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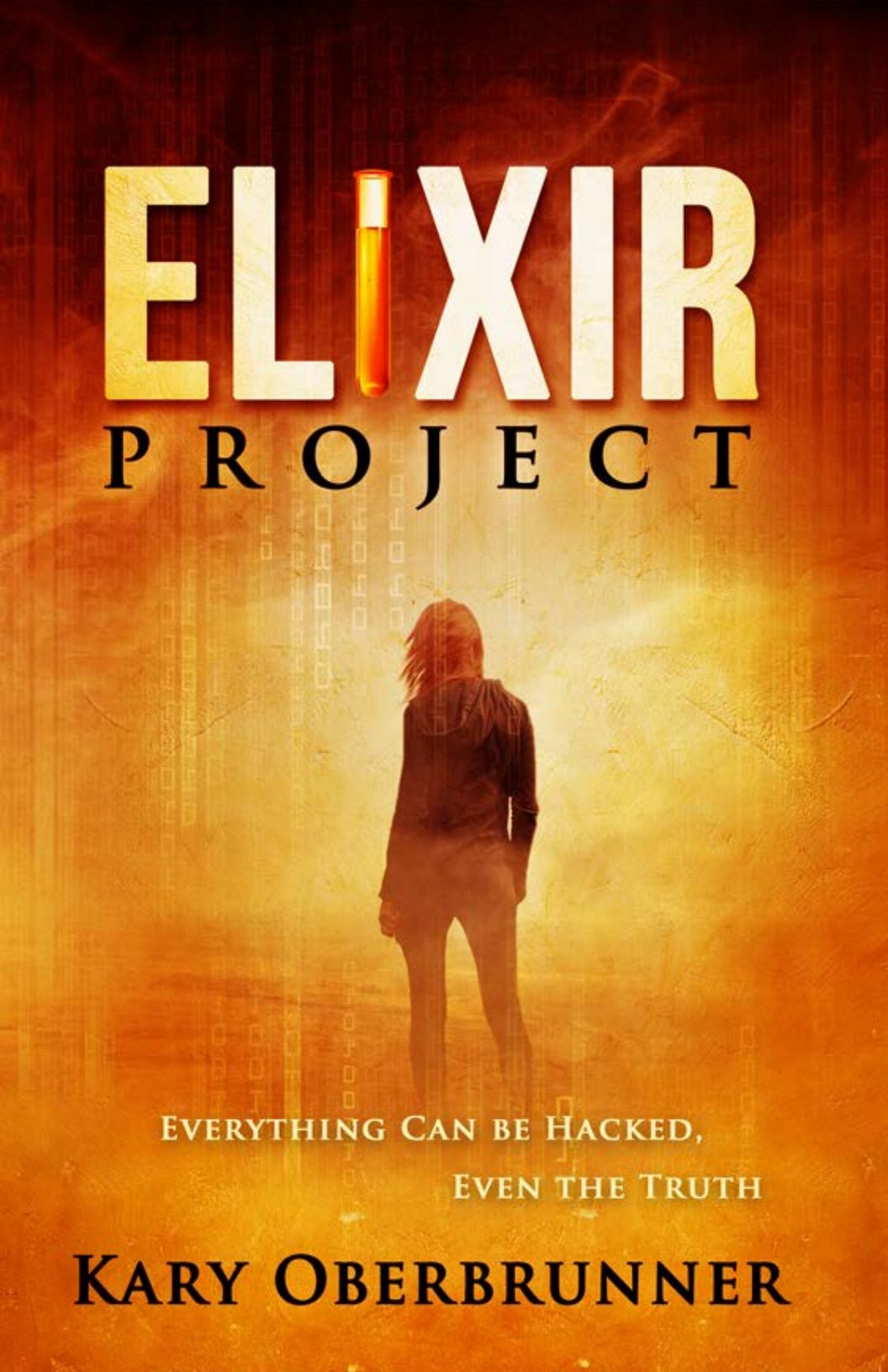

Everything Can be Hacked,
Even the Truth

Kary Oberbrunner

ELIXIR PROJECT

EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED, EVEN THE TRUTH.

KARY OBERBRUNNER

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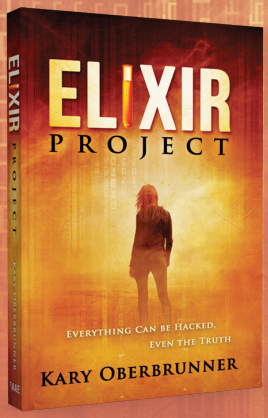

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CHAPTER ONE

"STRIP SEARCH 'EM," barks the senior TSA officer to his junior. Then he lowers his voice. "After last week's events, I'm not taking any chances."

The younger officer snaps up from his stool. "You heard him. You two, follow me!" he says, scowling at an attractive couple in their mid-twenties.

Both look innocent enough. What set the agents off? I'm not sure if the junior officer's abrupt tone is meant to impress his superior or intimidate those of us waiting in line. Judging by our expressions, I don't think either strategy is working well for Mr. Mall Cop.

"You can't be serious," the woman says. "I'm not going with you. And I'm *definitely* not getting naked."

Her travel companion jumps in. "We're just tech professionals on our way to meet with a private client in London. Why the search?"

They argue back and forth. Their growing resistance and escalating voices cause other officers to stop their check-in process. Pens freeze midway through verifying a long line of travelers anxious to get through security and one step closer to their anticipated destinations.

The other officers place their paperwork down and shuffle closer to the couple. Easygoing chitchat among the passengers dissipates. Like a thin metal wire stretched taut, the patience in the room is dangerously close to snapping.

"I think there's going to be a problem here," Nick whispers to me, Darren, and Chloe.

"Yeah," Chloe says. "This is starting to feel a little weird."

The senior officer towers directly over the couple in front of us. He looks crusty and weathered, like old leather left out in the afternoon sun too long. His eyes bug out slightly, but oddly they don't blink. He's close enough to smell—a musty odor, a mixture of cheap aftershave and wet dog. I read the lettering on his narrow tan name tag:

Officer McNultey

"Don't give us that 'tech professional' spiel," the irritable officer hisses. "We know exactly *who you are*. We can either discuss details here or privately back in our control room."

At the words *control room*, I catch a glimmer in his eye. Maybe even a wink?

The woman's eyebrows narrow. "I said, I'm not going anywhere with you." Her speech drips of a strength that I envy.

Her associate maintains his poise, too, but I'm near

enough to see his fingers twitch nervously. I'm sure he's capable, but the officers outnumber him half a dozen to one.

I want to look at my three friends instead. Maybe they know something I don't? But that would require turning from McNultey, and I'm not sure that's a good idea.

"We have passports and papers," the young businessman says, reaching in his pocket.

"*Stop!* And keep your hands where we can see them. We know you're linked with a SWARM sleeper cell here in the States."

Time stumbles and spins as I process his accusation. *SWARM? Here? Now?* A bead of perspiration trickles slowly down McNultey's face.

"Did you say SWARM?" a deep voice growls directly behind me.

A thick elbow smacks my back. I turn to see a large, balding man shaking with rage. His face twists and contorts, seizure-like. Bright shades of red streak from the tops of his ears all the way down to his wide neck and the gold chain encircling it. Tufts of dark chest hair sprout out from his button-down Hawaiian shirt.

He struggles to speak, as if someone has kidnapped his tongue. *"Filthy pigs. Y-you murdered my wife!"*

He lunges forward, flailing his arms and nearly knocking me over. The close quarters in this crowded line don't offer me much space, but Darren still has the presence of mind to react quickly. His arms catch me, gripping the small of

my back, wrapping around my waist, and stopping me from a nasty fall on an unforgiving floor.

Before I can gather my thoughts or my balance, another voice screams from behind us. "*Hackers from hell! You ruined my family*," a petite soccer mom yells. "You stole my identity, our money, and our dreams!"

Several others shout, voicing their disdain. Our once organized line pushes forward, mimicking a Black Friday crowd overly amped about doorbusters waiting on the other side.

"Quit pushing," an older man with a cane yells, trying to maintain his balance.

"Let security do their job," pleads a woman to my left.

Without space to stop the force welling up behind us, bodies begin toppling forward like bowling pins smacked by a heavy ball. Anger mounts, the cane falls, and fists begin to fly, in this supercharged, unforeseen escapade.

Scrunching down as low as we can, Darren, Chloe, Nick, and I crawl to the right, hoping to avoid getting caught in the fray.

I catch a glimpse of the large balding man. Using his weight, he knocks over several more bystanders and army-crawls toward the young businessman, who must have fallen during the commotion. The balding man sits on the chest of the alleged SWARM member and pummels his face, bouncing his skull off the tile floor with each blow.

His arms pinned under the large man's weight, the businessman's only response is a series of high-pitched squawks.

This barbaric scene rivals any mixed martial arts competition.

I want to run for help. As much as I hate SWARM, he should be tried in court, not beaten to a pulp. Before I can move, a red dot appears on the balding man's back, and a second later I hear a loud crackling and clacking noise. Blue bolts of lightning dance between the two electrodes at the tip of the senior officer's gun. I watch as thousands of volts of current shoot through his body. The balding man screams and shakes and then goes stiff.

Officer McNultey bellows in a deep voice, "Freeze! Everyone!" Even the other officers stop trying to break up the fights all around them.

The order finds its mark, and silence soon replaces pandemonium. The crowd sheepishly settles down, like elementary school kids caught misbehaving on the playground.

"Get an ambulance for Gramps here," he says.

Two other officers spring into action, helping the older man to his feet. Another recovers his cane, which got knocked away during the scuffle.

"What about the guy with the bloody face…and his blond friend?" the junior officer asks. "Better get them an ambulance, too?"

"Not a chance," the older officer says, putting his gun back in its holster. His tone is emotionless.

The junior officer doesn't pick up on the cues. "Yeah, but we're not even sure they're associated with the hacktivists."

The weight of the moment closes in on my chest. It looks like McNultey is going to turn his stun gun on his junior

officer next. But instead, he tightens his lips and cranes his neck at an awkward angle. "Take them anywhere other than our control room and you can kiss your job good-bye." He whips around and storms away, huffing as he marches.

Heat flushes into the junior officer's cheeks. He straightens his belt, then issues a command of his own. "You heard him. Call an ambulance for the old guy." Then his voice drops. "And take those two suspects into the control room."

"What should I do with them there?" a middle-aged female officer whispers. My friends and I are still close enough to hear her.

"You know what to do," he mutters. "Dispose of them."

CHAPTER TWO

NONE OF US speak until we get through airport security and to our gate. From our seats, we can still see the officers, but at least they can't listen in.

Darren breaks the silence. "Did he say 'dispose of them'?"

I didn't think much of Darren until we did a group project last semester. The girls in my dorm studied him more than the exams for their gen ed courses, often commenting about his wavy ash-brown hair. He is easy on the eyes, but I would never admit it to them—or him.

Darren listens unlike anyone I've ever met. On the surface, some might chalk it up as shyness. While others bumble on about their opinions, Darren stops to ask for mine. After a couple of conversations, I discovered what's truly behind those brilliant brown eyes: sincerity.

"I know," Chloe replies. "Think he was joking?"

"Hope not," Nick says. "They have what's coming to them."

Although it was a callous comment, he does have a point. Most everybody I know has suffered at the hands of SWARM.

"Cai warned us about the potential for high alert during our trip," I point out.

"Should we still board our flight or head back to campus?" Nick asks.

He doesn't sound scared, just a little concerned. Nick isn't the type to get alarmed by officers in the airport or by opponents on the football field. He can thank his running back frame for that extra shot of confidence—muscles bulging out from all directions of his dark mahogany skin. I bet Officer McNultey wouldn't last ten seconds against him—if he didn't have his stun gun to help him.

"It *only* counts as a whole semester's worth of credits," Chloe reminds us. "Besides, don't you think we owe it to Sienna's uncle after all the strings he pulled to get us this opportunity?"

Nick, Darren, and Chloe stare at me, waiting for my response.

"Sienna?" Chloe says.

"What?" I clear my throat before continuing. "He insisted on hooking us up."

"I'd say," Nick says, nodding. "The plane tickets, hotels, and meals…"

"Don't forget the details between the registrar and the Center for Global Engagement," Darren adds. "First quan-

tum mechanics majors spending the summer abroad in Greece. Can't beat that."

The longer we talk, the better I feel. Conversation creates distance between the incident and us. Still, I wonder about the blond woman. *Did they succeed in transporting her to their control room? If so, she might be dead by now.*

"You boys pick your perks," Chloe teases. "But I've enjoyed our smart-rings the most."

I have to agree. Our smart-rings are the coolest invention I've ever worn or seen. I can't live without mine now, but last October was a different matter. I've never enjoyed receiving gifts. I get anxious thinking about what reaction I'm supposed to have when I untie the bow. Most years I forget about my birthday until the day it arrives. But this year Uncle Cai wouldn't let me. Between those reminders, he dropped hints about an extra special gift he'd selected for my eighteenth birthday. He insisted on giving me matching ones for my friends to help us prep for our trip to Greece. Though he never listens to my pleas of going cold turkey on his gift-giving addiction, I can't help but appreciate his thoughtfulness. For as long as I can remember, Uncle Cai's been the steady presence in my life and the closest thing I have to a father—or mother, for that matter.

I glance around at the other gates. People stand relaxed, scrolling on their phones and sipping beverages. All signs of what happened only fifteen minutes ago are gone.

The junior officer still flexes his dominance, flitting about to various stations. From this distance, I can't make

out what he's saying. His gestures seem overdone, like he enjoys playing the part of the main character in his own personal drama.

I scan the faces of passengers filling the gate area. That SWARM couple were going to be on our flight to London. I know Cai is probably busy this morning, but I should call him anyway. He'd want to know.

When I was a toddler, my parents were in an accident. My lone memory of our former life together is captured in a family photograph from my third birthday. Uncle Cai told me the picture had been taken days before my parents were removed from me and from this life.

Over the years, I've stared at the picture more than I care to admit. Guess I keep hoping to find the truth. Like, what really happened? The details surrounding their deaths have always felt conveniently cryptic in nature. Fifteen years later, unanswered questions still infiltrate my mind regularly.

Heaven knows I've coexisted with ambiguity for far too long. A couple of years ago, I launched my own amateur investigation about my parents' accident via the Internet. A junior in high school at the time, night after night, I followed every lead in a web of interrelated mouse clicks. But in the end, I failed to uncover an alternative besides the official pronouncement: "an unfortunate accident."

Don't get me wrong. I'm deeply indebted to Cai for adopting me. My father's kid brother wore his protector role well, given the circumstances. Inheriting a toddler overnight is a big responsibility for anyone, much less a

single guy highly committed to his career.

Growing up, I viewed Cai more like an older brother than an uncle or legal guardian. Still, I can't shake the unsettling sensation I have deep in my gut. Something about my parents' accident screams *non-accidental.*

"What do you like best about the ring, Sienna?" Darren asks, interrupting my thoughts.

"Umm…the ability to talk on it," I announce, trying to look engaged in the moment. I don't want him to think I'm distracted. Chloe calls my habit daydreaming. I call it a part-time job, staying afloat in my deluge of thoughts.

"Agreed," Nick says. "That feature saved all our butts last semester. No thanks to you, Chloe." He gives Chloe a flirtatious jab with his elbow.

"The way I remember, you were the one getting distracted. Don't you know you can't watch a playoff game and ace quantum physics at the same time?"

"She's got a point," Darren says. "They say multitasking decreases your IQ—producing the same effect as being stoned."

Chloe grins at Darren. She looks stunning as usual, despite the fact that we're in an airport and barely managed to escape a brawl. She has so much to be thankful for. Nick, her boyfriend, adores her, and her mom and dad love her. In a weak moment, I could let jealousy spring up and choke out the kindness I feel toward her. Lucky for me, Chloe's loyalty melts any ill will I'm tempted to entertain.

Our friendship blossomed over the past couple of semesters.

She was the first girl I met on campus, even before moving in—all thanks to the admissions office. They switched our welcome packets on accident. Feeling responsible, they gave me her phone number, and we ended up tracking each other down through text messages.

After straightening the debacle, we chatted in the campus café for the remainder of the afternoon, talking about whatever popped into our heads: class schedules, embarrassing moments from high school, and how to avoid the freshman fifteen. To our surprise, later that day admissions reassigned us as roommates—not a common gesture at our college, I'm told.

Cai had worked his magic at the admissions office. He'd waltzed into Ravenwood Hall and emerged fifteen minutes later with a spring in his step.

"Good news, ladies. Admissions owned its mistake and regrets the welcome packet mix-up. They've reassigned you as roommates *and* put you in an upperclassmen dorm."

"Wow, Mr. Lewis," Chloe remarked. "You've got some serious pull here."

"Please call me Cai," he corrected. "I'm just happy you've got each other now. Sienna could use a friend like you."

"Thanks, Uncle," I said. "You think of everything, even picking my friends." I winked. "Guess I'll keep you, roomie. That is, if you still want me?"

Nick gets up from his chair. "You guys hungry?" he asks. "I saw they had some protein bars over there."

"No thanks," I respond. "After that latte on the drive over, I'm good."

If only it were true—me feeling good? This knot in my stomach isn't going to loosen until I talk to Cai. He always knows what to say.

In the tech world, Cai became known as a phenom at a relatively young age. Selling your first start-up while still in college tends to have that effect. He turned the heads of all the major players in the industry. No need to climb the corporate ladder when you can take the elevator straight to the top. His key roles at ELIXIR and on the Senior Board of Clerics, the governing entity for the global organization, come with plenty of perks.

"Sienna, when was the last time you saw Cai?" Darren asks.

I love the way Darren says my name. I could listen to him say it over and over.

I try recalling his question, but I'm distracted again, focused more on his mouth than finding the correct answer.

"Umm…he's been pretty busy with ELIXIR stuff. I guess they're putting the finishing touches on a new project. But I think we chatted Tuesday…in prep for our trip."

"He's so lucky, striking the lottery by joining ELIXIR when he did," Nick says, still hovering since nobody else wanted any food. Guess he gave up on those protein bars.

"Yeah, I'd give my left arm to work there," Chloe says. "You know I'm counting on you getting me in there for my internship."

"Who said I could get you in?" I tease. "I'm on Cai all the time just to get my résumé in front of the right people."

"Well, don't forget about your friends when the opportunity comes."

Cai joined ELIXIR way back when it was still relatively unknown. About five years ago, it became more popular among those with a taste for technology and innovation. But with the release of their new SWARM-fighting technology and recent stamp of approval from the League of Nations, ELIXIR crashed into the mainstream—definitely claiming the spot as the cool kid on the block.

"Which is it for you, Chloe—revenge or career?" Darren asks.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Your motive for working at ELIXIR."

"Motive? What am I, on trial or something?" she replies with an icy edge.

"It was just a question," I say. "I don't think he meant anything by it."

She stares blankly ahead. Tears well up in her eyes and start rolling down her cheeks and off her chin. I know the source of her sorrow because, as roommates, we often confide in each other. I even know things Chloe hasn't told Nick.

"I'm sure your secret is safe with Darren and Nick," I tell Chloe, trying to make it easier for her.

"I'm sorry, guys," she says. "SWARM's a sore subject

for me." No one speaks—because it doesn't feel like we're supposed to.

"You could say SWARM stole my high school best friend—Amy. Back then I didn't know how SWARM tricks girls into the human-trafficking industry. They go online and pretend to be a teenage guy. After establishing trust and chatting for a few days, they ask the girl to do something she'll regret—nothing too big, but still something embarrassing."

"That's horrible," Darren says.

"It gets worse. They record it by hacking the webcam and then use it as blackmail, threatening to send it to her parents and classmates unless she continues down the regretful path. Each day they apply more pressure—upping the ante and demanding more. After weeks of torture, guilt, and self-hatred, victims will do anything to end this toxic cyber cycle. SWARM then offers an ultimatum. If she agrees to meet in person, they'll destroy the videos. If she doesn't, then they'll go public."

"Sounds like hell," Nick says, putting his hand on her arm.

"Nobody knew Amy was stuck until she didn't return home one weekend," she says, her voice cracking. "After confiscating her computer, the authorities put together all the pieces. For all we know, SWARM is still using her in one of their trafficking rings in some dark corner of the world." Chloe wipes her tears with her hands. Nick leans

in—giving her a comforting hug. "I'd do anything to take out SWARM," she says.

"Wouldn't we all," Darren mumbles under his breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the junior officer and his female colleague huddled around an electronic gadget, like a tablet or something. They both seem animated, maybe even upset.

I turn back to my friends and look down at the new text on my ring—an alert about boarding beginning in fifteen minutes.

I remember when I first opened Cai's gift, I wasn't exactly sure what it was, so I simply stared at the box instead.

"Come on, Sienna," he prodded. "You don't even know what it is—do you?"

"Well, no." I blushed. But then I went on the offensive. "It looks like a ring, but okay, Einstein. What is it?" I picked up the simple silver band and turned it over in my hands, appreciating the sleek design.

"Try it on."

I slipped the ring on my finger.

"Cortex, call Cai," he said.

His phone rang on command. "Hello, birthday girl," Cai's voice boomed through the ring with crystal clarity.

"Shut up! It's a *phone*, too?"

"More than that," Cai boasted with as much pride as a new dad showing off his baby's pictures. "Watch this. Cortex, play Sienna's favorite childhood movie."

The ring glowed softly and then more intensely. A bright

flash ripped through the silver circle. Above us, recognizable images were projected onto the flat white ceiling. The surround sound in his home office sprang to life somehow integrated with the operating system.

Cai spent the rest of the afternoon educating me on Cortex, the new smart-ring he and his ELIXIR team had developed.

The gift opened up my mind to possibilities I never knew existed. Of course, it contains all the expected features—unlimited access to all things digital, an internal projector with built-in GPS, and Internet of Things integration. IoT connects you to everyone and everything, including your bank, your mechanic, and even your doctor.

Think you might need to change a lightbulb or replace the filter in your refrigerator? Cortex does most of it for you, the knowing, the buying, and the shipping—all done by instant drone delivery.

"What's this?" I asked. "A text informing me to drink a glass of water outside?"

"Oh, that's Prompts technology," Cai replied. "Your current level of hydration is low and your cortisol is high—hence the text message. You could use some water and sunlight."

Only in its infancy stage, Prompts influences brain waves by suggesting new thought patterns. Beta testing found it extremely effective for overcoming addictions to substances such as heroin and nicotine. Parents sang its praises for aiding their children in replacing night terrors with sweet dreams.

"But isn't it a little…*dangerous*?" I asked, shifting my weight on Cai's dark brown leather sofa. I tucked both feet up under my legs to get into a comfortable position.

"Prompts? How so?" He rested his chin on his fist.

"Well…," I fumbled, trying to form an educated objection. "Thought-influencing technology sounds awfully similar to mind control. Isn't it risky?"

"Risky? Come on, Sienna. What news feed have you been scanning? Sure, we have skeptics and haters, but think of all the good it can do."

"Like what?"

"Well…in beta testing, Prompts increased academic scores, decreased anxiety, and raised our propensities for charitable giving. Plus there are privacy settings you can enable. I set yours extremely high, so you have nothing to worry about."

He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. His blue eyes searched for a smile on my face. We both knew he had me. And although Cai often proves his point, it's my job to make him work for it.

"Need more proof?"

"Prompts also decreased violence in hostile environments and helped athletes shatter records in nearly every sport. And…" Cai stretched out his next statement for emphasis. "We need any edge over SWARM we can get. They're playing for keeps, remember?"

I let silence have its place, filling the empty space between us.

"Okay, okay. You've proved your point," I said. "Prompts might be a breakthrough, but sometimes I worry about all of you at ELIXIR. You seem so busy creating I wonder if you have time to evaluate what you're doing. There's a price for playing God, you know."

"Well, any time God wants to step in and stop SWARM he can," Cai replied. "In the meantime, we'll do our part."

"Sienna. Earth to Sienna," Chloe says, tapping my shoulder. "That's the third time I said your name. Someone's calling you."

I snap out of my daydream. Tiny orange letters encircle my ring, revealing the identity of the caller. *Why would Cai be calling me?*

"Sorry, guys. I need to take this." I excuse myself a few feet away and accept the call.

"I thought you were on assignment with ELIXIR in—" But before I even have a chance to finish, Cai interrupts me with unfamiliar urgency in his voice.

"Sienna, whatever you do, don't get on that plane to London."

CHAPTER THREE

"WHAT'S WRONG, CAI?"

"No time to explain." Then he shoots off a series of directives. "Find a TV or use your ring. SWARM is in London. They did something to the royal family."

"What are you talking about? When?" A thousand other thoughts hijack my mind.

"They're dead—all of them." Then, in a somber tone, he warns, "This is the beginning, Sienna. Everything is about to change—forever."

I don't recognize this person on the other end of the line. Cai has never been one for melodrama. He's the complete opposite. Forever the eternal optimist, he downplays negativity, sensationalism, and fear-based media.

"You're scaring me, Cai." Anxiety creeps up from the pit of my stomach, making it hard to swallow. Then our call drops—and he's gone. I take the ring away from my mouth and close my eyes. Darren, Chloe, and Nick stare back at me.

"You okay, roomie?" Chloe notices the fear plastered all over my face. She reaches for my hand. I clasp it and walk forward, pulling her with me, not once taking my eyes off the adjacent wall.

We join a small group of travelers huddled around a public transparent projection screen. I gaze at shaky footage on the left side of the screen shot by a cameraman who appears to be running through a crowded street toward a river.

The right side of the screen shows video from what looks like a mobile phone. Several cars with tinted windows speed down a city street, striking people and breaking through barriers.

Chloe and I inch forward hand in hand. Nick and Darren press in behind us. A reporter speaks:

"A day that started out so perfectly will end tragically for billions across the planet. Historically, May 9 is known as Europe Day, a day dedicated to peace and unity.

"The queen's eight state limousines—two Bentleys, three Rolls-Royces, and three Daimlers—departed at eleven a.m. Eight veteran chauffeurs, each extremely loyal to the royal family, transported European dignitaries from more than two dozen countries. Supporters lined the streets, waving flags, cheering, and greeting one another with shouts of peace in their native language.

"Around eleven thirty a.m., the lead car with the royal family suddenly accelerated. Shortly after, the other seven cars in the motorcade broke line and followed in reckless pursuit. Reaching speeds of more than ninety miles per hour, the vehi-

cles plowed through bystanders and barriers, killing several people. The chase ended when the cars broke through a final barricade and drove straight into the River Thames.

"Calls made from the dignitaries in the vehicles are now being compiled by officials. Apparently, screams of being trapped in the cars and cries of doors and windows that wouldn't unlock pepper these voice mails.

"Witnesses say several dignitaries broke the windows, but because of high speeds, they were unable to jump out. The onboard cameras reveal chauffeurs who appear oblivious to the screaming and pleading of their passengers. Each driver looks physically present, but mentally absent—not even panicked or aware of danger.

"Rescue attempts are being made as we speak by the emergency workers behind me. As of now, no bodies have been recovered. At the same time as this tragic accident, several large European government websites were hacked. Each site went completely dark except for the word 'SWARM.'

"We're left with more questions than answers. Was SWARM's attack retaliation for London's recent support to resurrect the League of Nations?

"One thing is for sure. This current attack is by far the most devastating and perplexing. Experts wonder if we've witnessed the first hack upon the human mind. Were these chauffeurs key players in a suicide mission they knew nothing about?

"If these suspicions are confirmed, then hacktivism has crossed a new echelon of evil, one that could infect us all.

"An official at ELIXIR—the international organization

dedicated to SWARM eradication—promised a formal response within the next forty-eight hours. Our correspondent believes ELIXIR may reveal some new technological advancement that will deliver a deathblow to SWARM.

"Apparently, ELIXIR officials have been testing this technology for some time. And according to its spokesperson, Ms. Tilda Tulane, the world can't wait any longer.

"This is Lori Wicker reporting on-site in London. Stay tuned for more updates, including coverage of ELIXIR's response."

A man to my right curses, and a lady to my left cries.

"This is bad," Nick says. "Really bad."

Chloe lets go of my hand. She turns to Nick, burying her head in his chest. He wraps his arms around her and holds her close.

My eyes catch Darren's. Must be nice—finding comfort in the arms of another. But relationships never come easy to me—the price you pay for losing a mother and father you can't even remember. I'm not willing to drop my guard ever again if it means the possibility of loving and losing.

Cai is the exception—probably because I was too young to know otherwise. A three-year-old orphan needs love and affection no matter who they are. Research proves it. In my freshman psychology class, I learned about a study of infant deaths on forty newborns. Despite getting all their physical needs met, over half died within the first four months. The single reason: not being touched.

"Think we should still leave the country?" I ask Darren, since Nick and Chloe seem a little preoccupied with each other.

"Well, I don't think we should stay here."

He's right. The entire airport feels like a giant tinderbox ready to explode. No wonder Cai sounded flustered. ELIXIR is probably scrambling over how to respond. Dignitaries from across Europe might be dead, including the royal family. And SWARM is probably celebrating with champagne bottles in hand.

All those lives, gone with one single hack. But if SWARM can hack our minds and not just our devices, then we're all in danger.

I want to run, but my feet feel heavy, like they're stuck in thick mud. My finger beeps again. "Sorry. Think we got disconnected," Cai says.

"I just saw the news. You okay? Was it SWARM? What's ELIXIR going to do?" I fire off questions.

"They didn't report even half of it. Look, I can't have you board that plane." He sounds more relaxed this time, more like the Cai I know.

"I'm worried about SWARM and so I've made some arrangements for you and your friends to get out of the airport safely," Cai instructs. "In a couple minutes, a guy in a uniform is going to come get you. Go with him. He's on our side."

"Okay. We will. So I take it our summer in Greece is on hold. No connection flight to London means no—"

"Sienna, I need to run. We're making a big announcement in the next forty-eight hours."

"Sure, go," I say. "What's the name of the guy coming to get us?"

"Officer McNultey," he replies.

CHAPTER FOUR

"SIENNA LEWIS!" a gruff voice behind us calls.

Chloe frowns. "Oh, it's you…Stun Gun himself. How can we help you today?"

"I'm the one asking the questions," he barks. "Unless you have a problem with that, Chloe?" The officer moves his right hand near the stun gun clipped to his belt.

"How do you know her name?" Nick asks.

"Nicolas Logan Elliott. Highly recruited football player from Columbus. Quantum physics major, 4.0 honors student. Want me to keep going?" McNultey says with a sparkle in his eyes.

Although taken aback, Nick isn't one to step down. "Try me."

"Favorite restaurant? Hot Wings and Things. Childhood friend? Cardale Smith. Fear of snakes and fear of failure," the senior officer says. He unloads his words the same way a soldier in a firing squad unloads bullets. But I think

McNultey, unlike a soldier, enjoys inflicting pain. "I got more where that came from, Nick, but that might just embarrass you in front of your friends. Want me to talk about who you dated before Chloe? Your deceased older brother? Or the organization you contacted at age sixteen?"

I wait for a comeback from this all-American running back, but instead I hear nothing.

McNultey looks him over with a condescending smirk. "Didn't think so. Hey, next time how about you keep your mouth shut?"

Then he turns in my direction, like a predator in pursuit of his next meal. "Ah, yes, of course, Ms. Sienna. You're even more stunning in person. Me and Kiran enjoyed reviewing some footage we found on your Cortex," he says, wiping his mouth. "You know, it's amazing what these new smart-rings capture when you're not even expecting it. Next time you might want to take it off before you freshen up after your morning run."

"You're bluffing," Chloe argues. "Don't listen to him."

Darren tenses up, but I grab his wrist before he shifts his weight forward.

"Not now," I whisper under my breath. He stops and puts his foot back down. "We need you."

Darren turns his head and fixes onto my gaze. The energy between us ignites a spark deep within my chest. But I don't give myself permission to unpack those feelings. Even if I cared for him in that way, I'm not about to let him know. In the long run, it's far less painful to keep on pretending.

"Your uncle instructed us to take you," McNultey says.

"And if we don't go?" Chloe asks with an undercurrent of defiance. "Will we miss out on our summer abroad?"

"Young lady, SWARM just murdered European dignitaries from more than two dozen countries," the officer smirks. "A summer abroad doesn't even matter at a time like this. How about you grow up for a second? ELIXIR is the only one with a potential answer, and Sienna's uncle is on the Senior Board. I'd shut up, if I were you, and do whatever he says."

She flushes with embarrassment.

"I'll go," I burst out, surprised by my own voice. My friends stare, their expressions convincing me they think I'm insane. I swallow hard before speaking. "I don't like the idea, either, but Cai told us to go with McNultey, and my uncle hasn't led us the wrong way yet." Nobody moves a muscle or speaks a word. And the longer they wait, the more my stomach turns.

"She's got a point," Darren says, breaking the silence. "Nobody's landing in London until they get this mess sorted out anyway." I lock onto his brown eyes and push the corners of my lips upward, acknowledging his support.

"All right," Nick responds, still looking shell-shocked from the verbal spar with the senior officer.

We all stare at Chloe. She shrugs. "Okay, fine."

"Follow me," McNultey says. Then he takes off in the direction of the security line.

"Where are we going?" Nick asks.

He halts and turns his right shoulder in our direction. Beaming back at us, he says, “To the control room, of course.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CONTROL ROOM IS underground. We traveled by a six-seater electric cart from the terminal and out to the tarmac. After driving into an airplane hangar, McNultey led us to an elevator, where we descended to level five. After a series of security checks, we arrived at a dimly lit hallway. On a desk a few feet behind me, I see what looks like a blond wig with a dark red streak on it.

"Still think we should have listened to Cai?" Chloe whispers to me.

Her question stings because, on the drive over, I had a similar thought. Why would Cai associate with the likes of McNultey?

"Guess we'll find out soon," I say as relaxed as possible.

"Drink this," McNultey orders. His eyebrows squish together at the top of his forehead just below his hair. Streaks of silver give away his age. He points to four vials of orange liquid on a high-top table in front of us. The

clear glass cylinders rest on a simple glass tray.

"What is it?" Nick holds one vial between his right index finger and thumb. He lifts it up to the single lightbulb overhead, trying to identify the contents.

"An elixir, you might say," a high voice says from beyond the shadows down the hall. "Created by none other than ELIXIR."

"Oh, I didn't see you," Nick says, cupping his left hand above his eyes, squinting into the darkness.

"I've been overlooked my entire life." A short man surfaces from a corner. "Standing less than four feet tall has that effect, you know," he giggles, finding humor in his own comment. More humor than the comment deserved.

"Forgive me." He clears his throat. "I'm Kiran, and I've been following you all for quite some time. It's an honor to finally meet you face-to-face." With jerky movements, he extends his hand up. But rather than shaking our hands, he bows dramatically, as if he's greeting somebody important.

I glance at Chloe. His comment about following us makes me feel more anxious than I already do.

"Ready to verify them? What'd you call it…3FA?" McNultey says, interrupting Kiran's pageantry.

"Is that similar to 2FA?" Nick butts in.

"Same thing as two-factor authentication, except we use three sources to confirm your identity," Kiran replies. "When you drink your vial, you'll already have two identities confirmed. But I'm not answering any more questions until you swallow the elixir."

Darren fidgets with his sleeve—folding it one more time, up toward his elbow. None of us knows what to do, so we don't do anything. I'm certainly not a fan of drinking anything they recommend.

"Chloe, don't you want to see your best friend from high school again?" Kiran winks. "Amy is her name, I believe?"

"How do you know her?" Chloe says, surprised.

"And you, Sienna. Wouldn't you like to know more details about a certain couple who died years ago?"

"Come on, people," the senior officer growls, tapping his foot on the hard floor. "We have to move." He places his hands on his hips, one hand near his stun gun.

For all we know, Kiran is manipulating our emotions, baiting us to drink the vial. But his cruel methods create anger and resentment, not trust and belief. As much as I want to resist his directives, I need to discover the truth.

I reach for one of the vials. Chloe follows suit.

"Ah, gentlemen, there's a reason you two may want to follow orders, too," McNultey says. "Something about your past. Hmm…?"

Reluctantly, Nick and Darren each grab a vial, too. Although I try to give Darren an encouraging smile, he looks down at the floor instead of at me.

Together, all four of us drink the orange liquid. The sugary aftertaste reminds me of summer evenings by the fire pit in the backyard. I sipped more drink boxes than I can count sitting next to Cai on those white Adirondack chairs. He told adventurous stories, and I licked gooey

marshmallow that'd leaked out onto my fingers when I'd squished the chocolate and graham crackers together.

"Perfect," Kiran says, wringing his hands.

"Now for the explanation?" I ask.

Kiran reaches into a pocket inside his jacket and pulls out a clear pane of glass just a tad bigger than a smartphone.

"For the past seven months, you've each been *wearing* the first identification credential. You know it as your smart-ring. We refer to it as a luxury wearable. As for the second identification—ingestibles—you just drank it. Each vial contained tiny microchips. I'm verifying your identity and monitoring your vitals here on my tablet."

"That's only two," Darren says.

"Oh, of course, dearies, I almost forgot," Kiran admits with vigor in his voice. "Injectables." Then he raises both hands in the air and announces, "McNultey, fire at will."

Perplexed, I turn in McNultey's direction. But instead of seeing a crusty old man, I stare straight down the barrel of a pistol. I hear four loud pops, and then Kiran cheers with glee. Cotton fills my ears and the space just above my eyes. Sounds muffle and then fade. My world grows dim and then swarthy dark.

I am no more.

CHAPTER SIX

MY MIND STIRS before my eyes open. I hear muffled sounds, and I'm not sure if I'm awake or asleep—or somewhere in between. I want to lift my eyelids, but they feel frozen shut.

My head spins. I remember waking up in a similar semi-conscious state sometime in my past. I strain, trying to access the memory, something about a dentist's office and wisdom teeth.

The first injection of local anesthesia didn't faze me, so he settled for a double dose instead. A few minutes later, when I still tasted the sensation of chewing broken glass, he resorted to general anesthesia.

I woke up in my bed a day later, with Uncle Cai in the adjacent room on his laptop—catching up on work for ELIXIR, I'm sure. The instant I stirred, he pushed the footrest on his recliner down and sauntered over to my bedside, trying his best to cloak any concern for my condition.

"Morning, bright eyes," he said, putting the back of his hand on my forehead.

"Morning," I moaned, using my arms to prop myself up. The toasty flannel sheets clung to my body.

"What happened?"

"Well…the dentist said he couldn't put you under, despite his best attempts and strongest medicine." Cai chuckled. "He warned me his next option was a baseball bat."

"You sure he didn't use that bat?" I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Evidently, you have quite an immunity to pain medication. His exact words were 'a freakish resistance.' Is there something you're not telling me?" Cai said, folding his arms across his white T-shirt.

He hadn't shaved in a day or two, but his kind eyes softened his appearance. Up until a few years ago, Cai took his impeccable health for granted. But then, at a routine physical, his doctor discovered an irregular heartbeat that scared us both.

Around that same time, his colleague at ELIXIR had been working on an advanced digital implant designed to regulate the heart. Always an early adopter, Cai volunteered to test this new technology inside his chest. Since then, he's been a poster child for perfect health.

"Morning, bright eyes," says an unfamiliar voice this time. The greeting jolts me out of my ride down memory lane, even if that road was about wisdom teeth removal.

"How about I fill in some blanks, dearie? I'm sure your

journey into Neverland has you flying higher than usual."

"S-sure." I yawn. The slumber clings to the corners of my mind, trying to pull me back into the dream world.

Bright sunlight soaks into my face. I open my eyes slowly and notice dense, tinted windows. Nick is zonked out in the seat behind me—his neck cranked at an awkward angle. His body swallows up the thin black seat belt.

The mental fog lifts—but at a sluggish pace, like a steamy morning mist burned off by the rising sun. Chloe is next to me, leaning against the right window. At least her seat belt fits her better, keeping her somewhat erect.

A pang of panic sets in. *Where's Darren?* I turn and see a crumpled-up combination of plaid and denim lying facedown on the dark leather seat behind me.

Maybe the haze dulls my inhibitions or maybe with all the recent events, I just need *someone* to hold on to. My fingers extend confidently—dancing in and out of his thick brown hair.

My breathing quickens, as does my pulse. A jolt of fire travels up through my arm and into my shoulder. I'm wide awake now. My lips curl up, content to be connected to a person I've only admired from afar. And as long as he sleeps, I don't need to waste time worrying about being rejected.

But then a speck of guilt grows from somewhere deep inside. Is it right to enjoy a connection with someone who's unconscious of the experience? I push away the thought, knowing now isn't the time or place to wrestle with complicated issues. For all the incongruence I feel around me—

with Cai, SWARM, and ELIXIR—the world is right, even if in this single moment.

"Hey, did you call me bright eyes?" I ask. The stranger's odd greeting took a minute to sink in. *Is he reading my thoughts or accessing past memories, or perhaps it was just a lucky guess?*

"My bad, dearie," says the voice. The stranger turns and I see what looks like a small boy gleefully rocking in the front passenger seat—Kiran, of course. "I figured using a familiar greeting would help you acclimate easier."

I snatch my hand away from Darren's head and move it near my chest. *Am I dreaming?* I press three of my fingers around my sternum, mining for broken bones from getting shot in the chest. Rather than finding fractured ribs, I locate a heart full of angst. A flood of emotions rips through me.

My uncle, my one source of stability, put me up to this. I want to believe he knows what he's doing. He's always protected me from pain. *But now he's the one allowing it.* He's either culpable or ignorant. But when has Cai been ignorant of anything? His work at ELIXIR demands meticulous precision. A civil war commences between my heart and my head. And the one logical explanation leads me to a lonely place—one without Cai. But if I don't have him, then who else do I have?

My friends and I followed Cai's prompts with unquestioning obedience. I glance down and see Cortex—my smart-ring—wrapped around my finger. *Prompts?*

Speculations spin around like the saucer ride at the

annual carnival. Faster and faster. I feel my body beginning to detach.

How much of the last seven months has been the result of my own volition? And how much has arisen from the Prompts and Thought Influencing Technology pulsating into my brain through the metal band bestowed to me as a gift? Was it even a gift? Or simply a digital leash designed to monitor my friends and me?

My mind can't stop racing. I'm not quite sure how much of my life is actually *my* life. What events have been manipulated or manufactured simply because I'm part of a larger experiment? Am I some kind of lab rat, the plaything of irrational ELIXIR scientists?

Anxiety rises within me. I want to rip this ring off my finger. I want to jump out of this vehicle. I want to get back home. But right now I'm not so sure who to trust.

Right now I'm not sure of anything.

Right now I feel like the orphan I truly am.

I put my hand around the ring, intending to remove it. I don't like being monitored. But before I can, a voice interrupts.

"Congratulations, Sienna," Kiran announces, scanning his device. "Confirmed. Genetically speaking, we had to make sure it was really you."

Confirmed? A haunting thought hits me. "Unplugging" from Cortex isn't even an option. They would know if I removed it because I'm not alone anymore. And I haven't been for quite some time. For how long? Who knows?

Probably Cai—if he's willing to tell the truth.

"Glad to hear it works," the driver says mockingly. "Your department requires a big enough budget to fund all your little toys, especially this new wii initiative."

I tilt my head to get a better view of the speaker and see McNultey. *Why am I not surprised?* "Did you say wii?" I can't help asking. "ELIXIR created a *gaming* system?" At this point, any facts would help me feel grounded.

Kiran snickers and spits, doubling over in his seat from my comment.

He's wound tight—so tight his gestures are simply reflexes birthed out of the weird, internal world he occupies. I have a hunch his oddities originated from sitting glued to his computer screen for twenty-plus hours a day in somebody's basement—maybe his mom's—if he even has one.

"Not a gaming system, silly," Kiran laughs. "Try an initiative to take down SWARM. Wearables, ingestibles, and injectables? Get it? Wii? You and your friends were the very first civilian beta testers."

I hear every word Kiran says, but I'm far from understanding the connection.

"You going to play her Tilda's video?" McNultey asks.

"Ahh, yes, of course," Kiran responds. "But according to my monitor, the other three will be out cold for at least another twenty minutes. Sienna's resistance levels were much higher."

McNultey accelerates the vehicle, despite the road

signs cautioning us of the upcoming curves. "Well then, genius, put the stupid thing on repeat and play it again when they wake up." He tilts the rearview mirror with his right hand.

"Hey, I thought you were a TSA officer. How do you know Cai?" I still can't believe Cai would put me in harm's way, sending us with these two kidnappers. Maybe I just don't want to believe it?

"*TSA?*" he sneers. "Those officers back at the airport are part of *my* team, not the other way around. I can be whomever I need to be to get the job done—TSA, FBI, CIA. But if you're asking who pays my salary, it's ELIXIR, just like the freak next to me in the front seat."

Kiran starts the video and bobbles in his seat. He reminds me of a tiny tot standing in line at the Ferris wheel. When the video begins, he cocks his head sharply and grins. "Welcome to your new destiny, Sienna. We've been waiting for you."

As if choreographed, the intro music cuts in. A yellowish-orange ELIXIR Project logo materializes and then fades away. The speed and angles of the cinematography remind me of Cai's drones we flew occasionally during my senior year of high school.

He taught me how to hover, steer, and even engage the onboard camera. One time we flew the drone over my teacher's house. When Cai spotted old Mr. Mackenzie's backyard, he grabbed the remote and broadcasted a warning through the speakers:

"Make the senior history final exam easier or suffer wrath from above!"

I slugged him and stole back the controls, and we both cracked up at the innocent prank. Lucky for me, Mr. Mackenzie never discovered who owned the drone.

But right now I'm not laughing, and I can't push away the rage I feel for anything to do with Cai.

A female voice narrates over the breathtaking cityscapes.

"Welcome to ELIXIR. My name is Tilda. I serve as spokesperson for the Senior Board of Clerics."

Hovering in midair, the drone drops abruptly with dizzying speed. The earth pushes up, threatening to swallow it. A second before crashing, it hovers again, this time above one particular skyscraper.

In theatrical flair, layers of dark, dystopian, electronic music rise. The camera zooms in, projecting the outline of a woman's back. Her thin arms stretch out on the railing in front of her as she watches over the city. She rotates to face the camera. Cheekbones protrude from her thin face, and her sandy-colored hair flows high above her forehead. Hints of unkind years infect the corners of her eyes.

But then I find them—or maybe they find me.

Unmistakably blue, ignited by a bottomless fire. Her gaze pierces me, unwrapping every fiber and undressing every mask. Then she speaks again, her voice a blend of seduction and mystery, dripping with hypnotic intonation:

"Please let me offer an apology and congratulations. First the apology. Although I'm unsure of the exact measures administered

to bring you to ELIXIR, I'm assuming they were somewhat extreme. Understand, our current campaign against SWARM demands we adhere to the highest levels of security. We could not jeopardize our Project at this time by providing details about your relocation to you or your families. In the future, you will know the whole truth.

"And now for the congratulations. Unbeknownst to you, we've been monitoring you for quite some time. We'll share more on this topic when you arrive. You are one of twelve clerics we have recruited from all corners of the world to assist in the overthrow of SWARM. Soon you will become household names.

"I'm sure you have questions. But rest assured, ELIXIR has the answers—and in time you will, too. Breathe deeply. I know the angst you taste. I was once recruited by ELIXIR, too. I chose to accept the call for my country, my family, and myself. Today my life is forever changed.

"I look forward to meeting you very soon. Remember, fear no one but truth."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"HOW LONG TILL we get some food?" Nick says, yawning from the backseat. "I'm starving."

"That's how you feel when you go without food the entire night," Kiran says.

"Yeah, I guess getting knocked unconscious works up a significant appetite," Nick replies.

Kiran checks his tablet, then announces something about the other three being confirmed thanks to the nanotechnology from the injectable.

"I think I got Tilda's whole over-the-top video, but would either of you care to explain why you had to drug us?" Chloe asks. "Walking out the front entrance of the airport would have been a little less…traumatic."

"Couldn't," McNultey replies. "We received confirmed reports of more SWARM agents at the airport. And the board gave us strict orders about transporting all twelve clerics safely."

"And we're supposed to believe you?" Chloe asks. "I've already snapped photos of you with my ring. Who says we're not going to turn both of you in to the authorities on charges of kidnapping?"

"*Authorities*," McNultey laughs. "Did you hear that, Kiran? Young lady, you're going to find out real quickly something you'd better never forget. We are the authorities. And someday you'll look back and thank us for 'kidnapping' you. SWARM knows you twelve clerics are valuable, and that's why they're after you."

"Where are we going?" Darren says, sitting up in his seat. He moves gingerly like the rest of us.

"Don't these rolling hills look even a little familiar to you?" Kiran replies.

"Should they?" Chloe sputters back. Though she is still groggy, her sharp tongue never sleeps. "McNultey shot us in the chest, remember? We're still a little out of it."

After a few more minutes and even more twists, we turn onto Route 1318 toward our college campus. "I recognize it now," Darren says, stretching his arms above his shoulders. "Wow, you must have used some potent stuff, to mess us up like that."

"Only the best," McNultey mutters.

We turn right onto Liberty Street and head up the hilltop. It doesn't look like the same serene campus we left yesterday morning. "Who are all those people?" I ask, looking at the young men and women across the lawn, sparring with each other. Dressed in dark attire, they resemble a

special ops militia in some kind of elite training.

Kiran pounces to answer. "We've commandeered the campus, and the people you see in black are ELIXIR—proxies, we call them."

Outside the campus café, I notice a black tent with the word *ELIXIR* printed on the side. I bet they're not playing cards and drinking coffee in there.

McNultey takes a right and heads down a narrow road. After a minute we close in on Radcliffe Hall with its characteristic daunting stone tower. As we pull up to the curb, I spot someone I'm not sure I want to see. Without time to prepare, I can't decide whether to hug him or hit him—or which he deserves more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"THANK GOD, YOU'RE SAFE," Cai says, opening the door to our vehicle. He reaches out a hand to help me out.

"Safe?" I snarl, avoiding his hand. I step out of the vehicle. "You call getting kidnapped *safe*?"

Unfazed by my comment, he raises his arms and offers a hug. I block his embrace and use all my force to push off his chest. The last thing I want to do is reciprocate affection with a caregiver who put me in harm's way. But my small frame is no match for his strong arms. He catches my wrists and draws me in close.

"Not now," he whispers through his clenched teeth. "They're watching us. Things aren't always what they seem." Then he smiles and kisses me on the cheek, switching back to the good-natured-uncle gig. "Welcome back to campus."

What does he mean? *Who's watching us?* Does he think a couple of phrases can erase the sting of betrayal inhabiting every cell of my body?

"Got a feisty niece there, Soter," McNultey says,

"*Soter?*" Nick asks. "Who's that?"

"Cai. Who else, idiot?" McNultey taunts.

Cai cringes at McNultey's name-calling and goes on to explain further. "At ELIXIR, we each pick a new name that reflects something true about us. Because of my public role, I'm often called by both names."

"So what does *Soter* mean?" Chloe asks, adjusting her hair in the reflection of our vehicle

"Soter was the spirit of safety and deliverance from harm," I say. I am still fresh off a final exam meant to prepare us for our summer abroad. Whether I like it or not Greek mythology still dominates my short-term memory.

I try using the tinted window to straighten the collar on my shirt, but it's no use. After getting shot with an injectable and then thrown into the vehicle, I'll bet this shirt has seen its day. "But I'm not so sure that name fits you any longer, Uncle," I say, glaring at him.

Cai winces. I pause and consider the unlikely. *Maybe he's protecting me, even now?*

"College kids." McNultey shakes his head. "You'll get your new names soon enough."

"Tonight, at the Name Change ceremony," Kiran replies. "Of course, you're going to need some work before you make your grand entrance to the worldwide audience."

"Excuse me?" Chloe says. "Did you say *world*?"

"Why, yes. London is in shambles and humans have now been hacked. ELIXIR must respond with swift action or

the whole planet will be thrown into chaos," Kiran explains. "Why else would we go through all this trouble—kidnapping as you call it?"

I still don't understand what Kiran is saying.

"What's ELIXIR's strategy, McNultey?" Darren asks. "Got some kind of secret weapon you've been hiding here on campus?"

"Wise guy, hey?" McNultey replies. "Of course we have a secret weapon."

"What is it? A rocket? Supercomputer? Nuclear weapon?" Nick asks.

"More powerful than all those combined," Kiran replies.

"What could be more powerful than a nuclear weapon?" Chloe asks.

"Why, that's simple, dearie—you. *You're* the secret weapon."

May 10

I'm not going to lie. It's quite a bit to take in. I feel so violated that my entire past seven months was hacked. At least I've got my journal. Where would I be without it? The one safe place where I can work out my thoughts and feelings. At least they can't hack that...whoever "they" are.

I've always found pen and paper my preferred style of processing, probably because Cai gave me my first journal for my ninth birthday. I've been filling journals ever since. But this past semester, Chloe helped me talk out some of my past reservations about trusting others. Maybe she knows the idea of being with Darren is starting to work its way into my heart, or that I need to learn to trust if I ever hope to love.

I still haven't had a chance to clear things up with Cai. And what he said was so strange. But we were around other people, so we couldn't really talk. I need to get him alone so he can come clean with whatever he needs to tell me.

Where to start? The past forty-eight hours have scrambled my plans, to say the least.

Sure, I'm bummed about the trip to Greece being canceled—who wouldn't be? All the prep we did with passports and plans, not to mention the extra class on Greek mythology.

But McNultey was right. Our summer abroad seems petty considering SWARM's attack on London. Hacking humans—seriously? What does this mean for life going forward? I sure don't know.

We're hours away from something Kiran called the "Name Change," and I hate not knowing how to prepare. At least I have Chloe, Nick, and Darren with me. Sounds like we might get our wish of working for ELIXIR somehow. More on that to come. They didn't give us any time to chat, either. The guys were escorted to their dorm rooms, and we were taken to ours.

I want to take off my ring, but what's the point? ELIXIR would know immediately, and I'd probably get in trouble.

I want to go for help, but according to McNultey, they are the authorities. So who would I tell?

Chloe's in the shower now. I'm not sure what either of us is going to wear. How are you supposed to dress when the whole world is watching? It's not the world's opinion I care about as much as Darren's.

Gotta run. More later.

—Sienna

CHAPTER NINE

STANDING IN FRONT of my mirror, I brush my hair while wearing my favorite bathrobe—a white one Chloe got me last Christmas. She swore she'd never worn a softer one and insisted I add it to my shower routine.

I've always wondered what it feels like to have a mother brush your hair. If mine ever did, I was too young to remember.

When I'm overwhelmed, I wish I could bury my head in my parents' arms, even if I am eighteen. I lack childhood memories of snuggling with them in their bed at night during a frightening storm. And today I find myself in a storm of epic proportions.

With Cortex on our fingers, microchips in our elixir, and nanotechnology coursing through our bloodstream, I guess the board trusts us enough to get ready in our rooms without someone here watching us. I bet this wii initiative

gives them a digital leash long enough to ease any anxiety they might have of us running away.

I'm not completely alone, though. Chloe stands next to me, brushing her teeth in front of the sink. She wears the same bathrobe except hers is pink. Uncle Cai pulled some strings so we could leave our dorm room as is during our summer abroad. We should be touring Athens right now, not preparing for some ceremony.

"So let me get this straight, Sienna…," she says, rinsing her toothbrush and putting it back in the holder.

I sit down slowly at the foot of the bed. "Listening," I say.

"Oh, I can't do this," Chloe confesses. "My mind feels like mush, and we're supposed to meet the world in a couple hours. If it were up to me, I'd run away. But where would we go, Sienna? And why is SWARM after us? What do they want to do—hack our minds, too?"

"Stop!" I raise my hand. Then I soften my voice. "Chloe, you're one of the strongest women I know. And we're in this thing together. Now, just like you always do, tell me what you're thinking, roomie, one thought at a time. Besides, nobody's running anywhere. With SWARM out there, staying here on campus with ELIXIR is probably the safest place we can be."

She looks down at the duvet, tucks her hair behind her ears, and continues. "Well, based upon what the reporter said yesterday and what Tilda told us in the video today, SWARM stepped up its hacktivism these past several years…and they have no intention of slowing down their

threats. ELIXIR saw this coming and took strategic steps to fight back. They developed the wii initiative, a state-of-the-art worldwide monitoring system."

Chloe relays her interpretation with as much calm as she can muster. Then she asks a difficult question, one I can't answer. "But why exactly are *we* here? And what does ELIXIR plan to do with the twelve of us—clerics, they called us?"

Before I can respond, a loud knock on the door startles us. I lift my right index finger up to my lips. Chloe nods. We both know danger might be behind this door.

"Who is it?" Chloe says, trying her best to sound casual.

"ELIXIR," responds a female voice from behind the door. "I insisted you both needed help preparing for the Unveiling."

The Unveiling? I mouth to Chloe, hoping she can read my lips.

"You didn't think you'd have to do it all by yourself," the voice from behind our door says. "We have a small army equipped with dresses, makeup, and shoes."

"Did somebody say *shoes*?" Chloe says. "Now you're speaking my language. Come on in." Before she opens the door, she turns to me. "Like you said, it's not like we're going anywhere. Might as well make the most of it and enjoy ourselves."

With the slightest crack in the door, half a dozen women pour through, arms piled high with boxes of various shapes and sizes. They set them down and exit only to return with a second load of boxes minutes later.

One thing's for sure: Makeup and dresses will distract both of us long enough to block out the stress of all these unknowns. I want answers as much as anybody else, but I also know we're not going to get closer to the truth by sitting cooped up in our dorm room.

"Good evening, ladies. My name is Phoebe, and my number one goal is to make you both look stunning," the woman says. Scanning us up and down, she continues, "Which won't be difficult at all because you've already provided us with a great start."

I glance at Chloe. She looks as surprised as I feel. If we're going to meet the world, we might as well do it in style. "Well…," I say, rubbing my hands together. "When do we begin?"

Over the next two hours, I come to appreciate Phoebe. Clearly, she has a high degree of fashion intuition. But I discover other sides to this multifaceted matriarch, too.

Probably in her mid-forties, she seems to be a walking enigma. Toned muscles, yet graceful poise. Strikingly beautiful, yet uncommonly intuitive. Phoebe exudes a variety of characteristics I admire and hope to emulate someday.

Phoebe doesn't stop telling stories. But I like it. The more she talks, the more my internal knot unravels. And for as much angst as I feel about ELIXIR, getting kidnapped, and the events that await us, Phoebe's demeanor puts me at ease.

Her team mainly focuses on Chloe, pulling and twisting, brushing and braiding. Every so often I catch a glimpse of

my friend and the transformation taking place. But then my mind drifts back to Phoebe.

She insists on working on me—though I'm not sure why. And yet I'm caught up in it all. She asks me how I feel and if I'm nervous about the Name Change or Unveiling. I find myself telling her more than I typically would share with a stranger. But for some reason, she doesn't seem like one.

When we near the end of our beautification process, she asks, "May I?"

"May you what?"

"Brush your hair."

What…? Does she know what I'm thinking, too?

Part of me wishes to let her engage in this simple but symbolic act. But part of me wants to run and hide. I'm sure for thousands of years mothers brushed their daughters' hair.

"Yes," I say with mixed emotion.

I close my eyes and imagine it's my mother brushing my hair as I prepare for some important event—prom perhaps? I wonder if Phoebe, probably my mother's age, has any children. I want to ask about her family, but I know better than asking strangers these types of questions.

I refrain from speaking and keep my eyes closed instead, savoring every swipe—hoping to cram eighteen years of hair-brushing depravation into one single experience.

"You know something, Sienna? I once had a daughter, a long time ago"—Phoebe's voice cracks—"but life thought it best to take her from me." She swallows hard. "Our little girl had your same hair color."

A small bubble of warmth grows inside me with each detail she shares.

"What was her name?"

"Kale. But she passed when she was just a small girl, three years old to be exact."

I've always loved that name—Kale—the same name as my neighbor down the street. She and her brother, Kevin, often played in our backyard.

"You named her after one of the daughters of Zeus?" I ask.

"Yes." She hesitates. "Her name meant 'beauty' and that's exactly what André and I thought the first time we saw her in the delivery room." She looks out the window, like she's stolen away to some far-off place, perhaps somewhere in her painful past. Then after a few seconds, she looks down at me again, never once pausing the swipes of her brush. Her lips stretch into a thin smile.

"You know, she'd probably be about your age…," Phoebe speculates with a twinge of sorrow. "If she were still with us."

Then I do something uncharacteristic. I stand up and give her a hug. I'm not sure why, but my gut said it was the right thing to do.

She returns my embrace and we hold each other for an extended moment. Our action seems to heal a certain internal ache—Phoebe, a mother without a daughter, and me, a daughter without a mother.

"This one…is done," one of Phoebe's team interrupts. I sit back down and give my full attention to my roommate.

Chloe spins around in her sophisticated white evening gown. Her brown hair falls all around her bare shoulders. She stands taller than usual thanks to her heels, which add three more inches.

"You look gorgeous," I say. Chloe always looks amazing, but tonight she is perfect.

"You think so?" Chloe asks.

Phoebe rushes in to remove any doubt. "Chloe, if looks could kill, then SWARM doesn't have a chance of survival."

An alert on Phoebe's smartwatch sounds: *"Three hours until the Unveiling."*

"My heavens," Phoebe squawks. "You ladies still need your Name Change. Come on, Sienna, your turn."

With all of Phoebe's talk about Kale and my thoughts of a mother I never knew, I forgot about the makeover being done to me the past two hours. Sure, I noticed the styling of my hair, the application of my makeup, and the fitting of my dress. But at the same time, I didn't *truly* notice it.

"Stand up, girl," Phoebe says. "If you're late for the Unveiling, I'll suffer the board's wrath, and trust me, I don't want any of that nonsense." I rise to my feet, and a collective gasp erupts throughout the room. I shiver, uncomfortable with all the attention.

"Look," she says, pointing to the mirror behind me.

I marvel at the young woman staring back at me. She looks like me, but older. Most days on campus I feel like a little girl homesick for a place I've never been. But what Phoebe performed on me is nothing less than a miracle.

She selected a forest-green tulle gown with a knot-tied waist and an elegant neckline. My eyes follow my figure up to my shoulders and to my face. I wrinkle my nose when I see my mouth. I never would have chosen such a prominent lip shade. The color reminds me of burning embers found in our fire pit back home.

"Do you think it's too much?" I ponder aloud. "All of it?"

"Too much?" Phoebe asks, as if my comment doesn't register. "I calculated every detail to draw out your natural beauty. Sienna, the world won't know what hit it."

Her heartfelt approval sinks in, and for the first time since I arrived, I might be ready for whatever awaits me.

"What's that noise?" Chloe asks, referencing the loud sound in front of our dorm.

"Transportation," Phoebe says, checking her smartwatch. "Yep, right on time. Ladies, your chariot awaits."

She points to the single window in front of my desk. Sometimes, when I can't sleep at night, I sit there and write in my leather journal by the light of an enclosed candle. In those dark moments, while breathing in the scent, I fumble over words in an effort to articulate the pain I feel inside.

Sometimes my words befriend me, leading me to a place of escape. But other times my words betray me, leading me into more angst. In those moments, when the night looks bright compared to the darkness I feel inside my soul, I seek out a stronger way of communicating my pain. A time or two, my pain danced dangerously close to the edge of a knife. But thankfully, the dawn always came before the blade.

Chloe and I rush to the windowsill and observe a sleek black craft touch down on the grass.

"What is it?" I wonder.

"Some kind of hovercraft?" Chloe guesses.

"Actually, we call it the Xcraft," Phoebe clarifies. "This carbon fiber transport tops out at ninety-five miles per hour and flies much higher than most traditional hovercrafts. You'll float over in style to the Name Change ceremony."

Phoebe's team snaps into action and starts packing up their supplies. "Follow me outside, ladies," Phoebe says. "You'll be joining the other ten clerics at St. Paul's for your Name Change. And then afterward, you'll all walk over to Radcliffe Hall with Tilda for the Unveiling."

We both nod.

I move down the stairwell, making sure not to trip on my gown. Outside, Phoebe opens the Xcraft door and flips down a small step. I half climb, half crawl up the vehicle, trying my best to be ladylike. Clearly, the Xcraft designers didn't have two college girls decked out in formal wear in mind.

"How many people can fit in this thing?" Chloe asks.

"Four, comfortably."

I sink into the cushy seats and notice the touchscreen cockpit display and refrigerated personal drink wells. Phoebe reaches over me and punches in some random keys, causing the engine to roar.

"Kiran put a security code on it," she explains. "Said he doesn't want a couple million dollars floating away from

his budget because someone figured out how to hotwire it. Don't blame him, though. Enter an incorrect code twice in a row, and the entire vehicle shifts over to safe mode. Won't start then until he manually unlocks it."

"That's pressure," I say.

"Got that right," Phoebe says. "But once I punch in your destination, it's self-driving. You can just relax."

She turns on the surround sound, and our favorite song comes on. I look at Phoebe, who is grinning in admiration, pleased by the wonder in our eyes. We ascend gently, a few inches off the ground, floating on a pillow of air.

"Hey," Chloe says. "How did you know we like this song?"

"We know everything about you." Phoebe winks.

Although I'm sure Phoebe's statement was meant to be comforting, I find it more concerning than anything—a little creepy, actually. Before I have time to think further, we lift up a couple of feet higher and then take off toward the church—clueless about what awaits us.

CHAPTER TEN

DARREN AND NICK ARE leaning up against a couple of trees outside the old church. Our Xcraft descends, and the boys stop their chat and stroll over to Chloe and me.

"Nice ride, ladies," Nick says. He assists Chloe out of the vehicle. "Wow! You look amazing."

"And you are handsome as always," she says, looking him over. "Hey, your white pocket square and vest match my gown."

My eyes find Darren's. He smiles back and steps closer, helping me exit the Xcraft. I release my grip the moment my foot touches the ground and search for something intelligent to say.

Darren starts, "Sienna, you are…I mean, you look…"

"Fantastic?" Chloe interrupts.

Darren's face brightens a couple shades of red. "You could say that. I was going to say beautiful."

"You look great, too," I say. "And your suit fits perfectly.

It's like they knew your size or something."

"Yeah, it's all a bit unsettling, if you ask me—the monitoring, the kidnapping, and especially the wii initiative," Darren says.

"Not to mention how Kiran knew about my best friend from high school," Chloe adds. "I'm resenting the day I started wearing this ring…and it's not like removing it solves the issue, either."

I don't disagree, and although I'm sure Chloe wasn't directing her comment at me, I feel responsible. Cai gave me the rings, and I passed them onto my friends.

I notice Darren's pocket square—forest green, the same color as my dress. ELIXIR picked that out, too? But if ELIXIR knows about Darren dominating my thoughts, then maybe I'm dominating his thoughts, too? That possibility makes me feel both excited and anxious.

"I think we'll find some answers in there," Nick says.

Just then, our rings light up with an orange glow. The words *Front Entrance* scroll across our metal bands. Without speaking, we gather with who must be the other eight clerics near the heavy wooden doors at the front of the church. Although each wears a dress or suit similar to ours, the posh clothes can't hide the apprehension behind their nervous smiles. At least we all share an emotion in common—angst.

The bells ring, and then, a few seconds later, the doors open. Music from an old pipe organ spills from the church, overtaking the cricket chirps outside.

Though I've walked past this building many times, I never

found the time nor the desire to go inside. Like anybody else, I appreciate the craftsmanship, but something about sitting in an old, quiet church with just my thoughts never appealed to me.

Nick, Chloe, Darren, and I hang toward the back of the group. When it's our turn, we file in through a narrow aisle. Four long decorative benches face the aisle on both sides. Bright stained glass windows create a beautiful contrast to the plain walls, each glass mosaic featuring a different word in the center.

A large soldier dressed in black—a proxy, I think Kiran called them—closes the large wooden doors behind us. Shaved head and chiseled jaw, he stands guard at the back entrance, expressionless and arms at his side. *Is he trying to keep us in or others out?*

Poking my head around Darren, I spot a raised altar on the far side. Twelve young adults in formal wear, standing single file in a several-hundred-year-old Gothic church, awaiting a Name Change ceremony we know nothing about. Who said ignorance is bliss?

"Attention!" says a familiar female voice. Her command causes the organist to stop playing in the middle of his song. I look up and see a blond woman dressed in a formfitting business suit. She's even more intimidating in person than on video.

"On behalf of ELIXIR, welcome. My name is Tilda. We've already divided you into one of three groups—soma, amrita, or ichor. Please check your ring now and sit with

your respective cohort. A proxy in your section will verify your text message."

A small flurry erupts as the twelve of us look down at our rings for the orange text. "Members of soma cohort sit on the left, amrita on the right, and, finally, those in ichor down in front," Tilda instructs.

"I'm ichor," Chloe says.

"Ditto," Nick echoes.

"Me too," Darren says. "What about you, Sienna?"

I check my ring again for the fourth time—spinning it deliberately, making sure the scrolling feature still works.

"I got nothing."

The other eight clerics self-sort into their respective cohorts on the left and right. The proxy assigned to each section verifies their orange text. Worry slowly creeps from my stomach, into my throat. So far in my life, I've been able to blend into the crowd. But in this moment, I know exactly how a cockroach must feel when someone flips on a light switch—exposed. Obviously, I'm with my other three friends, but I never got a text, so the proxy can't verify me.

Tilda leans on her lectern to the left of the altar, tapping her fingernail, agonizing over every wasted second. It's painful to watch her wait for the other eleven clerics to find their seat.

"Sienna," she snaps, catching me out of the corner of her eye. "Why aren't you sitting with your cohort?"

"Um…I never got a text."

"You're Cai's niece," she says. "You should have received one."

When she mentions my relationship to Cai, I hear clerics in the other two cohorts murmur, making me even more self-conscious. Before I can melt into the reddish-orange carpet, Cai emerges from a back door just to the right of the altar. He walks toward Tilda at a brisk pace. She hunches down over the lectern to listen. Though I'm not sure what he whispers, Tilda lightens her tone.

"Sienna, please join ichor down in front."

"Thank you," I sigh, dashing to the front pew with as much poise as possible. Darren and Chloe split apart to clear a small space, and I plop down between them. My cheeks probably match the color of my hair. Good thing *this* ceremony isn't being broadcast.

Before Tilda speaks again, I scan the room for Cai, hoping to thank him for putting me with my friends. But in the commotion, I didn't see where he went.

"Why a Name Change?" Tilda asks, the question we're all wondering.

The candle on the altar to her right flickers high above its glass cylinder. "Let me ask you, clerics. How many of you have suffered harm—directly or indirectly—from SWARM?"

One hand goes up—then another and another. Soon, we all extend our hands into the air.

"Enough!" Tilda laments. Then she makes a fist with her left hand and puts it up to her mouth, biting down on her knuckle. "Enough," she says again, with anguish in her voice.

She descends from the lectern and onto the main floor. Taking her time, she paces in front of us, pausing to make

eye contact with each of us clerics.

Hawklike, I fixate on every move she makes, unsure when she'll break the silence. But she pauses for so long I don't know *if* she'll break the silence.

After a few more seconds pass, she begins again, much quieter. "It's time I tell my story," she says. "And honestly, I've never publicly shared it."

She breathes deeply before continuing. Maybe Tilda's story will help me find answers to some of my own questions—like why my friends and I were chosen. On the verge of hearing the truth, I can't stop my hands from shaking.

Why do I feel so afraid?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"FIVE YEARS AGO, my life was very different," Tilda explains. "I served as CEO of the trillion-dollar technology company Arete. We earned a reputation for penetrating the dark web and demanding radical reform. Before our efforts, criminals enjoyed unregulated access and engaged in the vilest of crimes with few repercussions."

I glance at my fellow clerics. They look spellbound, transfixed by every word flowing from Tilda's mouth.

"Years ago, I thought the dark web was an isolated digital 'back alley' somewhere on the Internet where people exchanged pirated movies and music. But then one day my team came to me with the truth, packaged in an executive summary. That summary shifted my vision from making Arete profitable to making it a catalyst for global reform.

"In the summary, my team revealed the size and scope of the dark web through a common search engine we probably all use. Like many people, I tried staying oblivious to

the dark web, but as a mother and a CEO of a technology company, I couldn't claim ignorance any longer. As expected, the summary highlighted pirated content and illegal drugs. Counterfeit currency and stolen luxury goods came next in line. But then the summary moved into more significant crimes such as identify theft, purchasing false documents, and even buying weapons, ammunition, and explosives.

"At this point, I told myself I'm only one woman. How can I take on the dark web? But when I read the next page, something inside me changed forever. To be honest, much of me wished I never saw that page. It forced me to confront a new depth of depravity—one I didn't think humankind was capable of.

"While I sat sipping tea, somewhere in the world adults were being killed for their kidneys and livers and children were being sold for pleasure.

"The next morning I commissioned my senior team to create what would be known as the Arete Report—a strategic initiative to shed light on the dark web and SWARM's potential link to it. My personal mission was to recruit other influential CEOs to read the Arete Report and then join forces to institute dark web reform."

I move my head to see Chloe. Although she's holding Nick's arm, she stares ahead at Tilda. Everyone in the room is engrossed, too—in body, soul, and spirit.

"Yet one thing mattered more to me than any title or salary, or even the Arete Report," Tilda says. "My heart revolved around my five-year-old son—William.

"He was the sunshine in my life and the only living memory I had of his father, who died protecting our country two years prior. William and I were inseparable. On weekends, we'd leave town and head to our ranch out in the country. For two straight days, we'd ride horses and make memories. I called him my Cowboy Will and he'd call me his Cowgirl Mama."

I don't like the way Tilda uses the past tense when referencing her son.

He was. William and I were. We'd leave.

Past tense is how I've been forced to refer to my parents throughout my formative years. For those who've loved and lost, the past is cruel and bitter. It haunts the living with the fading memory of what might have been. It chokes out the present and kills the future, leaving an unpleasant aftertaste in the minds of all who survive.

Tilda continues her story.

"One Friday afternoon I left work to pick William up at school. When I arrived, they told me he never came in that day. I called my younger sister, Anne. She dropped off William on Fridays so I could start early and end early. My heart sank when she didn't pick up my call after more than half a dozen attempts. I knew something terrible had happened. I just didn't know what."

Mechanically, Tilda sits on a nearby stool and wipes a tear.

Unrest rises within me the longer I hear her story, like a dam about to burst from too much pressure behind it.

"You okay?" Darren whispers.

I measure the space between his mouth and my ear. The warmth of his breath sends a shiver through my entire body. Beginning at my neck, flowing down my torso and legs, and surging out through the tips of my toes. I ache, longing to bridge *that* space.

I want to tell Darren I'm not okay and that I need him to hold me. I want to tell him to run away with me, from SWARM, from ELIXIR, and from the ghosts of the parents I never knew. *But I can't*.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

He nods, but I know he sees through the thin mask I hide behind. Times like this, I wish Darren weren't so intuitive.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TILDA BLOWS HER nose into a tissue before continuing. "In the midst of trying to locate William, I received a call from a number I didn't recognize. I heard William screaming for me in the background. They hacked my phone and inserted a live video feed. Through my tiny screen, I saw my little Cowboy Will writhing in pain. A group of men in masks surrounded him, laughing and poking him. I begged them to stop.

"Fury filled my lungs and rage hijacked my brain. To this day I'm unable to erase his screams. I wished I could reach through that phone and strangle each of his attackers. A computerized voice spoke off camera, identifying itself as SWARM. The voice cursed the Arete Report and me for threatening their enterprise. Then it told me…it set up—"

Midsentence, Tilda nearly falls from her stool. Several ELIXIR proxies rush to her side to steady her. She shoves their hands away. "Let me finish," she shouts. "These clerics

must learn why they're here and why SWARM must be stopped!"

Although she stands back up unassisted, Tilda looks dangerously close to toppling over. She breathes deeply, searching for words.

"The digitized hacker's voice pronounced a death sentence upon my little Cowboy Will. They set up a live murder and started taking orders from a pay-per-view audience. Using Bitcoin, the preferred currency of the dark web, viewers purchased abusive acts that SWARM performed upon William in real time. I don't have the strength or stomach to tell you what happened for the next sixty minutes. I wanted to hang up and run, but I couldn't abandon my son or his screams. Despite all my power, all my connections, and all my wealth, I stood there impotent.

"Moments before ending William's life, they offered a solemn ultimatum. I could either press ahead with the Arete Report or I could resign my post as CEO. If the report continued, then every day SWARM would hack my phone and I'd witness another child's abuse and death in real time.

"I couldn't continue knowing my actions would cause the death of another innocent child. My name Felicity meant 'happiness,' but Felicity Tulane died that day along with William and my sister, Anne."

I can feel Darren's shoulders shaking next to me. "You okay?" I whisper. He stares off into nowhere, his eyes downcast and glassy.

He shakes his head before the words come out of his mouth. "No…I'm not."

"Can I help?" I say.

"*Is there a problem?*" Tilda asks. Clerics and proxies alike twist their heads toward us. Their stares cause my heart to race. I try to avoid making eye contact with Tilda. "Sienna, would you like to tell the group about your private discussion with Darren? Or maybe you find my traumatic tale too boring for your tastes?"

I join Darren staring at the floor, controlling my breathing. I shake my head. Although now isn't the time to talk, I touch Darren's hand, letting him know I'm here to listen.

"Then I'll continue," Tilda says. "Authorities covered up SWARM's crime. They released a story about my son dying suddenly when a drunk driver struck him on his bicycle. They told the public that the grief initiated a nervous breakdown, and Arete had let me go so I could recover. Of course, to save face, Arete gave me a generous severance package.

"Only a few people knew the real reason for my departure. Authorities told me—off the record—that any type of exposé would simply exacerbate SWARM's rage and unleash a bloodthirsty attack on a global level. The world wasn't ready to deal with a hacktivist group so powerful. And so out of fear they looked the other way, oblivious to the truth—that every day SWARM grew in size and strength."

I swallow hard. Up until this point, I had no concept of SWARM's capacity for terrorism. Naively, I thought

they were just a loosely organized group of criminals, not a superpower poised for world domination.

Tilda glances down before continuing. "So here we are five years later. Twenty-four hours ago SWARM initiated its most strategic attack to date, hacking humans and killing dignitaries from more than two dozen countries worldwide. If the human mind can be hacked, then there is no end to the evil SWARM can unleash.

"Thankfully, not everybody just sat around these past five years waiting for SWARM to swell. One visionary did something to fight back.

"While grieving William's death, I received a call from the renowned philanthropist André Saradon. He invited me to join him and his wife, Phoebe, at their estate to chat about a new project. As a jobless widow who recently buried her only child, naturally I refused. I didn't need more money, nor did I need more relationships. I still had an influential network of true friends.

"I was about to hang up when he said one word that forced me to reconsider. *ELIXIR.* André told me he knew the truth about William, the dark web, and SWARM's uprising. He and Phoebe recently invested their personal fortune—billions and billions—into the independent research and technology company ELIXIR. Their goal was to infiltrate the dark web, initiate reform, and ultimately eradicate SWARM. He assured me that with ELIXIR's talent and his funding, they'd pick up where the Arete Report left off and they wouldn't let up until they accomplished the mission.

"ELIXIR's board believed I brought the needed charisma, clarity, and clout to spearhead what he referred to as ELIXIR Project. They needed me to leverage my corporate connections and persuade them to join forces with ELIXIR. So, fueled by passion from William's passing and a desire to personally contribute to SWARM's downfall, I accepted the role as spokesperson for ELIXIR."

The light in the church is too dim to tell for sure, but Tilda's lips seem to curve upward at the ends. "And so this brings us to tonight. These past five years we've been preparing for the Unveiling, and for you twelve clerics."

Three proxies move to the front of the church. Each holds a small velvet bag. Tilda reaches her hand in one proxy's bag and pulls out a small dark object.

Then she nods, and the three proxies pass their respective bags to each cohort. Before the velvet bag comes to me, I wipe my hands on my dress. I am still warm and sweaty from Tilda's rebuke only a few minutes ago. What had upset Darren so much? Was it something about SWARM or maybe William's death?

The velvet bag reaches me, and I pull out a dense, dark, heavy stone. I smell strong incense when I bring the stone close to my face.

Another proxy brings Tilda a gold platter. She places it on the altar in the center of the cruciform. Tilda raises her dark stone in the air. "Clerics, there comes a time when we lose ourselves so collectively we can find a new way forward. A time to forget our past so we can embrace our future.

Tonight I invite you. Let your old self die and let your new self be reborn. We memorialize this commitment through the Name Change ceremony."

Another proxy stands at the front of the altar holding a metal censer suspended from chains. Tilda places her dark stone inside. Gray smoke slithers out of the slits like a famished serpent in search of prey.

"Felicity, meaning 'happiness,' buried in death," Tilda announces. Then she picks up a white stone off the altar and lifts it in the air. "Tilda, meaning 'strong in war,' raised to new life." She places her stone on the gold platter.

"Clerics, ELIXIR has chosen you twelve to usher in this era—one where SWARM no longer exists. Together we'll accomplish this mission even if we need to go through the gates of hell to do it. This thurible will lead our procession to the great room, where the entire world will join us for the Unveiling.

"If you accept your role with ELIXIR, I invite you to come forward, one at a time, and receive your new name. At the Unveiling, you'll discover why we chose you twelve to join one of the greatest innovations ever created, ELIXIR Project."

Certain parts of Tilda's story sound preposterous—the live-stream murder and the Arete Report cover-up for starters. Still, in my heart I know she's telling the truth. Her words burrow their way deep into my being. Isn't this what I've wanted? To begin again? To forget the past and the pain of losing a mother and a father?

"We'll start with soma, then amrita, and finally ichor."

But her invitation is confusing. *Do I even have a choice?* Nothing about ELIXIR seems optional—from us drinking the vial back in the control room to being shot with an injectable. I scan the church one more time, hoping to see Cai. He'd know what to do. Although I don't see him, his warning from earlier today still haunts me.

They're watching us. Things aren't always what they seem. Who was he referring to? SWARM? ELIXIR?

Clerics from soma step forward one by one, depositing their dark stones into the censer. They declare death to their old names and then place their white stones on the platter.

Part of me wants to join them, but what am I saying yes to? Working for ELXIR? I've always respected them, but the past two days have caused me to question some of their actions.

"What are you going to do?" I whisper to Chloe. I imagine her choice will influence Nick. He won't let her go into the Unveiling by herself.

"I'm doing it. I've heard enough tonight to convince me there's a whole different world out there. Plus I wouldn't mind a new name." She smiles.

I kind of like my name, Sienna. I think it means "little redhead." Cai helped me with my research in elementary school during an assignment on our family trees. I was named after a city in Italy. I guess I could make do with a new name if it means finding answers about my parents.

The amrita clerics form a line in front of the altar.

"I'm in," Nick says in a hushed tone. "We're too far into this already, and I'm worried what happens if we *don't* go. Tilda is amped up about this Project, and I'm sure SWARM knows something about it. They wouldn't have had agents in the airport otherwise. Besides, I'd rather be under ELIXIR's protection then out on my own."

I want to shake them. Am I the only one who feels this Name Change ceremony is a little weird? How can we trust Tilda or ELIXIR, for that matter? How can we trust anyone?

I turn to Darren, scanning his face for some clue into what he's thinking. Maybe he's the only sane one left. But rather than speaking, he just shrugs, like he hasn't made up his mind yet.

"What's your new name going to be?" I whisper to Chloe.

"Check your ring," she says. "They picked a Greek one for me and it even has a cool meaning. Maybe they feel bad for taking away our trip."

I look at my ring, but just like before, there's no text.

"You both got one, too?" I ask Darren and Nick. They nod. Maybe mine's the only one broken?

"Ichor, your turn," Tilda says abruptly.

Chloe walks forward and places her dark stone into the censer. "Chloe, meaning 'green shoot,' buried in death." Then she picks a white stone off the altar. "Karme, meaning 'harvest,' raised to new life." She places her stone on the golden platter.

Nick follows her lead, placing his dark stone into the

censer. "Nick, meaning 'victory,' buried in death." Then he picks a white stone off the altar. "Phoenix, meaning 'immortal,' raised to new life."

Two more stones. Two more spaces. One for Darren. One for me. Darren looks like a startled animal caught in a cage with no way to escape.

"I'm out," Darren announces.

"*You're out?*" Tilda repeats, shocked by his answer. "Do you know what this means?"

"No, I don't, and that's exactly why I'm not doing it," Darren says plainly.

"But this is your chance to clear your name, to forget your past, to start over," Tilda coaxes. "Are you sure you don't want those things?"

Darren hesitates. Tilda spots an angle and seeks to exploit it.

"Please weigh your decision carefully," Tilda warns. "Remember, any information we have stored on you could naturally be hacked by SWARM. Imagine them using that information to hurt you or the ones you love."

He stares at the ground for a few seconds, appearing to let her admonition sink in. With a reluctant gait, he walks forward and places his dark stone into the censer. "Darren, meaning 'gift,' buried in death." Then he picks a white stone off the altar. "Damon, meaning 'to tame,' raised to new life." He places his stone on the platter.

Before I have time to decipher Darren's actions, Tilda addresses me. "Sienna, only one spot remains."

What's the meaning behind Tilda's warning to Darren? A thousand thoughts flood my mind. I worry about SWARM and Darren and the Unveiling. I think of William and the dark web. I hear McNultey's laugh and Kiran's snickering. I long for more time with Phoebe and the memory of a mother I never knew.

The whole experience is overwhelming. I wish Cai could help me navigate this murky path. Despite his recent behavior, I know I can still trust him. "Yeah…" I start in with my rationale for declining her offer. "Um, I just don't think…"

I notice the orange glow encircling my finger and use my left hand to shield the message: *Choose Aryedne.*

I turn my torso and scan the pews. Cai is the only person who knows the significance of that name. In tenth grade, I tried writing my first novel. Unsure of what to name the heroine, I asked Cai for his advice. He suggested researching Greek mythology. I stumbled upon a story about Ariadne that captured my attention.

Ariadne—meaning "holy"—was the daughter of King Minos of Crete. She fell in love with Theseus and gave him a ball of thread. After killing the Minotaur, Theseus used the ball of thread to find his way out and escape the Minotaur's labyrinth.

Although I loved the story of Ariadne, I wanted to give my novel a unique twist, so I changed the spelling to Aryedne. Maybe this text is a clue from Cai? Maybe he's telling me to continue down the path before me? Maybe I'll be led out of this labyrinth of questions, too?

"Sienna," Tilda says, interrupting my thoughts. "We're waiting for your answer."

Chloe, Nick, and Darren lock onto me. At best, joining ELIXIR might be a calculated step into unknown risks or unrealized rewards. For all I know, maybe both.

But what other option do I have? I could go back to my predictable past. At least it's clear and familiar. Or do I run toward my uncertain future?

My feet shuffle toward the censer. Sometimes we need to step forward in spite of our fears. Sometimes we need to mentally check out so we can emotionally jump in. I resist thinking at all. And so, on autopilot, with the orange glow imprinted in my memory, I place my dark stone into the censer.

"Sienna, meaning 'little redhead,' buried in death." Then I reach onto the altar and pick up a white stone. "Aryedne, meaning 'holy,' raised to new life." I place my stone on the golden platter and complete the circle of twelve.

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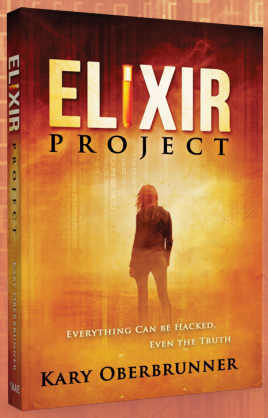

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WILL THIS FACT SET SIENNA FREE OR
PLUNGE HER INTO AN EVEN BIGGER LIE?

ELIXIR PROJECT

Sienna Lewis lives in a world constantly threatened by a hacktivist group known as SWARM. After SWARM executes its deadliest attack yet, Sienna and her three college friends learn they have been chosen for the ELIXIR Project—a master plan designed to overthrow SWARM—and participation is mandatory.

As she faces the deadly challenges of the Project, Sienna confronts layers of conspiracies that force her to question everyone she trusts and everything she believes about her friends, her parents' untimely deaths, and herself—all while staying one step ahead of SWARM. In this fast-paced, near-future thriller, will love and loyalty have time to catch up with Sienna? Or will she crack under the pressure of a future already chosen for her?

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