking the water out? So they could hog it for themselves? Of course. Jafar. That's why he'd been there. He was hoarding it for himself, camping out nearby and trying to scare people from going in so they wouldn't find his little fountain of youth.

"That water ain't doing nothin' but staying right here where it belongs," Hunter said, snapping Nolan out of his train of thought.

"But," Kaylee said, "What about—"

"It's staying right here. End of story." He turned to look at Emily as she lay sleeping next to the fire. Then he turned back to face Nolan one last time. "We're leaving at sunup. I wanna get her checked out."

"What about the rest of the week, man?" Whether Hunter liked it or not, Nolan was determined to make one last-ditch effort for his case.

"I could care less about the rest of the week." The way he said it, the way he stood, and the expression on his face made him look much older than 18. He could almost pass for a

grandfather. “What I care about is getting her looked at sooner, and not later. I’d leave right now if it wasn’t so dark out.”

“Hunter. Bro, look—“

“No, *bro*,” he sneered the word, “you look. We’re leaving. Emily was right. We never shoulda come in here.” He turned to walk away but stopped suddenly as if he forgot something. Then he turned back to face them again, seemingly choosing his words carefully. “One more thing. You ain’t my *bro*.” He stomped off as he headed back to Emily.

“Babe, oh my gosh! That was so intense!” Kaylee said as she took down her ponytail. Then she took her scrunchie and readjusted her hair back on top of her head in a messy bun.

“He’s just mad right now. Don’t worry about it,” he told her with confidence. He’d been through fire and back with Hunter. Sure, he’d done some things in the past that his best friend didn’t like, but Hunter always got over it.

“I don’t think so, babe. He seems pretty upset.” she let out a sigh of relief like she’d been holding it in for days.

“You don’t know him like I do.” He stared at Emily and Hunter as he spoke. He watched as his best friend emptied out the contents of his pockets and put them in the front zipper of his backpack. Then, he took off his t-shirt and squeezed into the sleeping bag behind Emily. Nolan figured it was to keep her body temperature up. Smart.

“Hello! Earth to Nolan!” Kaylee said. At the mention of his name, he turned to face his girlfriend.

“What, babe?”

“Uh, you’ve been staring at them forever. What is your deal?”

“Just making a plan,” he said. He looked back at Hunter and Emily, who both looked like they were either almost asleep or already there. Then, he focused his attention on Hunter’s backpack and all the empty water bottles in the trash bag Emily brought. *Leave it to Miss Perfect to worry about the environment.* As he watched her shift her weight back and forth, he couldn’t help but notice how pretty she was. Much moreso than Kay, even though the whole school was crazy about the moron. “Lucky man,” he whispered to himself.

“Excuse me?” Kaylee asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“I said we need a plan.”

“What kind of plan?” Her eyes were suspicious.

Yup. Total moron. He wasn’t sure how she’d feel about his agenda, but he knew she wouldn’t rat him out either. In fact, if he could get her on his side —and he was sure he could— she’d be pretty helpful.

“The kind I hope you’re gonna like,” he said. “We wait for them to fall asleep, fill up them water bottles over there in the trash bag, and take ‘em back to my place. We’ll figure the rest out later, but at least we’ll have it.”

“Are you crazy? There’s like, I don’t know, a million reasons that won’t work,” she said.

“Such as?”

She put her arms out to the side with her elbows going in to her hips and her palms facing the ceiling of the cave. “Well, for starters, how are we gonna get there? Hunter’s not just gonna hand us the keys to his Jeep.”

“I saw where he put ‘em. We’ll just borrow the car and come back before either of ‘em wake up. They’ll never know. It took us a couple hours to get here, so that’s four hours driving,

hour most to fill up the bottles. Piece of cake. Don't people sleep about eight hours anyway? That's plenty of time."

The longer he spoke, the more skepticism he saw in her face.

"It's plenty of time," he repeated.

She dropped her hands flat to her side in defeat. She seemed to be thinking of something else as he continued to run the plan over and over in his mind. The more he thought about it, the more flawless it became. It was the perfect plan.

"What if they wake up and don't see us?"

"So? They'll assume we're off somewhere having our own fun." He bit his lip suggestively as he looked her up and down.

"What about when they can't find us at all?"

"We went exploring," he said confidently.

"Or they catch us sneaking in with Hunter's keys?"

"The keys'll be in my pocket, they won't see 'em, and I'll sneak em back in when he's not looking. Simple."

"So why we were outside?" she asked. The way she asked, it was clear she thought she'd trapped him.

"Peeing."

"Why'd it take us so long?"

"Saw a deer, found a trail, ran into ol' Jafar again, got chased by a bear. Take your pick."

There was no argument she could make that he wouldn't have an answer for.

"What about the trash bag?" She pointed out, her voice raising.

“Shh! You trying to wake ‘em up? We took the trash out when we went to pee and recycled the bottles. There’s a state park nearby. Bound to be plenty of trails, trash bins, and places to recycle water bottles.”

Kaylee let out a long-winded sigh that made him believe she was finally giving in. Then she turned to him with a peculiar expression that seemed to be mixed with fear and confidence. “What about the legend?”

“What do you mean?” He knew what she was referring to, but he wasn’t willing to admit it.

“Don’t play dumb,” she said, reaching over to playfully smack his shoulder. “You know what I mean. We can’t take the water out of the cave anyway, remember? That stupid legend said we’d die. Even that guy outside told us not to take anything and not fill up our water bottles. Leave it to you to do the one thing some scary man tells you not to.” She rolled her eyes and started to walk away before he grabbed her by the elbow.

“Wait. Just think about it for a minute. If you knew there was water in a cave that could heal people, would you wanna share that information with people or would you wanna scare them off?” He waited for her to connect the dots, but when her eyebrows scrunched together, he knew he’d have to break it down for the idiot, little by little. “If other people know, they’d take it for themselves, right?” He deliberately spoke slowly, knowing he was challenging her intelligence, but not caring. Dum dum was slowing him down as it was. “They’d make the money and not you. So, you scare ‘em off.”

“What are you talking about?” She looked more confused than ever.

“You didn’t see that piece of paper, Kay. I did. The handwriting at the very end was a little different than the handwriting at the beginning.”

“So?” As she latched on to his point, her expression shifted from confused to irate.

“Somebody changed that ending. Ol’ Jafar probably.”

“Why would someone do that?” Again, her face was covered in annoyance.

“Are you listening? To make people afraid to take the water. To scare ‘em! Who did that when we first got here? Jafar. Who was practically waiting for us outside the cave? Jafar. Don’t you think it’s a little too convenient that the one thing he told us not to do just happens to show up in a journal? It’s all a big setup so he can hoard the water for himself! He’s probably making money off it, too, or keeping himself immortal or something. I mean, he looked young, right? But he talked like he was a hundred.” He watched as Kaylee, finally, showed the slightest hint of intrigue behind her typically oblivious eyes. His argument was working, and it was clear on her pretty, moronic little face. It was time to bring it home. “Sides, what are the odds that journal would still be here? Probably ain’t even real. Jafar coulda faked the whole thing.”

“That really does make sense, babe,” she conceded. Then she turned her attention to Hunter and Emily. “But why not explain that to them so we can all work together without Hunter getting more ticked off at us when he finds out we stole his Jeep?”

“Think you ruined that when you brought up his sister. And we ain’t stealing. Thieves don’t bring stuff back. We’re borrowing it.” Now it was his turn to be annoyed. If not for her, they might all be filling up water bottles right now.

“I don’t know, babe,” she said. “It was stupid.”

“Can’t argue that,” he agreed. He looked over her head and, for the first time, felt confident the happy couple was off in la-la land. “But you know what? I think it’s time we make our move. They’re both crashed.”

He led the way as the two tiptoed across the cave, careful to avoid the fire and stay as far away as they could from Hunter and Emily. When they got to Hunter's backpack, Nolan bent down and slowly pulled on the zipper. As it made the slightest sound, he looked back over his shoulder in time to see his best friend snuggle in closer to Emily. His pulse quickened as he turned his focus on retrieving Hunter's keys. Kaylee stayed close behind him with her hands on his shoulders. Slowly, he tugged on the dangly keychain, keeping his eyes laser-focused. No matter what, he was determined to nab the key to his freedom as quickly and quietly as possible.

Suddenly, a garbled voice from behind them said, "Whatchu think you're doing?"

Chapter 10: Earthquake

Suddenly, there was a chill in the air as each individual hair on the back of Kaylee's neck rose to the sound of the familiar voice. Her eyes widened as she cautiously craned her neck to face Hunter.

"Relax," Nolan whispered. "He talks in his sleep." He shook his head from side to side, as if the assessment was painfully obvious.

"Just hurry up and get the keys," she snapped. Ever since the pair began dating at Homecoming, he never shied away from the dumb blonde jokes or any opportunity he could grab to poke fun at her intellect or— if you ask Nolan— the lack thereof. If it wasn't for him being so popular and easy on the eyes, she would have never considered dating him. He constantly insinuated that she was stupid, but it was a small price to pay for dating the hottest guy in school. She would pay it.

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying!" After a few more seconds, she heard the faint sound of keys clanking together as Nolan worked to keep them firmly in his gorilla hands. It was obvious he was trying to reduce the noise, but he wasn't doing a very good job. *But he calls me stupid.* "Alright, now grab that trash bag over there and start picking up all the empty water bottles."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure thing, Mr. Bossy." She quietly moved around the fire, collecting all the bottles she could find, leaving only the two that rested next to Hunter and Emily.

"Get 'em all," he instructed as he shoved the keys in his pocket. His brows were creased in anger and his whisper rose a decibel.

"We may as well just wake 'em up then!" she countered. "If I get that close, that's exactly what's gonna happen, but if that's what you want—"

“Fine! Leave ‘em!”

After all the water bottles were collected, they set out down the peculiar path illuminated by the mysterious blue light. At first, they walked in silence and she assumed it was because Nolan didn’t want to wake Hunter and Emily any more than she did. Then again, knowing him, it was hard to say why he did the things he did. The quiet continued until they reached the maze of stalactites and stalagmites.

“Do you always have to be such a jerk?” she said finally.

“Say what? You forget to take your Midol or something? I’m literally just walkin’ beside you, not sayin’ anything.”

“I meant earlier Do you always have to be so bossy and talk to me like I’m stupid?”

“First off, I ain’t bossy. I’m just tryin’ to get things done before them lovebirds wake up. Second, I ain’t never called you stupid. You must be hearin’ things.” He moved quickly through the slippery, moist rocks, forcing her to quicken her pace.

“You could carry the trash bag if you’re gonna move that fast!” she said, nearly tripping over a stalagmite as she worked to keep up with him.

“Well hand it here then!” he fumed, jerking the bag from her unsuspecting hands. “I shoulda left you behind anyway.”

She could feel a lump forming in her throat as he forged ahead without her. It was the opposite reaction she’d hoped for. She wanted him to realize he was being a jerk and to stop and apologize for it. Deep down, she knew she may as well be wishing for the moon. She had a greater chance at holding it in the palm of her hand than she ever would at hearing him say, ‘I’m sorry.’ Even still, she hoped for it.

“Is there a reason you’re standing there like you don’t know your own name? Let’s go, dum dum!” The painful nickname pricked at the tear ducts in her eyes. She wanted so much to break up with him then, but he was still the guy that all the other girls at school wanted and being his girlfriend made her special. It made everyone look at her and want to be her. That wasn’t a feeling she was ready to let go of. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But if she couldn’t end things with him, then maybe she could turn around and head back to camp. Better yet, she could talk Nolan out of his big plan to become millionaires with the magic cave’s potion of youth. One look at the back of his handsome head and she knew all hope was lost. She’d never been able to stand up to him before. At least, not really stand up to him. Not on the things that really mattered to her. *But what if Jafar was right and we’re about to anger the gods in the cave? Can I really just not say anything? Risk it all just so I don’t have to stand up to him?*

“What are you waitin’ on? Christmas?” His voice was impatient, angry. “Come on!”

She picked up the pace and followed him down the path of blue light all the way to the end. She made her way into the room where the majestic water shone brilliantly against the azure light radiating from within and stood at the water’s edge. She watched as he got to his knees and emptied out the trash bag full of water bottles, grabbing a few before they rolled into the mysterious pond.

“It’s so pretty,” she noted. When they’d been here before, he pushed Emily in so fast, it hadn’t given her a chance to look at the lake. The water appeared to be at least 50 feet deep and a straight drop down, no matter which side one entered the massively oversized puddle. The water itself was crystal clear and danced in the blue light like tiny particles of white glitter inside every ripple. It was well illuminated by the strange blue glow that seemed to radiate against the interior of the lake walls. She squinted, desperate to make out more of the walls inside the pond, but the

fluorescent light made it impossible to see. If she had to guess, she would assume the interior walls must have looked the same as the walls inside the cave. Just hidden beneath the penetrating azure light that filled the room.

“You gonna help me or what?”

She joined him on the ground and reached for a water bottle. Suddenly, she felt her heartbeat quicken as she held the empty bottle in her hand.

“Well don’t just stare at it. Fill it up!” He snatched a bottle from the ground and held it underneath the crystal blue water. “See? Ol’ Jafar was lying. Ain’t nothin’ happening.” e painted his face with mock terror as he waited for the bottle to fill.

But she wasn’t convinced. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like there were too many warnings: Jafar, the story he told on the way to the cave, the petroglyphs or whatever had been scribbled on the cave wall, that journal, that piece of paper containing the legend, and especially, Emily’s leg. “If that legend was right about the water, then it’ll be right about stealing it.” Her voice trembled as she spoke, and she couldn’t meet Nolan’s eyes.

“Yeah? Well, I’m literally filling up the water bottles right now and nothin’s happening.” As usual, his voice rang with sarcasm. “Dang, Kay, you gettin’ to be as boring and lame as those lovebirds back there.”

She bit her lip as he erupted into laughter. *What if he goes back to school and tells everyone I chickened out? What if the whole schools starts talking about me like Nolan and Hunter were talking about Trevor when we got here?* It pained her as she recalled them laughing at him, then accusing him of running scared. She’d laughed right along, too, not giving it a second thought. She even assumed it was all true.

“I’m not boring,” she countered as she grabbed a water bottle from the ground. She raised an eyebrow to Nolan as she twisted the plastic cap off.

“There’s my girl,” he nodded as he tossed the first full bottle into the trash bag. “Now just think about all the money we’re gonna make off this stuff!”

She laughed along with him, thrilled to hear him call her his girl. She shoved the empty bottle below the surface of the mystical water. Maybe he was right all along. They were both filling up bottles of water, yet no harm was coming to them. Jafar probably was hogging it all to himself! *Selfish, selfish, selfish. Our turn now!*

Her bottle was nearly full when the ground began to quiver. “What’s that?” In an instant, her mood shifted from celebratory to panic.

“Proolly just a little earthquake or something,” he answered. But there was a tremble in his voice that wasn’t caused by the palpitating ground.

“In Virginia? When was the last time you heard of an earthquake in Virginia?”

“We’re in a cave. Rules might be different in here. Different rock formations, who knows?”

The ground continued to shake, only more furiously, until they struggled to keep their balance. As they toppled to the ground next to the mysterious blue water, Kaylee heard rocks crashing nearby. The sound seemed to be coming from the path they’d trekked down to get to the water. The stalactites maybe?

But she didn’t have time to think as she struggled to get to her feet during the earthquake. She looked to Nolan to help her balance herself, but he was already clinging to the wall of the cave as though he were glued to the edge of a cliff, dangling thousands of feet above land. For

whatever reason, he saw the cave wall as his lifeline and she wondered if he knew something about the cave that the rest of them didn't.

She crawled in the opposite direction of the water toward the cave wall as the ground continued to shift beneath her. The sharp rocks under her body scratched and tore through her flesh, leaving open gashes that poured fresh blood on the ground. Once she reached the wall, she wobbled back and forth, desperate to get to her feet as she left a trail of crimson behind her. Nolan had already reached the doorway to the path by the time Kaylee reached the wall. She clutched against it to keep herself from falling over. As the seconds passed, the ground seemed to jolt more intensely until even the walls and ceiling were pulsating, all keeping a different, angry rhythm.

She toppled back to the ground, her left arm slicing through a large rock as her head pounded against the cave floor. She let out an ear-piercing scream that rang throughout the cave.

"Nolan!" She shrieked. He turned back, but only for a second before returning his focus to the doorway. He rocked back and forth with the cave as he continued to navigate toward the path they'd journeyed from. It was his gateway to freedom. She grabbed hold of her arm as it poured liquid crimson, but the violent shaking of the cave wouldn't allow her the time she needed to tend to her ruined arm. Suddenly, the giant, sharp rock which had been her enemy moments before when it sliced through her flesh, became her best friend. She snatched onto it, desperate to stay in place, but it was no use. The cave continued to aggressively vibrate, thrashing her small body around as blood poured out of her. Within seconds, it covered the rock, creating a slippery surface that was near impossible to hang on to.

She looked up at Nolan, who was untouched aside from the little bit of blood on the cave walls where he'd created his own trail of red splotches. Fresh tears filled her eyes as her heart

beat against the rhythm of the earthquake. She could do nothing but hang on and watch Nolan, desperate for him to come back; distraught knowing he wouldn't. Maybe it would be over soon. She had to hope against hope as she continued to grasp at the scarlet soaked boulder. It was the only chance she had at survival. Nolan continued to struggle against the earthquake as he hurriedly tried to force his way out the room of turmoil and down the pathway to the safe campsite. Her eyes widened in horror as he ducked out of the doorway.

Just as he reached the other side, rocks or maybe stalactites or both, rained down from the ceiling. One of them, the largest one she'd seen, came from out of nowhere. It flew down at Nolan's head like it was aiming for him. Hearing the cracking sounds above him, he lifted his neck in time to see the enormous rock and immediately darted to the left. However, the ever-shaking ground made it impossible for him to dodge it completely. It crashed into his shoulder, causing the muscular teenager to moan in agony. As loud and terrifying as the scream was, it held no power in drowning out the sound of the crunching bones underneath his flesh. His body collided with the ground as the stalactite rolled down his body, almost deliberately, and landed on the tops of his thighs. Undoubtedly, it destroyed the cartilage underneath. The cave was rocked with another tormented groan.

Kaylee, still clutching on to the rock, peered into his anguished eyes as the life drained from them. He took his last breath in front of her, sending her into hysterics. Her cry was tortured, though it wasn't because she mourned his loss. It was because she knew she was next.

"Nolan!" she screamed, as her eyes darted all over the mangled body of her boyfriend.

His body answered with a jerk, and she wondered if he was somehow still alive. Her question was soon to be answered. His body rocked again, but this time, it was like an unseen force was pulling on it. Maybe it was trying to rescue him from the stalactite? But it was too late

to save him, wasn't it? Her eyes bulged as an apparition that resembled Nolan was yanked from the corpse. His eyes, the same eyes whose life had melted away in front of her just moments ago, now stood before her full of shock and confusion. He faced her, seemingly unaffected by the earthquake that continued to slam Kaylee's body against the unforgiving rock.

His ghost, or whatever it was, took in her horrified expression. Then the transparent doppelganger followed her eyes until he was gazing at his own deceased body. Out of nowhere, the corpse jerked again, only this time, the force was pulling it downward. It was almost as if the cave wanted to absorb it into the floor.

She and the apparition watched in terror as his body was sucked into the ground, as if it was never there at all. Then, impossibly, the cave rocked more violently and loudly. The floor of the cave that, seconds ago, held Nolan's body, rippled beneath the surface. She looked on as the billow, clearly carrying his frame, jerked it beneath the ground and down the path toward the campsite. It almost looked like an earthworm moving beneath the surface of damp soil, only this was far more violent. The body stopped about five feet short of the collection of stalagmites and rested, but only for a second. Then it sprouted up from the floor of the cave, creating a brand new stalagmite to join the rest. *That's why there's so many!*

She looked back at the blood on the cave wall where he once stood. It was the only shred of evidence he was ever there. She held her breath as the cherry-red liquid began to evaporate, leaving no trace of Nolan's presence. The apparition, still standing there in complete shock and horror, locked eyes with her once more. It was obvious he wanted to say something, but the ghost was struggling with the words. Before she had time to wonder, the apparition was gone.

The cave began to guzzle him down the path as he screamed a scream that raised the hair on the

back of Kaylee's neck. Everything about the legend was true, and now, Nolan's body was being carried off to that bottomless pit of spirits. Maybe now though, the earthquake would stop.

She was wrong.

The rock she clutched to pounded against her and sent her flying two feet backward into the magical water. Frantically, she swam against the tumultuous current to save her own life. She opened her eyes underwater as the liquid burned into her corneas. The one thing she hadn't suspected was how bright the light was beneath the surface. It was blinding. On the plus side, her injuries stopped hurting as soon as she landed in the water, but it did nothing to bring her comfort as the water thrashed her body side to side.

Her feat seemed impossible, but she had to try. At the very least, she knew she was a good swimmer, so she fought against the current using every muscle in her body. She was almost to the surface when the rock, the same one that sliced her arm, the same one she clutched on to before, was aggressively flung into the water. To Kaylee's detriment, it was coming right for her. She tried to change course and swim away from it, but the water seemed to pull her body into the path where the rock was falling.

The unforgiving pond threw her body around like she was stuck in the spin cycle of a high-end washing machine. Only, instead of a washing machine, she was trapped in a whirlpool in the middle of the ocean, Mother Nature promising she wasn't going anywhere as the rock continued to come for her. She made one last-ditch effort to swim away, using all the strength she had left, but it was no use. She wound up on her back as the boulder pounded into her stomach. Out of strength and now, out of air, she could do nothing but sink to the bottom of the lake. That is, if it even had a bottom.

She closed her eyes and thought of her parents and her childhood as fluid filled her lungs. She thought of the long hours her dad spent working as a doctor and how she'd given anything to spend more time with him. For years, she craved his attention, but his time was reserved for others in the emergency room, healing people and saving lives. It wasn't that she wasn't proud of him. She wanted to be like him: selfless, kind, big-hearted. But all these traits afforded him a career that cost him their relationship. He just didn't know it because he didn't know her. He knew what she wanted him to know, and he loved her enough to believe her. He believed she made good grades, that she was untouched, she didn't lie, and didn't sneak around. What he didn't know was how she photoshopped report cards, how promiscuous she was, and right now, he didn't even know where she was. How heartbroken he was going to be when he found out, in the worst way, that he never knew his daughter at all.

Suddenly, she realized she could open her eyes. Had it all been a dream? Was she ok? Had she gotten out of the water? Everything looked so bright! As her eyes adjusted, she realized she was still in the room with the magic waters, only she wasn't under the water anymore. She was above it, watching something sink deeper and deeper into the water. She squinted, realizing it was a person. No. It was her! She'd become an apparition, just as Nolan had and now, she was looking at her own dead body. About that time, the body disappeared, along with all the blood she'd spilled moments ago. She watched as it pummeled beneath the surface and joined Nolan's body down the path of stalagmites.

Then she felt something pull her backward, like a great gust of wind. After watching Nolan fly off, she feared the worst and fought against it, but she didn't stand a chance. The wind jerked her back and all she could see was blurry images of the cave they'd spent the last few

days exploring. She cried out, desperate to apologize to the gods for what she and Nolan had done, but it was too late. The damage was done.

In seconds, everything went black and all the wounds from before returned to her body, burning her. She screamed out in pain, in fear, but the only sounds she heard were hundreds, maybe thousands, of others howling out in the same pain.

Chapter 11: No Man Left Behind

“Hunter!” Emily screamed. He flinched as she dug her fingernails into his flesh. “What’s happening?”

Hunter, still wrapped in the sleeping bag with Emily, worked to free himself. “I don’t know, but we gotta get outta here and get to that shaft.” He used his head to nod in the direction of the cave’s opening as he wiggled like a worm, tossing them both back and forth inside their polyester prison. As Mother Nature tossed the couple around like rag dolls, he couldn’t help but be reminded of the time he and Nolan went white water rafting in the tenth grade. The current had rocked the boat beneath them, sending them tumbling over onto each other as they worked to maintain stability. *The only difference now is it’s Emily and a sleeping bag instead of Nolan and a rickety ol’ boat.*

“Is it an earthquake?” she asked as she pushed and pulled against him. The ground continued to throttle and rock beneath them. Mother Nature continued to throw them around as she saw fit, and Hunter couldn’t help but wonder if she was enjoying herself.

“There,” he said as he squeezed his enormous body out. “Come on!” He reached his hands out for Emily’s, but the Earth continued to tremble beneath them, and he was immediately thrown off balance. Mother Nature wasn’t quite finished with her game. She seemed to be laughing at him as she threw him face first on the ground, landing him mere inches from Emily and the sleeping bag.

“Get me out!” she screamed. Her face was drained of color as perspiration spread across her forehead. Like a toddler learning to crawl, he made his way to the head of the sleeping bag where her eager fingers were reaching for him. It took some effort, but Hunter finally managed to interlock their hands together. Once their fingers were entangled, he tugged with all the energy

his body could muster, to no avail. The sleeping bag was somehow molded into Emily's body. He pulled again, but Mother Nature laughed at his efforts as she threw them both around on the ground.

He worked to get to his knees, his eyes fixed on Emily's. The way she looked at him reminded him of the patients he'd worked with at the hospital; the ones who knew their time was about to be cut short, but they weren't quite ready to let go. He squinted, desperate to wipe the image from his mind. He turned his focus to Emily and his body position. Whatever it took, he had to pull her out and get them both to safety. With one last heave, he jerked on her hands, freeing her body from the sleeping bag. She landed on top of him as the Earth continued to bounce beneath them.

"Come on!" He shouted. He continued to crawl on the ground, seldomly bracing his weight against the side of the cave wall.

"I'm right behind you," she said. There was a fear in her voice that Hunter tried to ignore.

Slowly, the couple inched their way to the shaft of the cave, both holding tight to either side of the walls as the ground recoiled. The cave he once found beautiful and mysterious was now an ugly platform of disaster and impending doom. It reminded him of a scene from *Armageddon* when the asteroid was exploding and all the rocks were flying across the screen, seemingly searching for astronauts to use as targets.

"Where's Nolan and Kay?" His own voice frightened him as he spoke. He'd been working hard not to panic, but the realization of his best friend's absence dissolved that plan entirely.

"I don't know," Emily yelled, clearly trying to carry her voice over the sound of rocks clanging and falling stalactites. "Maybe they went to sleep in the same spot as before."

They continued to cling to the wall inside the shaft as he pondered the suggestion. It seemed practical, but he couldn't shake the notion that something was wrong. Very wrong. Wouldn't they have heard Nolan and Kaylee by now? Then again, it was hard to hear Emily and she was less than five feet away.

"You're probably right," he shouted. "Hang on!"

"Hunter! Look!" she shrieked. There was a deadly trepidation in her voice that made Hunter's heart stop. He turned to Emily, but her face was almost green, and her eyes were brimming with fresh tears as she attempted to point at something in the distance. He didn't know why yet, but he was sure he'd regret it if he looked. At the same time, there was no avoiding it now.

He followed the direction of her bobbing finger, squinting in a feeble attempt to make sense of the figure that was headed in their direction. It was sailing from the path of the mysterious blue light where they'd visited the lake earlier before Emily got hurt. He could have sworn it was a person, but if it was, then that person was flying. *That don't make sense.*

He squished his eyes closed and then opened them again, as if the gesture would force them to make sense of the fast-moving form. It hadn't worked. He could still see a person flying backwards through the air. As it got closer, all Hunter could hear were agonizing screams that seemed to be coming from the moving figure.

"What is it?" he shouted as the unknown being continued to move toward them. In seconds, it was flying by and down the dark path they'd all been avoiding since their arrival. The figure, still airborne, was instantly recognizable as it blew past them, screaming a scream Hunter knew would haunt him for the rest of his days. It was Nolan. No, not Nolan. A ghost version of Nolan. Hunter's mouth gaped open as he took in the transparency of his best friend, zeroing in

on his eyes. He'd never seen that level of fear before and, if he lived a thousand more years, he still wouldn't.

“Nolan!” Emily wept openly. Hearing the consternation in her voice destroyed any hope he had left of keeping his panic at bay. His heartbeat quickened and he felt his body convulsing in a way that had nothing to do with the earthquake. What was he supposed to do now? How was he going to get out of this? How was he getting his best friend out of this? What had even happened? What about Em and Kay? There were too many questions and not enough answers. *One thing at a time. One thing at a time. Isn't that what Dr. Bledsoe always says? Do one thing at a time so you don't get overwhelmed. Address the most serious patient first, then the less serious patients. Prioritize.*

“Hang on!” he shouted in Nolan's direction. He looked back at Emily as the gears in his head began to turn. *Nolan is the most serious patient. I have to get to him first. I have to find him while keeping Emily safe, but how?* The look on her face left him doubting the plan he hadn't come up with yet. “What's wrong?”

“We can't help him!” The way she said the words. It was so final. For whatever reason, she believed it was too late to save him. In a way, it made sense and hearing them out loud forced all the pieces to come together: the urban legends, Jafar, the story about Ben and Jeff, the notebook, the piece of paper with the legend, Emily's leg, and now, his best friend's apparition. But apparitions weren't real. *I'm going crazy down here. Ghost stories? You really think you saw Nolan's ghost? No, you saw Nolan. The cave is dark, you've been in here for days, there's limited oxygen, you're in the middle of an earthquake, and your mind is playing tricks on you. People don't fly and ghosts ain't real.*

“I ain’t leaving him!” Hunter yelled, hoping Emily could hear him above the noise of the earthquake. She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it. “Stay here!”

He hustled away from the shaft, once again crawling on the cave floor as he kept the dark, ominous path in his line of sight. All the while, he tried to think of how he’d save his best friend. They’d known each other since the second grade and saw each other through everything: trips to the principal’s office, first kisses, first dates, Nolan’s parents’ miscarriage after they tried for years to have another baby, Rachel’s death, and now this. He couldn’t leave Nolan behind. Maybe she wouldn’t understand that, but he couldn’t. With a fierce determination he felt in the pit of his stomach, he continued to bury his fingernails into the dirt as the earthquake continued to toss him around.

“Hunter, please!” The voice behind him was strained and full of panic. In the pit of his stomach, a new emotion bubbled deep until it washed over him in a fresh wave of immeasurable guilt because he knew he was abandoning her. He tried to push the feeling out of his mind. *She’ll be ok. I’m not abandoning her. I’m leaving her someplace safe while I try to help Nolan. That’s all.* Somehow, there had to be a way to save them all. No matter how big of a jerk Nolan had been over the last few days, he couldn’t leave him behind. If the roles were reversed, he was sure Nolan would do the same for him or anyone else.

“Just stay here! Please!” he ordered, turning his head to face Emily as he clutched desperately to the cave floor. “I’ll be right back.”

“Kay!” she screamed suddenly, once again pointing to an image behind Hunter’s head. He jerked his neck around in time to see Kaylee’s ghost flying past them and in the same direction as Nolan’s. He couldn’t help noticing that her eyes held the same look of pure terror and agony as Nolan’s had. “Please, Hunter! We can’t save them now!” He could hear the tears in

her voice, but he refused to turn around and face her again. If he had, he knew he couldn't have left her there alone. Then again, there was a part of him who knew she was right; that it was too late. But he was a logical person, too; a man of science. If the facts didn't fit, then there had to be another explanation. *Facts don't support this. Native American legends? Magic caves? Ghosts? We've been down here a while, there's less oxygen in here, we been listening to these ghost stories, and now our minds are playing tricks on us. That's all it is.*

"Just hang on!" he screamed, both to Emily and his friends. The ground seemed to be moving less, so he threw his body forward, moving more frantically than before. He could feel his knees scraping against the rocks beneath him as fresh blood spilled onto the ground, but he couldn't feel the injuries. As he crawled, the ground continued to shake less and less. Hunter, not wanting to waste time or opportunity, climbed to his feet and sprinted toward the dark path.

"Hunter, wait!" Emily's voice sounded so distant, he wondered how far he'd gotten away from her. The light down the corridor of the path was dimming, making his vision nearly non-existent when he decided to slow down and catch his breath. The Earth let out one final jerk that slammed him to the ground and sent him tumbling. In which direction, he didn't know. He'd lost complete visibility. He continued to roll until his back slammed against a cave wall, causing him to cry out in excruciating pain.

Chapter 12: Broken

“Are you okay? Hunter?” Emily could feel the panic building in her chest as she slowly peeled her wounded hands from the cave wall. During the earthquake, as she painstakingly clamped onto it, she’d managed to scrape up both of her palms. “Where are you?” she shouted. *Stupid question. You saw where he went.* Her body shuddered as she lifted her eyes to the black path she’d been working to avoid since the time of their arrival.

She bit her bottom lip as she moved away from the cave wall, a new wave of tears beginning to brim in her eyes. Slowly, carefully, she moved through the campsite, taking in the devastation caused by the impromptu earthquake. From the looks of it, you’d think the teenagers were robbed in the middle of the night by thieves who found more pleasure in ransacking than in stealing. The fire was nonexistent, all the water bottles were gone, and their bags were strewn throughout the cave floor. Hunter and Kay’s had both come open and their clothes were flung around the campsite. It reminded Emily of the one time she’d been in Kaylee’s room before a double date —another of which Em had been opposed to— and Kay could find “nothing to wear.” Meanwhile, her entire bedroom looked like it threw up an entire collection of camisoles and pink miniskirts.

“Hunter?” she swallowed hard as she tiptoed toward the darkness, her pulse quickening. She knew how much he loved his best friend, but hadn’t they both seen the same thing? She shook her head, trying to rid her mind of the image of their flying apparitions. *What am I going to do? Just leave? I don’t wanna go down that dark path!* She thought about their initial arrival into the cave and how, one look at that path, she knew Nolan would be the one responsible for getting her to go down it. Then again, she never dreamed this was the way he would do it.

Her eyes wandered back to the shaft, the one she'd found safety in just moments ago. It held the same promise of safety and freedom if only she'd run over to it and walk out. *What about Hunter? What if he's hurt?* She hung her head. He dove into the icy lake to save her. If she now had the chance to repay him for the sacrifice, then she had to.

Her eyes focused on the dark and ominous path as her body revolted against it. If everything she'd seen and heard the past few days turned out to be true, and it certainly seemed like it was, then that path was the last place she wanted to go. At the same time, she had no choice. She couldn't leave him. She had to find him, convince him it was too late to save Nolan and Kaylee, and then convince him to leave. How they'd ever explain what happened, she didn't know. Who would believe them? What would people think really happened to their friends? Immediately, she thought of the hippie and his story about Ben and Jeff. Suddenly, she felt sorry for Ben. He'd been telling the truth all along, but everyone thought he was lying. *They won't believe us either.*

She tried to shake the thought from her mind as she continued to stare down the sinister path. It was much too dark to explore without a flashlight and the last time she'd seen those, Hunter was putting them in his book bag. Now, the contents of it were strewn throughout the cave for who knows how far! Those flashlights could be at the bottom of the lake for all she knew.

She turned back to the campsite, her brain working overtime to take in the events that had unfolded over the last few minutes. Meanwhile, she continued to search for the light sources. How can this be real? She wanted so much to believe she was dreaming, but the cuts on her palms told a different story. Even if it all felt like a nightmare, her hands burned and bled too much to believe she was sleeping.

As she sorted through the mess of clothes, backpacks, and food wrappers, her mind continued to race as it worked to put the pieces together. She'd never believed in ghost stories, urban legends, or magic, but there was no other explanation for all she'd seen and heard: Nolan's stories on the drive up, all the hippy said, the notebook, the legend, the paths, the blue light, the lake itself, her leg, and then Nolan and Kaylee's apparitions. It was time to face it. The legend was real.

She continued to look for the flashlights or even the helmets they'd worn a few days prior, but she kept coming up short. The earthquake had done too much damage, wrecked too much havoc, and tossed too much around for her to find anything. It all felt so pointless, so hopeless.

Tears welled in her eyes again as she backed against one of the cave walls. Unable to contain her emotions, she allowed her anxiety to rain down her cheeks as she slid her back down the wall, landing on the cave floor with a thud.

"Ow!" She said aloud, whimpering as she reached down to grab whatever object was beneath her bottom. To her intense surprise, it was a flashlight. She clutched it against her chest and wept uncontrollably, amazed at her own stupid luck. As she sobbed, she realized how long it'd been since she allowed herself to cry with that level of ferocity. *Not since Daddy*. Her mind traveled back to the last time she'd seen him before his body surrendered itself to cancer. She was next to his hospital bed, holding his hand for the last time.

"Keep going, Emily," he'd said. "No matter what happens, don't you ever give up. Not ever. Whenever your back's against the wall, you stand up, you hear me? Stand up, dust yourself off, and you keep going. I love you."

Another wave of emotions rocked through her as she continued to wail on the floor of the cave. It all felt so ironic now as she rested her back against the cave wall and allowed all the pain, all the turmoil she'd been holding in for days, to stream down in a puddle of salty tears. *Ok, Daddy.* She made her way to her feet with the flashlight in hand. Then she powered it on and headed down the dreary, unexplored corridor.

"Hunter?" She called out. "Hunter, can you hear me?" She tiptoed down the menacing path, frequently looking back as their campsite grew smaller and smaller, the light dimming with each step she took. "Hunter?"

As she crept down the path, she thought more about her dad and what he might say to her now. Probably, "Save yourself. They're the ones who got you into this mess. They're the ones who wouldn't listen to you or that guy who tried to help you."

I can't leave Hunter, Daddy. He helped me, remember? He saved my life when I fell in the lake.

Her hands shook, causing the light of the flashlight to bounce aggressively off the side of the cave walls. It reminded her of a strobe light in a nightclub, not that she'd ever been to one. Every now and then, she caught glimpses of the wall of the cave. The earth-brown color it once was when she first entered the path was slowly becoming darker and darker, and she wasn't sure if it was the cave's natural color or the depleting light source that made it appear that way. Maybe she didn't want to know.

As she continued to inch forward, she kept her eyes focused on the cave walls. Eventually, they changed to pitch-black and didn't hold nearly the same sparkle as the walls where their campsite was. This was dark, gloomy, and apocalyptic. This was the place you searched for if you wanted to know where the devil might live if he were human and looking for

real estate. Every fiber of her being screamed, ‘turn around,’ but she couldn’t. What if Hunter was in trouble? What if, by her leaving, it meant his inevitable demise? She suddenly found herself too afraid to turn around and too afraid not to.

“Hunter?” Her volume was unimpressive at best. If he’d been standing two inches from her, he wouldn’t have heard her calling his name.

Without warning, she heard loud, flapping noises coming right at her. It reminded her of the time she was at her aunt Linda’s house right before a huge rainstorm. Aunt Linda was outside earlier that day hanging sheets up to dry. Then, with the storm coming, she’d shouted at Emily to help bring them in. The wind was blowing ferociously that day, causing the sheets to whip and slap against one another as the thunder rolled in. She had been lucky that day. She made it inside with her arms full before the rain came pouring down. Still, she never forgot the sound those sheets made as the wind beat against them. Whatever sound she was hearing now, it was just like the sound of those sheets beating together in the wind. Only now, it was coming fast and getting louder as the seconds passed.

Suddenly, she was engulfed in the sound as it flew in her face, screeching and crying out in high pitches all around her. She dove onto the ground screaming loudly and covering her head with both hands as an army of bats flapped past her through the eerie cave corridor. Since she’d first arrived with Hunter, Kaylee, and Nolan, she wondered if there were bats in the back of this dark and dangerous path. Of all the ways she imagined finding out that answer, this method would have been at the bottom of a very short list.

“Hunter?” She called out from the floor of the cave. This time, her volume was far louder, as she was now more anxious than ever to get out of there.

“Auuuuungh.”

“Hunter?” She was practically choking with relief. She looked around for the flashlight she dropped before the floodgates of hell opened up and spit out its military of bloodsuckers.

“Em?” The sound was garbled, but even in the dark, she knew Hunter’s voice. She grabbed hold of the flashlight and shone it all around as she attempted to find him.

“Where are you?”

“Go back!” he ordered. There was something in the way he said the words that made her quiver. In the back of her mind, she wondered if maybe he was trying to protect her. From what, she wasn’t sure. As much as she wanted to listen to him, there was a sharp edge of pain in his voice, and she just couldn’t desert him.

“Keep talking. I can’t see anything except—”

She shined the flashlight on a pair of feet on the ground. She steadied the flashlight and slowly, she moved the glare up his body. Immediately, she got sick to her stomach. He was scrunched up in a way that made him look more like a fetus than a grown man. Blood was pouring from his thigh, seeping onto his blue jean shorts, creating a strange burgundy pattern. A puddle of dark crimson had formed a few inches from his body as he lay moaning in what Emily could only imagine was intense pain. Her stomach heaved, so she forced her eyes shut and focused on her breathing. Whatever happened, she couldn’t faint on him.

“Go!” he managed to say, his voice gravely. There was something about the way he sounded that terrified her. It was like talking required extreme effort.

She opened her eyes and set the flashlight down at her feet, shining it on his torso to avoid blinding him. She hustled to his side, kneeling by his head, and placing her left palm against his blood-soaked hair. “Are you able to stand?” The question felt silly. Hunter was the guy who never stopped moving. If he wasn’t getting up, there had to be a reason. A bad one.

“No, I—” He moved his neck until the side of his forehead was pushing against the ground. Then he let out a tortuous groan. “I think my back’s broke.”

“What do I do? What do I do?” she was waving her hands inches above his body like she couldn’t quite figure out where the safest place was to touch him.

“Get outta here. Get help!”

“I can’t leave you here!” her voice was shrill.

“You can’t carry me, Em. Even if you could, it’d just make it worse.” He moaned into the ground again, smearing his face with dirt.

“What about the water? It fixed my leg!”

“Just get outta here. Keys are in my bag.” As he spoke, he seemed to be losing more and more strength. There was no point in arguing with him. She knew what she had to do.

She looked back, but there was nothing but darkness pouring in from the direction she was certain she’d come from. She deliberated, unsure as to whether she should take the flashlight. If she took it and accidentally went the wrong way, then at least she’d have a way to see in the dark to find the right path. On the other hand, it would leave him completely in the dark, alone and with a serious injury. But, if she left the flashlight behind and got lost, she might never find her way back to the campsite. The choice was clear. She just prayed Hunter would forgive her. She picked up the flashlight and gently kissed his forehead. “I love you,” she whispered.

He answered with a quiet groan as she made her way to her feet. She turned back one last time to look at his mangled body and it brought on another wave of nausea. She forced her eyes shut and took in another deep breath. *Stay conscious. Stay conscious. Stay conscious. Now, focus, Em. Which way were you facing when you saw Hunter?*

She tried to remember how her body was positioned when she first shone the flashlight on him and worked hard to recreate it. Once she was sure she had, she turned her body 180° and began hustling in the direction she believed was their campsite, all the while praying she was going in the right direction. She didn't know how bad his injuries were or how much time he had, but she knew she didn't have time to be wrong.

Chapter 13: The Plan

It was still night by the time Emily made her way back to the campsite.

Her biggest challenge would be finding a water bottle, any water bottle, to fill up and take back to Hunter. The only problem was she didn't understand the legend well enough to know if her decision was a deadly one. As she thought about the legend, she remembered the part Nolan read about how the Tahomas used the water to "spare the lives of the young and wounded" and that it wasn't meant to be used for immortality. Hunter was both young *and* wounded, and she wasn't using the water for monetary gain or to bring him back from the dead. She was using it to save his life.

Her mind was made up. She looked around the campsite as déjà vu washed over her. It wasn't that long ago when she was searching for a flashlight in the same mess. She tried to recall if she'd seen a water bottle in the clutter, but nothing stood out in her memory. They had brought along a large black trash bag so they could clean up after themselves. That bag was full of water bottles, but it seemed to be gone, too. She scoured the site, turning over every rock, t-shirt, protein bar wrapper, and sock. The more she scavenged, the more defeated she felt. At the end of her search, it had been for nothing. There wasn't a single water bottle at their campsite. What was she supposed to do now? Hike all the way back down to the Jeep and see if there was something in Hunter's vehicle she could use to keep the water in? What if she couldn't find anything? Would she have to drive somewhere? She didn't even know the area. She covered her face with both hands and pressed her pointer fingers into her forehead with enough force to create small bruises.

She covered her face with both hands and screamed into them.

He was counting on her, but she couldn't think of a way to save him. If only her mom were here. She'd know what to do. Her heart grew heavy as she thought about her mother. She had the chance to hike back down to the Jeep, retrieve her phone, and text her mom about their change of plans, but she hadn't. She let Nolan guilt her into waiting. Now she was alone with no food, no water – except for the fountain of youth she was probably forbidden to drink – and there wasn't a soul who knew where they were. Worst of all, Kaylee and Nolan were both dead and Hunter would probably be next if she couldn't get back to him in time. She wept softly in her hands.

What about the sleeping bag? She suddenly remembered that she and Hunter took water bottles to bed with them a few hours ago. Maybe one of them would be near it or inside it somewhere? As far as she could tell, it was her best option.

She stumbled over to the sleeping bag, hitting her knees beside it as tears continued to fall down the sides of her freckled cheeks. She turned the sleeping bag over in her hands, feeling something moving around on the inside. Another stroke of good luck. One of their water bottles was tucked away, half full, inside the sleeping bag. Now the only thing left to do was fill it up and take it back to him, all the while hoping she could get to him in time.

She headed down the brightly lit blue path of stalactites and stalagmites, carefully trying to avoid touching them as she weaved her body through the maze of protruding cave rocks. As she curled her body through the familiar maze, she couldn't help but think about the box where they found the notebook. Every so often, she glanced to her right, desperate to remember where Nolan had left it, but she continued to come up short. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the path, except for the number of stalactites and stalagmites. It was strange to see so many

of them. It was almost as if the number increased since the last time she'd gone down the path just hours before.

Where's that box? It's gotta be over there somewhere! She couldn't help but think if she just got the chance to read it, she might find something in the old writings that could help her. Either way, she didn't have time to look for it. That much, she was sure. Hunter's disfigured body flashed into her memory, bringing on another wave of nausea. *Deep breaths, Emily.*

In moments, she was inside the large room with the crystal-clear lake. Her memory flashed through moving photos of her wounded leg, Nolan pushing her from behind, her vivid dream with her father and grandparents, and Hunter pushing on her chest to get the water out. He'd saved her life here. Now it was her turn to save his.

She got to her knees just inches away from the water, her half-empty bottle still in her hand. Not wanting to mix the water together, she turned the bottle up and drank the remaining liquid inside. Then she placed the bottle in the lake and waited for the icy water to fill it up. All the while, her eyes darted back and forth as though she were waiting for someone to jump out and scare her. Or worse, come to kill her for stealing the water.

"I just want to heal my friend," she said aloud, her eyes focusing on the cave wall beside her. "Please tell the gods I don't want to make them mad. I don't want to abuse your water or sell it." She bit her lip, feeling ridiculous. She was literally talking to no one, and no one was talking back to her. *I must be crazy.*

As the liquid bubbled into the water bottle, she thought about her mom again. She could picture the 39-year-old woman sitting on the pistachio-colored, crushed velvet couch, scratching the middle finger on her left hand with her pointer finger on her right. It was something she had done for as long as she could remember and it was always because she was deep in thought. That

particular day, she had come home to complain about Hunter. It was their first double date with Nolan and Kaylee. Hunter had dropped that bomb on her in Mr. Hodges class during his lecture on Nazi, Germany, knowing full well they couldn't have a real conversation about it. It all had felt like a setup.

"Maybe it'd be good for you to get to know his friends," she'd said. "I'm not crazy about how he went about it either, but you know, honey? Guys are just different. Maybe he thought you'd say no if he'd asked you up front."

"I would have!"

"Well, there you go. You just proved my point," she'd smiled, satisfied.

"It's not that simple, mom! Nolan is so obnoxious and Kaylee? Ugh! I can't stand her!"

"You hardly know her, honey, give her a chance." Mom had a way of making things sound so easy, even when they weren't.

"And sometimes he gets me so mad, mom! I know he grew up with them, but it's like talking to a wall with him."

She smiled as the memory melted away. What she wouldn't give now to be face-to-face with such a trivial problem. The more she thought about it, the more it made her smile. Between her dad's words to "stand up when your back's against a wall" and her own words to her mom about "talking to a wall," she felt like she'd had enough irony for one day. *I wish you could see me now, mom. I really am talking to a wall.*

Once the water bottle was full, she looked around the cave again, still waiting for something bad to happen. Maybe another earthquake? She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut, holding the water bottle in her hand as she anxiously waited to see the cave's reaction. Minutes

passed, but nothing happened. She must have been right about the legend. It wasn't going to punish her for trying to save Hunter's life.

She got to her feet and took off running down the path, shoving the full water bottle into her back pocket. If she hurried, maybe she could still save him.

Chapter 14: The Watchkeeper

The hippie stood timidly on the outside of the cave. It'd been 20 years since he dared to venture inside, but he wasn't sure he could just walk away. He felt the earthquake from his tent, two miles away from the cave. It must have been bad.

Walk away. Just walk away.

But there was a reason he stuck around; a reason he lived off the grid, why he didn't bother with society, why he didn't have friends, and why he never went far from the cave. As much as he was afraid of what was going on inside, he could still do something good. Even if that good was to save only one person. It hadn't happened yet, but that didn't mean it never would. That girl he'd seen a few days ago, the only one in the bunch that had any sense about her, she might be the first one to make it out. The first one to prove his efforts hadn't been in vain.

He continued to stand on the outside, his fear crippling him from venturing in. There was no way he was reliving the events from last time. No way he could stomach seeing the things he'd seen. *But what if that girl needs your help? What if she's innocent in all this? You just gonna leave her in there all alone?*

He took a deep breath and entered the cave.

Slowly, he crept down the shaft, clutching tightly to the wall as the path jugged straight down. He'd almost forgotten how easily it was to lose your balance on the steep decline of the cave's entrance. He stopped momentarily to take another deep inhale, exhaling it sharply back out as he worked to steady his breathing. All the while, he tried to remember why entering the cave was a good idea. That's when he heard footsteps.

“Hello?” he said as he tiptoed inside the front room of the cave. He looked around and immediately, he felt disoriented. The cave certainly looked like it’d experienced an earthquake the way the kids’ clothes were thrown around. His eyes darted around the room for the footsteps he’d heard moments ago. “Hello?”

The blue light caught his eyes, and he turned his head to peer at the old jungle of cave rocks. There, he saw the familiar teenage girl, alone, and walking toward the campsite. The way her attention was focused on navigating through the entangled maze of stalactites and stalagmites, it was obvious she hadn’t heard him. He waited, his hands shaking, as the girl tiptoed closer to him.

“Hey,” he said once she was mere feet away. She jumped, her body nearly falling backward as she took him in. “Sorry, sorry. I, uh, I met you before, remember? I’m not gonna hurt you.” He held his palms up as a sign of surrender, hoping she understood the gesture.

“What—” the girl tried collecting herself. “What are you doing here?” Her face and knees were smeared with dry mud and her loose ponytail revealed a frightening story he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear.

“I felt the earthquake. Just wanted to see if you kids were alright,” he said, not wanting to give too much away. He still wasn’t sure how much the girl knew about the cave, and he wasn’t willing to risk scaring her if she were oblivious.

“No,” she said, her eyes immediately filling with tears, “but I don’t have time to talk about it. Hunter’s waiting for me.”

“Slow down,” he said, closing the space between them and putting his hands on her shoulders. “Tell me what happened.” Every ounce of him wanted to run from the cave screaming. He didn’t want any part of this. Not again. At the same time, he wanted to be there

for her because it was like being there for his friend. He'd never been able to prevent anyone from enduring the same fate, but maybe this time, that would change. She was alive, standing right in front of him.

"I don't know," she said as her tears brimmed over. "We just woke up in the middle of this earthquake and Nolan and Kaylee were dead and Hunter tried to help them, but he's hurt, and now I have to help him."

"Slow down," he said as he continued to rest his hands on her shoulders. "What happened to Nolan and Bailey?"

"Kaylee," she corrected.

"Kaylee, sorry." He tried to make his voice sound empathetic. "What happened to Nolan and Kaylee?"

"I don't know!" the girl whimpered. "They were ghosts and they were flying, and I think that legend..." she trailed off and it looked as though her mind was off in a hundred different directions. She looked into his eyes, and he could feel her questions boring into him. He could only wonder which one she would ask first and if he could tell her the truth. "Who are you?"

Of all the things she could have asked, that was probably the easiest one he could answer. "My name is Ben."

"Ben?" Her eyebrows pulled together. Recognition seemed to fill her eyes as she backed away from the stranger. "Not the Ben who killed his best friend?"

"I didn't hurt him!" his voice cracked as he spoke. As many times as people accused him over the years, he'd been waiting for the day when the sting of the false accusation would go away. Today was not that day. The girl's words stood only to prove the wound was as fresh as it had always been. "We came in here for the same reason as you. Young kids, thought we knew

everything, wanted to explore, and wanted to find out if the old legends were true. We were stupid.”

“What happened?” There was a genuine curiosity and softness in the girl’s voice that made him believe she regretted her assumption.

“I guess the same thing that happened to you. We found an old box with a notebook in it, read the piece of paper...”

“Us too,” she interrupted.

“You put it back?” Ben’s heart began to race.

“We did after we read it.”

“So, you know not to mess with that water back there,” he said as he pointed a finger in the direction of the blue path. “That’s what happened to Jeff.” He could feel his tears demanding a voice, but he was determined not to oblige them. He swallowed hard to push them back down his throat.

“What happened to Jeff? Were you close?”

“Yeah, we was real close. He wasn’t just my best friend. He was fixing to be my brother.” He could feel the memory flooding back to his mind. “20 years ago, before we come into this torture chamber, I was gonna marry Jeff’s sister, Kelly. Man, I loved that girl. Still do. Jeff had this wild idea to make money off the water and he was the kinda guy where you couldn’t tell him nothing. Once he got an idea in his head, he went running with it. I didn’t believe in the legend myself. It all sounded like a bunch of mumbo jumbo, but I didn’t wanna take any chances either. Call me superstitious or whatever, but if you can avoid breaking a mirror, walking under a ladder, or taking water out of an old cave, then you ought to just do it.”

“That makes sense.”

“But Jeff wanted to have a good life with the girl he was gonna propose to. One where they didn’t have to worry about money like his folks did. So, he cut his finger with a hunting knife to see if the legend was true and dipped it in the water back there, bleeding and everything. It went back to normal. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers as he spoke. “So, he filled up both Coke bottles he had with him. Then he filled up mine. He just kept talking about how he was gonna be rich. I didn’t want any part of it, so I let him do what he was gonna do. That’s when the earthquake hit, and a big rock fell on him.” He could feel the lump rising again in his throat, knowing the worst part of the story was coming. He inhaled again, more sharply than before, and choked the lump down.

“It crushed him to death. I watched my best friend die right in front of me.” He looked down the familiar blue path and, despite his best efforts, Ben’s tears betrayed him. “Then I watched his soul leave his body. It was whisked into that pit back there. His body just became part of the cave and I ain’t seen him since. Course, nobody believed me ‘cept Kelly. It didn’t matter though. I couldn’t look her in the eye after I let that happen to Jeff. Couldn’t forgive myself. How was she supposed to?”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Her voice was full of concern.

“It’s awful nice of you to say that.”

“Whatever happened to Kelly?”

“Last I heard, she worked for some computer company. I guess she’s happy.”

“Did she ever get married?” She turned her face down and Ben could only guess the question had embarrassed her somehow.

“No. No, she didn’t.” He turned his eyes away from the young girl. She looked so much like Kelly used to that it almost pained him to meet her gaze.

“Maybe you could help me!” she said. She seemed eager to change the subject. “Hunter got hurt and...”

“Who’s Hunter?” Ben tried to shake the image of Kelly from his mind and focus on what Emily was saying.

“My... my boyfriend.” She bit her lip as she spoke. “He got hurt down that path and...”

“And? Wait, how did he get hurt?” He wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes and was immediately suspicious, though he wasn’t sure why.

“During the earthquake, after Nolan and Kaylee’s...” she swallowed hard, “ghosts flew back there, he went to help them.”

“Help ‘em? You can’t help ‘em now! They’re—”

“I know!” she cried. “I tried to tell him, but he went anyway. When I found him, he said his back was broken and his leg was bleeding and—”

“We gotta get outta here. Get him some help,” he said as he reached out for Emily’s hand.

“I’ve already got him some,” she said as she pulled her hand away. She reached back and retrieved the water bottle from her back pocket.

“What’s that?” he asked, his voice shrill. Emily may as well have been holding a loaded gun. His heart stopped and he stumbled backward, landing on the ground with a loud thump. Sweat poured from his forehead as his eyes stayed glued to the catastrophic disaster in the girl’s hand.

“After Nolan pushed me in the water when I hurt my leg and it healed it, I just figured it could do the same for Hunter before it’s too late. He’s hurt bad!”

“Get that thing away from me! Haven’t you heard a word I’ve said? I don’t want anything to do with this and you shouldn’t either!” He hustled to his feet and backed away from the promise of death she carried in her hand.

“I’m just going to heal him with it. The legend says it’s ok!” she argued.

“No! No! Get it away. I’m not going along with this! I’m not!” He scrambled to his feet and went running from the cave.

Chapter 15: Goodnight

Hunter tried to move, but other than his arms, the rest of his body wasn't working. All he could feel was pain. The one time he tried to stand up, he regretted it immediately. The agony in his back was grueling. It was as though he'd fallen off the side of a cliff, rather than smashed his back into the corner of a sharp cave wall. He closed his eyes, a pathetic attempt to ignore the unignorable afflictions of his body.

When he reopened them, he saw the bouncing light of Emily's flashlight coming toward him. At least, he thought it was Emily. But it felt too soon for her to be coming back for him. Maybe he was just dreaming. That seemed more likely. He'd been in the dark for so long that he was now pretending she was back with help.

The bouncing light continued to approach him, growing larger and larger as he laid there, surrounded by blackness. At least, this was a good delusion. As much as the light was bobbling, he almost believed it was there. It was refreshing against the total blackness he'd been experiencing since Emily left. As he tried to ignore the tortuous injuries throughout his body, a task that seemed impossible at best, he started to wonder if his eyes would adjust. Maybe, somehow, he could find a way to see inside the pitch black. It was a nice thought, but he had just as much a chance at seeing inside the cave as he did ignoring the excruciating agony of his dilapidated body.

He shrugged away the thought immediately. He knew enough about the human body to know his eyes could never adjust to the blackness, but it was still his delusion. Couldn't he pretend that humans were superhuman if he wanted? A sharp pain ripped into this back, causing him to cry out loud against the horrifying agony. That was all he could do now, aside from trying to enjoy his delusion. If only his body would cooperate.

As he lay in the dark, he had the incredible urge to sleep away his injuries. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea and the more distant his pain seemed to become. He'd spent enough time with patients to know that sleep was the best thing for the body to heal itself. It wouldn't—and couldn't— heal his back, but if he had other injuries, less severe ones, then resting might help. Besides, who knew how long it'd be before she returned with help? Probably hours.

It was decided. He would sleep until she came back. He couldn't see anyway, except for the jumping light he'd conjured up in his interesting hallucination. What was the harm in getting a little nap? None he could think of. Then, suddenly, his body felt strange. Stranger than strange. Like, it wasn't sleep it craved, but something else entirely. What, he couldn't be sure. Whatever it was, he would figure it out when he woke up.

Then, he drifted off into the most peaceful sleep he'd ever had.

Chapter 16: Memories of the Past

Hunter's body was laying in the same position when Emily returned with the bottle of healing water. On accident, she shined the flashlight in his eyes, and he closed them immediately after.

"Sorry!" she whispered as she tiptoed next to him. Instinctively, she shined it all over his mangled body, her stomach heaving all over again. She drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and bent down to set the flashlight on the ground, turning the light away from his face.

"I'm here. I brought the water," she whispered. She waited for his response, but he said nothing. *Maybe I wasn't loud enough.*

"Hunter!" She waited, but her increase in volume didn't even make him flinch. "Hunter!"

Her mind raced. Reflexively, she put her hand on his shoulder and began to shake his body while calling out his name. Still, his eyes remained closed and he laid there without moving. Her pulse quickened, and she struggled to catch her breath. Somehow, his unmoving body left her feeling the cold inside the cave as goosebumps prickled all over her arms and legs.

Suddenly, she was in the hospital room with her father.

"Dad?" she whispered. "Daddy, wake up!" Just one second before, he was telling her how much he would always love her. How could it be he couldn't hear her now? "Daddy!"

She turned to her mother for answers, but everything she needed to know was brimming over in her mother's tears. A weight crushed against her chest, making breathing a painful chore rather than a natural human function. Everything in her body ached like she'd run twenty miles in a marathon without stopping for air or a drink of water.

“I love you, my darling,” her mother had whispered as she bent down to kiss her husband’s cheek for the last time. Tearfully, she began to sing *Amazing Grace* to heaven’s newest, most selfless angel.

Her chest grew tighter, and an enormous knot formed at the base of her throat. Unable to swallow it down, she allowed the sobs to erupt from the pit of her stomach as she held her father’s lifeless hand in hers. “Daddy, don’t go. Please.” She pulled his hand to her lips and wept into it, allowing her tears to rain down his knuckles and onto the floor.

“I once was lost, but now I’m found...” her mother continued to choke out the song.

“Can’t you do something?” she scanned the room, but not one of the nurses would meet her gaze. It was like they were all ashamed to. “Save him! Bring him back!” She continued to weep into her father’s hand as her mother began the second verse of her father’s favorite song.

Her eyes scanned the cave, but all she could see was darkness. The only exception was the lone flashlight on the ground that shined onto Hunter’s lifeless body. His hand, she realized, was in hers.

“Hunter, wake up!” she begged as she pressed the back of his hand against her cheek.

She rocked her body side to side, all the while holding his hand against the side of her face, her tears pouring over it and melting down the side of his arm.

“You need to get yourself together if you’re gonna save him,” she heard her father say.

I’m not a doctor, daddy. I don’t know how! Tell me!

“Check his pulse. You need to make sure there’s something there to save.”

She pulled Hunter’s hand away from her cheek and, as she’d seen her own doctor do during checkups, she pressed her fingers against his pulse. When she didn’t feel it in her fingers, she tried again, pressing harder. “No! You can’t be gone!”

Her body began to convulse as she worked to make sense of what was happening. *His neck. Maybe I'll feel it in his neck!* She pressed her shaking fingers into the side of his neck, but again, she felt nothing. *This isn't happening! This isn't happening!* She doubled over into hysterics, as a sob she'd been holding in rocked through her body.

“Calm down, honey,” her father said. “You haven't put your fingers under his nose. Try that. Maybe you'll feel the warmth of his breath.”

It's too late, daddy. It's too late! He's gone! As she thought the last word, she threw her arms over Hunter's body and allowed all of her tears to soak his bloody shirt. With her face against his chest, she received her final confirmation that he was dead. His heart had stopped beating. There was nothing but nothing in his chest.

“It isn't fair! It's not fair!” She continued to hold tightly onto him as her tears soaked through his shirt.

As she wept onto his lifeless body, all the memories of their short time together came flooding back. His dreamy blue eyes the first time he looked at her in history class, the time he asked her to be his girlfriend, that first kiss. She thought about how his eyes teared when he told her about losing Rachel and how that experience inspired him to help people. Now, when he needed someone to help him, she couldn't do it.

Amid her sobbing, she looked up, suddenly remembering the bottle of healing water she brought with her. When it was her father, there was nothing she could do to save him. No healing water she could give him to reverse the damage that had been done. But she could save Hunter. She could pour the water over his injuries and bring him back!

For the first time since she realized Hunter was dead, she had hope. Maybe in saving Hunter, she could find redemption in her inability to save her father. Hunter could go on. He could help others and maybe, he could save lives.

“What about the curse?” She heard her father’s voice again in her head.

What about it? It didn’t hurt me before when I filled up the water bottle.

“Because you were trying to heal a young man. You remember what that curse said. You can’t use that water for immortality. You can’t bring him back from the dead.”

Maybe that’s not what it means. Maybe it means you can’t use it to live forever. There’s got to be a reason it said you could heal the young and wounded.

“You’re wrong. Don’t do this.” There was a fear in his voice that left her body convulsing. On one hand, she knew why he was warning her. It made sense. On the other hand, she couldn’t shake the feeling that bringing Hunter back wouldn’t violate the rules of the curse. If the Tahomas used it to rebuild their tribe, maybe part of that was restoring life to those who would have otherwise died young.

She stared at the bottle of magic water, deliberating. What would happen to her if she used the water? What would happen to Hunter? When she hurt her leg and Nolan pushed her into the water, the water healed her leg, but the gods hadn’t taken her. Why? Maybe it was because she had no control over her leg being healed. Or maybe it was because she, too, was young and wounded. Either way, she bore no fault in using the water to heal her leg. Perhaps the same scenario would be applied here. Like Nolan, she was just using the water to heal someone. And she wasn’t even doing it for selfish reasons as Nolan had. She wanted to help someone. She wanted to save a life and, in doing so, save others.

“No, you’d be using it to bring them back from the dead,” her father said. “That’s different and you know it.”

But he won’t be affected by it. He’d be an innocent bystander like I was. And maybe nothing will happen to me either. Nothing happened to Nolan.

“Nolan sought healing, not immortality.”

Nolan just wanted to know if it worked. He didn’t care about healing me. If she was sure of anything, it was that.

“It’s not a good idea.”

If I save him, Daddy, I’m saving others. She could only imagine how many people’s lives could be touched by Hunter. He was a good guy who wouldn’t be lying on the ground right now, his soul inches above his body, if he hadn’t risked his life to try and save Nolan and Kaylee. It may have been in vain, but that’s how big his heart was. He was willing to keep trying to save someone, even when they were beyond saving.

“Don’t do it.”

I love you, Daddy. With that, she reached for the bottle and opened the lid. She had to act quickly. If she was wrong, the cave probably wouldn’t hesitate to come for her and if it did, at least she could save Hunter first. She scanned his body, careful to observe where his injuries were to save time.

She took a deep breath and began pouring the water on his back. Then she went for his leg where the blood was oozing and dumped nearly all the remaining contents on his body, reserving only a few drops in the bottle. With the tiny amount left, she dropped the rest on the tip of his tongue.

Emily closed her eyes, hugged her knees, and waited for the cave's wrath to consume her. She could feel the warmth of her tears as they poured like rainwater down the sides of her burning cheeks. As she waited for the stab of death, she felt something brush against her leg as a strange, yet familiar sound erupted beside her.

“Hunter?”

Then the ground began to rock beneath her as a loud clang —reminiscent of a falling stalactite— went crashing to the ground nearby.

Epilogue

“That’s the craziest story I’ve ever heard!” Riley said as she zeroed in on her brother’s face. Although I gotta hand it to you. You picked the right setting,” she said, her eyes scanning the cave.

“Totally,” Selena chimed in, scooting close to her best friend as the two sat on a blanket in front of the fire. “This place gives me the creeps. You’ll protect me, right?”

“We’ll protect each other,” Riley asserted as she locked elbows with Selena. “Joey, of all the dumb ideas you’ve had, this one’s got to be the dumbest. Ohhh,” she mocked, “let’s go explore a scary cave and tell ghost stories! The cave has legends! It’s super creepy!”

“The only thing creepy about this cave was the old man outside,” Michael said. He laughed out loud as Core held his right hand up for a high-five. “Don’t take anything from the cave!” Michael’s voice mimicked as he chuckled loudly beside his friend. Then he crouched down and lightly threw his shoulder into Michael’s knees, knocking him off-balance and sending him to the ground as both teens laughed heartily. They playfully wrestled on the claylike floor, tossing each other in what Selena discerned was a weak imitation of John Cena.

“Yeah, I like how you threw that into the story, Joey. Real clever. Was that supposed to make us think it’s the same guy?” She rolled her eyes as she spoke. “You’re so transparent.”

“It’s true!” he argued.

“Bromance alert,” Selena giggled, working to spare her bestie from an inevitable argument with Joey.

“For real, girl,” Riley agreed as she turned her eyes longingly to Core.

“Hot girls sitting over here and they’re more into each other.” Selena could hear her own annoyance, but she didn’t care. “What does he know?”

“Exactly.”

Selena followed Riley’s gaze over to Core, her bestie’s longtime crush, and immediately felt an ache in her heart. Last year, Selena had convinced Riley to ask him out, only to find out that Core turned her down with the whole, ‘You’re great, but I think we’re better off as friends’ excuse. Selena felt guilty all over again. The look on Riley’s heartbroken face was one she was all too familiar with: unrequited love. What teenager hadn’t suffered its wrath?

“It’s his loss,” she said, only to Riley. “By the time he figures that out, you’ll probably be married to some hot football player.”

The reassurance worked better than she hoped. In seconds, she and Riley were doubled over in laughter and making jokes about the school’s football team.

Riley turned her attention back to Joey. “So, little brother…”

“You’re only one minute older, Riles. Give it a rest,” Joey reminded her, his eyes rolling so far back in his head that Selena wondered if they’d get stuck.

“As I was saying, little brother,” Riley said—this time adding extra emphasis to word “little.”— “how does the story end? You kinda gave us a cliffhanger. Did Hunter die? Did Emily? What gives?”.

“Well, after Emily sacrificed herself by pouring the magic water over Hunter’s body, not even knowing if her efforts held the power to exempt her from the curse, he was miraculously brought back to life. It turns out the markings they found on the cave wall, the ones Nolan and Emily were trying to figure out, were in Mother Nature’s own language and they revealed that an act of self-sacrifice nullifies the curse of the magic water. So, Emily’s willingness to give up her life to save Hunter’s not only protected her from the curse but saved his life as well.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad story,” Michael said.

“Unless you’re Nolan and Kaylee,” Riley laughed as she clapped her hands together.

“Ahh, but Hunter and Emily’s story doesn’t end there. When authorities came looking for the bodies of Nolan and Kaylee, they were never found, leaving police to speculate that Hunter and Emily’s story about the magic cave were lies to cover up the murders of their friends.”

“But why would they kill Nolan and Kaylee? What do they gain from that?” Core asked.

“Envy? Greed? People believe their worst nightmares. A guy killing two of his best friends is anybody’s bad dream. But the locals know the truth about the cave and dare not enter in, fearful of becoming prey to the curse that dwells inside. For Hunter and Emily, telling the truth landed them in psychiatric hospitals where they remain today. They live their lives doped up on sleeping pills and anxiety medication, telling anyone who will listen the tale of the magic cave. Muah ha ha ha ha,” Joey laughed in his most sinister, villainous voice.

Selena looked around at all the wide eyes in the group, wondering who would be the first to respond to the ridiculous tale, but they all erupted into laughter.

“That sounds more like a comedy to me than a ghost story,” Michael chuckled.

“I don’t know. It’s kinda depressing,” Riley weighed in. “Where do you get this stuff, baby brother?”

Joey’s eyes reddened as he turned to face his sister. “Aunt Crystal.”

Riley rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me. Church gossip?”

“It’s not just church gossip, Riles!” Joey argued. “One of the chicks in her women’s group works with Emily’s mom.”

“For real?”

“For real,” Joey confirmed.

“Well, you wanna know what I heard?” Michael asked, his voice climbing an octave in excitement as he rubbed his hands together like an evil genius plotting his next scheme.

“Anything’s better than that story,” Selena allowed. “By all means!” She waved her hand in front of her like a butler introducing a visitor.

“My older brother went to school with Hunter, and he said Nolan and Emily had a little something-something on the side and Kaylee busted them. She threatened to tell Hunter everything, and boom! Winds up dead. Hunter thought Nolan killed Kaylee, so Hunter killed Nolan!” Michael’s eyes were wide and animated as he spoke.

“Why would Hunter be so mad at Nolan for killing Kaylee if Emily was his girlfriend?” Riley asked, her eyebrow raised.

“‘Cuz him and Kaylee had a little something-something on the side, too. She was his soulmate, but he didn’t wanna break up with Emily because he thought she’d go crazy. Her dad died and she was always talking to him like he was still alive.” Michael brought his left hand by his temple and, with his pointer finger, made circles beside his head. “So, Hunter doesn't know what to do about this crazy chick and just stays with her, but he keeps his thing going with Kaylee. He couldn’t say nothing no way. He was getting his kicks with his best friend’s girl, you know? So now, Nolan and Kaylee are dead, and Hunter buries their bodies in the cave. Police never did find ‘em.”

“Maybe he threw ‘em both in the water,” Riley laughed.

“Death by magic water!” Selena agreed, slapping her knee and doubling over in laughter. The girls clutched onto each other, rocking and chuckling at the same time.

“That’s wild, man!” Core said, his eyes bulging. “So they never got caught?”

“Cops didn’t have enough evidence. But I heard they was in the crazy house, too,”

Michael said, nodding.

“Guilt?” Riley asked.

“Oh yeah!” Selena said, a lightbulb going off in her head. “You’re probably right.”

“So wild, man,” Core repeated. “To be honest, I think that second story makes the most sense though. Come on. Magic healing water? Native American legends? Who would believe a story like that?”

“That’s why we’re here, man! We gonna find out tomorrow morning.” Michael said, excitement building behind his hazel eyes.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Riley said.

“Really bad,” Selena agreed, as the girls’ laughter dissipated.

“Sounds like fun to me,” Core disagreed, a huge grin forming on his round cheeks.

“Well,” Riley began, “maybe it won’t be awful.” Selena watched as Riley’s attention was stolen by Core. Once they made eye contact, Riley’s blushing smile left Selena an ally short.

“Thanks a lot, bestie,” Selena whispered into Riley’s ear, knowing her best friend was the only one who could hear her. “*Cornelius*” —she made the name sound like it was coming from a 5-year-old who thought boys had cooties— “smiles at you and there goes your common sense.”

“Come on, Sel, do you really think you’re sitting in a magic cave with magic water where people died from disobeying the gods?” The way she said it made Selena feel as childish as she knew she sounded when she said Cornelius’ name just moments ago. “Besides, you know how much he hates to be called that. It’s Core.”

“Sure, I’ll call him whatever you want me to.” Selena rolled her eyes at Riley, but Riley’s eyes were still glued to her crush.

“We doing this or what?” Joey asked, clapping his hands together.

“I guess we’re doing it, little brother,” Riley smiled.

“First light,” Core agreed, his laughter infectious. “We’re off to explore a magic cave!”

Once again, the group doubled over in laughter.

Annotated Bibliography

Amazon. (n.d.). *An Un-Conventional Murder* Kindle Edition. Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01FLHODPO/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1

This source was especially useful, as it provided a way to review a similar fictional book that took place in a cave. In addition to its similarities to my project, the author is noted as being an avid cave explorer and so, it's filled with cave lingo that was useful for the research topic.

Bottoms, Anthony, and Joanna Shapland. "Can Persistent Offenders Acquire Virtue?" *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 27, no. 3, Aug. 2014, pp. 318–333,

doi:10.1177/0953946814530233. Retrieved from:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0953946814530233>

I chose this resource as I wrote my critical piece during the proposal phase of this project. My project was based on the ideology that greed is a strong driving force that some are unable to steer from, for whatever reason. In today's world when people are taught to "follow their heart," I wanted to explore the idea of whether or not a person could change if they had bad habits that persisted over a long period of time. This article explored that very thing.

CBS News. (2016, March 11). *Homeowner shoots, kills teen burglary suspect*. CBS News

Miami. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/teen-burglary-suspect-killed-homeowner/>

Again, while doing research for the critical piece, I wanted to learn more about how the world sees crime and sin. In this particular story, the teenager who was killed during a

robbery defended the actions of the teenager, one family member suggesting that burglary was the only way he could afford to buy things, as if the action should be considered acceptable. Regardless of how you view the case or whether or not the homeowner should have shot and killed the teenager, the research that interested me most is how the teenager's actions were defended by his family members.

Covington, Taylor. (May 18, 2022). *The Zebra*. <https://comfyliving.net/home-invasion-statistics/>

During the research phase, learning the statistics of home invasions became important to the critical piece. As such, I wanted to make sure I had my facts correct before including them in the paper.

Curtis, Mary B., Robertson, Jesse C., Cameron, Cockrell R., and Dutch, Fayard L. "Peer Ostracism as a Sanction Against Wrongdoers and Whistleblowers." *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 174, no. 2, Nov. 2021, pp. 333-354, doi: 10.1007/s10551-020-04596-0.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2594891204/fulltextPDF/440653B540E84245PQ/1?accountid=12085>

This article was important for the critical paper, as it showed how whistleblowers can be punished with disincentives or miss out on opportunities for being honest. Unfortunately, we live in a society where some people are ostracized for standing up for what's right, which is why this particular article was essential to the research.

English Standard Version Bible. (2001). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+12%3A15&version=NET>

Because my project was inspired by several elements of the Bible, it was crucial to include certain Bible verses throughout this body of work. Part of that was finding the

verses that went along with the critical piece, as well as the things that inspired the project.

“Greed.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greed>

Since greed was the theme of my project and the critical piece, it was important to find the best definition of the word to build my argument on. The Merriam-Webster is well-respected and has been around for a number of years, so it was the first place I looked when figuring out the best definition to use.

Haywood, Scott. (May 17, 2018). *When Wills Go Wrong* [Video File]. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhCJBfb-K4k>

This was a video I happened upon on YouTube by accident. With greed being my topic for my critical piece, as well as being the theme in my project, this particular video was an amazing find. It talked about two brothers at war with each other over their mother’s will. As such, greed destroyed their relationship.

King James Bible. (2017). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Timothy+6%3A10&version=KJV>

(Original work published 1769)

Again, Bible verses were essential to the project, as well as the critical piece. There were times when I opted to use different versions of the Bible, whether it be King James, English Standard, or some other version, just to add some variety to the paper.

Kovachevska, Marija. (January 13, 2022). *Comfy Living*. <https://comfyliving.net/home-invasion-statistics/>

This resource was important during the research phase, as I was in need of finding accurate statistics for home invasions. Home invasions are driven by theft, driven by need, desperation, or perhaps even revenge by the ones doing the invading. Regardless of the reason for home invaders to force entry, the important part of this research was having the statistics accurate for the paper.

Lyon, Christopher. (2022). *The Cave*. Focus on the Family's Plugged In

<https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/cave/>

I opted to watch this movie with my husband, quite frankly, because it shared the name of my book and took place inside a cave. It was absolutely crucial for me to get a feel of how they handled lighting in the movie so that I could write a better book. This particular review was helpful in that, it allowed me to get an idea of what the movie was about before I watched it and the “winged demons” they found inside.

Melossi, Dario. “Changing Representations of the Criminal.” *The British Journal of*

Criminology, Volume 40, Issue 2, March 2000, Pages 296–320. Retrieved from:

<https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article-abstract/40/2/296/611112>

This research was important during the critical paper phase in that, it helped to prove an argument I made about society being sympathetic toward criminals. I had written about how a teenage boy's family justified his burglary and so, an article where sympathy toward criminals was discussed helped to support that argument.

MindTools. “Helping People Take Responsibility: What Does It Mean to Take Ownership of

Your Work?” Retrieved from: [https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/taking-](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/taking-responsibility.htm)

[responsibility.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/taking-responsibility.htm)

While doing research for the critical paper, I sought an article that talked about taking responsibility for anything. In this article, it talked about taking responsibility for work you do, though learning how to take responsibility in this area could help a person take responsibility in other areas as well.

Murray, Donna. (October 31, 2021). *50 Native American Baby Names: Learn the meanings and origins of popular and unique Native American baby names*. verywellfamily.

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/native-american-baby-names-4590089>

This article was especially helpful when I was trying to come up with Native American names for my thesis project. It lists several Native American names, as well as their meanings, which I used when naming those characters and tribes in my project.

Natural Bridge Caverns. (2022). *NATURAL BRIDGE CAVERNS: Naturally AMAZING*. Natural Bridge Caverns. Retrieved from: <https://naturalbridgecaverns.com/geology/>

During the research process, it was important for me to explore caves in our area so I could get a feel of what these characters would be experiencing throughout the book.

Natural Bridge Caverns is one of the places I visited with my husband so we could learn more about caves, stalactites, and stalagmites, all of which were elements in my project.

Natural Bridge Virginia. (2022). *The Caverns at Natural Bridge*. Natural Bridge Historic Hotel and Conference Center. <https://naturalbridgeva.com/caverns/>

Again, this was part of my cave research while I was putting the project together. I visited both the Natural Bridge websites, as well as the cave to get more information about caves.

Newhauser, Richard. *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature*. Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Retrieved from: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam032/99025922.pdf>

For the critical paper, one of the arguments I made was that greed leads to death. It is also the theme in my project. As such, I sought an article that talked about this very thing, which I found in Newhauser's piece. He specifically talks about how greed leads to death.

Sandersen, Catherine A. "Six Tips for Speaking Up Against Bad Behavior: Psychologist

Catherine Sandersen explains how to be more courageous in speaking up about bad behavior, from offensive speech to harmful actions." Sept. 30, 2020,

greatergood.berkeley.edu. Retrieved from:

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_tips_for_speaking_up_against_bad_behavior

This resource was perfect for the argument I was making in the critical piece about speaking up against wrongdoers and how the culture needs to change. Rather than defend the bad guy or develop a soft spot for them, we should hold them accountable. That starts by speaking up. Alongside the article that talked about whistleblowers missing opportunities or being offered disincentives for speaking up, rather than incentives for their honesty. This article helped with that argument, as it talked about changing the way society does things by encouraging them to speak up against wrongdoing.

Silvestru, Emil. (2008). *The Cave Book (Wonders of Creation)*. Masterbooks.

This book was wonderful in terms of researching caves. It had so much information in it about caves, both young and old, and their histories. It was especially important to have a

book like this at my fingertips as I researched caves, so I could create a realistic world for these characters to move around in.

Skinner, Charles M. (1896). *The Division of Two Tribes*. Legends of America.

<https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-twotribes/>

This resource was important in the research process, as it allowed me to get a feel for Native American legends. Since I was including Native American folklore in my work, I wanted to get a feel for other legends and how they were told.

Taflinger, Richard F. "Taking Advantage: The Sociological Basis of Greed."

<https://public.wsu.edu/~taflinge/socgreed.html>

As a person who likes to double up on everything and do extensive research, I wanted to find an additional definition of greed somewhere. Not knowing exactly where to look, I came across this article during my research that had a great title which included the word "greed." Greed being the theme for my thesis project, this article practically screamed at me to open it, and I'm glad I did. In it, the author, Taflinger, offered a definition of greed that was perfect for my research and the critical piece.

The Living Bible. (1971). Bible Gateway.

The Living Bible is my favorite translation of the Bible, so I'm happy I was able to include it as part of my research. As a Christian, I believe it's important to cover all my bases and use different versions of the Bible when talking to someone, witnessing, or even, writing a research paper. The reader/listener should be able to discern for themselves that, although the versions are worded differently, still all mean the same thing.

True Crime Daily. (February 20, 2017). *Man Admits To Killing Son For Life Insurance- Crime Watch Daily With Chris Hansen (Pt 3)* [Video File]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj7LxFqgsPQ>

This was another video on YouTube that I found by accident, simply by typing in a few key words. I was researching the things people do in the name of greed and this popped up. It's a heartbreaking world we live in when a man is willing to kill his own son for money. With my book being about how greed brings on one's demise, this particular story was perfect for getting that message across in the critical piece.

Visit Roanoke Virginia. *History Museum of Western Virginia*.

<https://www.visitroanokeva.com/listings/history-museum-of-western-virginia/6205/>

This website was important, as I wanted to get an idea of what the History Museum of Western Virginia had to offer. I had visited the museum a while back but forgot more than I could remember. As such, I visited the website first to get a feel for what I might be seeing inside the museum. I remembered seeing Native American artifacts and so, I was most interested in that while doing my research, especially since I would be writing about Native American tools and the like in my thesis project.