

Amiri Hayes

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Chapter 1

Drew Goyover

8:00 AM, Friday Morning

Make no mistake, I do talk. It's a common misconception about selective mutism. Even my mom sometimes forgets that I *can* speak. But people are like crowds and their eyes are like spotlights. When it's my turn to go on the stage, the spotlights are just too bright and the crowd is just too quiet. And that never goes away. If I don't say anything, the crowd won't react and I won't be condemned for saying the wrong things. It's a good thought in theory but some people really do find a seventeen-year old who won't talk unimaginable.

Maybe one day I'll say something snarky like, *Maybe if you shut up there'd be enough time for me to open my mouth and get a word out*, but again—the spotlights.

Nobody really understands why I don't speak except for maybe my therapist Carol. Sometimes I'm not even completely sure why I don't want to speak. At some point you start internalizing what people say you are and it's hard to stop. Not speaking started when the January night of the Bloomville Fire when I was young so people believe the trauma's to blame. It wasn't. It isn't. Resentment is a powerful thing. I still resent the people who didn't respect my insights. I still resent the people who told me that everything was going to be okay when I warned them of how unlikely it would be to get adopted before I became a ward of the system. It's fine. I'm over it.

I remember my first foster parents completely ignoring me when I complained about the

lack of food in the house and the fact that the trash in my room still hadn't been cleaned out after the weeks I'd been there. I remember my Aunt Peggy, who declined to take me to live with her children, telling me that she was sorry for my loss and then adding that I should make sure to take care of my new young foster brother because he was "cute". She said I should make sure he got adopted. What?

When my father got himself, my mother and my older brother killed, I became a servant, a diplomat, and above all a starry-eyed fool. Plus a doormat. My sole purpose became to listen. So I did. I listened to my foster parents. I listened to my aunts. I listened to my uncles. Everybody had problems and everybody just wanted someone to listen. That's not a crime. It sounds reasonable enough to me honestly.

Jumping into my sweatpants and Vans and plugging my earbuds in, I sit down to check my computer. It's almost 8:00 so I'll have to get on the bus soon. I inspect my Ps4 to see that my Transparent.Net Disk was in and sure enough, the ultra-familiar logo engulfed my screen with a single notification from my BOF (best online friend). CG asked if I was up an hour ago. I replied, *Going to school*, and rushed out the door. I follow through on what I say I'll do.

Transparent is a disk that some geek at my school made. (Geek is a relative term, a non-offensive word when used by me, a nerd, and it's a noun defined as a person who specializes and obsesses over computers, computer hardwares and softwares, or creates or sells code.) The Transparent disk program allows a bunch of people to have their own social media without it being watched by any companies or even the government, apparently. Nobody knows how many people have it or who exactly made it but we knew the source originated at Johnson X High, my school, where everyone with access to any kind of DVD player has Transparent.

Most people use the social media disk and they all use it for various different reasons and activities. Some people do very illegal things with it but I never got that deep into the dark side of the disk. All I know was that a group of misfits held a competition where people did dares for money and there was an illegal television app streaming service with every movie 'since the beginning of time.' I just use it to talk to CG and a couple of other friends I made playing the wack

games amateurs posted. I only knew people who would use it for the other things.

Rushing out of my room, speeding down the stairs into the kitchen, a quick nod was given to Mom and a banana was snatched, before I am out of the door. Then I grab my skateboard and am running on the street, jumping on and catching up to the car ahead of me to grab onto its end.

I peel the banana, devouring it and then throw the peel in the garbage as I make a left, swerving with the car while skating vigorously. The bus comes at 8:05 and it's 8:04 so I have to be quick. No time for apologies. I push myself off the moving red 2005 Mustang GT, torpedoing down the street and within a few seconds I'm speeding down the street at 40 miles an hour, suddenly aware of every pebble on the ground and every person or car in the area. Danger can be fun.

A few mere seconds later I am at the front of Pablo's—also known as my real-life best friend's house. Pablo sits outside on the steps of his house and greeted me with a, "Wassup Drew," as he saw me coming. I wait until I get close enough and then nod, making sure the ends of my lips curl up so that he knows it's friendly. "Bro, you should be careful on that thing," he starts off with a stern tone and then he yells, "You're not going to believe this!" The bus rolls to a stop in front of his house and we walk up to it as Pablo continues to talk.

"I was on Transparent, right, just scrolling down looking at all the posts when I see digital confetti come down from the top of the screen. Then an invitation appears in the middle of the screen, right? It says 'You're invited. Come to 55 Faraday Avenue, San Francisco at 8:30. AM. You can bring one guest.' Bro, it was crazy, I don't even know why they chose me."

I nod and smile again, hiding the fact I got the same message last night when I was on the app. Rule #1, Don't undermine or belittle the reactions of the people you're listening to.

After taking out my beloved notepad I write with my big 0.3mm limited edition Stan Lee Sharpie pen 'I am not going to that, I won't skip school again'. Last time something like this happened, it was at lunch and he swore that we'd be back before lunch ended. It was a Transparent Treasure Hunt and it was fun enough but we didn't get back to school until 5:00 PM

when everybody except for a portly janitor was long gone. Even worse, apart from the fact that Mom chewed me out over that I couldn't go back to school to get homework for the next day. Which was relatively fine, I don't like homework, but no need to let the teachers dislike me even more.

"Come on," he pleads, "Last time, I didn't know that it was so long. This is probably going to end before the second period starts. We both have second period free, so we'd only miss one class."

'One too many classes,' I write with my smaller sharpie pen.

His logic is completely flawed and he's aware of that. He's openly lying. Even if we did manage to get back to school in time for class, to get into school we'd have to go to the Front Office and explain why we were late. I don't talk and he's a really bad liar so they would never believe us. Besides, the Vice President of ninth grade cannot be seen skipping school too much. Got to set an example for my 'peers'.

I decide to change the subject in a subtle way. 'What are you *wearing*?'

"What! Shut up, bro, you're one to talk," he counters. To be fair, he isn't wrong. This morning I just threw on a dress shirt, sweatpants and Vans. He, on the other hand, is dressed in a bright orange and purple shirt, black jeans and a mismatched pair of orange and purple shoes. To be honest, I think his outfit is pretty cool. But conversation is a must. Can't have a silent bus ride.

'Alright, alright,' I write allowing myself to laugh quietly.

Erica VanJay

7:00 AM, Friday Morning

School! What time is it? I pull up my sleeve and check my watch. 7:15. There is plenty of time before classes start. I pull out my phone, holding it tighter than usual so it won't fall out of

the booming helicopter I am currently in and tap on the familiar blue logo on it. *Transparent*. Then it disappears and I look at my profile pic with my favorite superhero DareDevil.

5:00, 4:59, 4:58, 4:57, etc.

I scroll down and quickly read the post that a DA (that stands for Darer) wrote.

E, you are dared to jump out of the helicopter with your eyes closed for 30 seconds. You will have to keep your phone in front of your face so your viewers can verify that you are keeping them closed. My friends will put a timer on your screen so that you know when to open your eyes.

I read it again and then once more with my mouth hanging open the whole time. Looking underneath the post, I see a blue checkmark with the word *Transparent* next to it in small blue letters. *Shoot*, they verified it! This is a crazy dare, I can't believe the leader of Transparent is even allowing it! But then I again I don't know what I expected, because they told me to get in a helicopter and this app is intense.. Maybe people were right about the dark side of the app.

4:49, 4:48, 4:47, 4:46... The time keeps going down. I am going to have to decide what to do soon. I want to pace but I can't.

I debate checking to see how much money they are offering for this challenge, but ultimately decide not to. I'm not in this for the money. I do this for the feeling the dare evokes.

If I don't do this, I have to pay the DA the dare money and the website back for the helicopter ride. I can probably cover that with the money I've made from other dares but I don't particularly want to.

4:30, 4:29, 4:28, 4:27, 4:26...

I turn on the camera and turn my phone to Selfie-mode so that viewers could see my face.

There are 3,921—no 3,928—people watching me. Wow! Then I remember that I don't do this for the attention either. I do it for the feeling. I do it for the *feeling*.

I smile at the camera and set my phone down on my lap while I put on a parachute and then pick the phone up again. The pilot gives me the go signal and I give an enthusiastic, "We're good," to my now 6,307 viewers watching me but my voice is drowned out by the chopping of helicopter blades. I stretch my arm out the helicopter so the viewers can see the view and shifted in my seat.

3:20, 3:19, 3:18, 3:17...

Almost 13,000 viewers. I didn't even know there were that many people on Transparent.

Gulp. I grab the strap and step onto the edge of the helicopter. The deafening sound of the blades is probably overwhelming speakers. I turn the phone back to me and make a face to show them how scary it is. Most DareDevils don't show emotion but I am as honest as I can be. I've got no reason to lie; I'm not in it for the views.

Then I fall out of the helicopter. It isn't a real fall of course, just something to keep my viewers on edge. Nevertheless, I am in the air falling holding my phone a few inches above my face to show that my eyes are closed. I feel really mad at the DA who posted right then and there because the sight of the Edgehill Mountains behind San Fran is probably beautiful.

I make sure to count as accurately as I can in my head so that I can tell where I was in terms of time. 22, Mississippi, 23 Mississippi, 24 Mississippi, 25 Mississippi, 26 Mississippi... I am almost there. I begin to get more scared than I've ever been in my life. The moment I open my eyes I could totally die.

I'd been skydiving once before but I didn't know exactly how long it took to get to the ground. When I reached 30 in my mind I sighed relief but my breath was interrupted by wind. The beep beep sound wasn't going off. I could've counted wrong but I would've sworn I was counting slower if anything. Then it goes off. I hear it faintly and smile but don't open my eyes. My viewers are in for the surprise of their life.

I start screaming as loud as I can so that even my watchers could hear me through the wind and jerk my phone around erratically. I point it away from my eyes for just a split second so that I could see where I was in the air and assess the situation.

I look down and figure that I have less than ten seconds before this becomes dangerous. I point the phone back at my face and scream, open my eyes and smile into the camera. Then I wink and pull the 'chute.

I smile as I turn off the video and cackle as I look through the comments while I float to the ground. Then I see the time. 7:20. It's going to take an hour to get to school. I am going to have to hurry up.

The steps in front of the school are empty and I can't decide if it was because I was too early or too late. I get out of the cab, pay the driver with cash not card, and run to the door. It isn't open. I still don't know if I'm late or not.

I walk around the school to the front office and ring the doorbell. Looking into the camera mounted above me, I smile as deviously as I can. A lock clicks and the door opens. I walk in, and am ready to explain my situation to the guy behind the desk when he points at the clock. It's only 7:40. That made me think two things: One, why is this man familiar with a situation where a random student can't tell if they're an hour early or late to class, and two, my cab driver must be a speed demon.

Walking through the doors and making my way to the computer lab, I do some of yesterday's homework and get it all finished before the first bell, but still sulk because I probably wouldn't be able to check my fans reactions for at least half an hour. It flashes through my mind that I'm going to have to keep the number of that cab driver.

Drew Goyover

8:30 AM, Friday Morning

Homeroom...the sweet stench from sweaty adolescents packed into a small room. The unattractive look of the Language Arts posters as they sag, refusing to be held up by their tape. The sound of periodic laughter as the class clown draws alarming images on the white board. The shade of red on the teachers face when she lectures us all for not having said anything about the clown's vulgar drawings. And worst of all: the feeling attained when you accidentally touch the fresh gum underneath your desk...Homeroom.

Lucky for me, the bell rings.

It's a hot day today, and besides the large amount of people stuck inside small classrooms, the lack of air conditioning in our school serves as a reason for everyone to complain. Not just the students, the teachers too.

As I make my way to Science—the only class I liked—I think of two things. The first is the lesson. We are learning about early communication and cryptography, which is the art of writing or solving codes. It is the single greatest thing we'd ever learned in school. This is one topic I can relate to. I know all about cryptography. I taught myself all about it when I was at home, instead of playing with my friends online or going outside to skate. The second is Mr. Tronner. Most people deem him as the coolest teacher in the school, which probably stemmed from him also being the youngest teacher. He's the only teacher I've ever met that is that is fresh out of college. I like him, mostly because he teaches my favorite class.

I sit down in my seat, in between Erica VanJay and Jack Parker. Erica's quiet as always, like me, except she's not like me. When she has something to say she says it, and even more she makes sure everybody in the room hears. I could never do that. On the other side, Andrew, who everyone just called Parker is more normal than me or Erica. He likes Mr. Tronner just like us and he's the Treasurer of the Student Council so we work together. but beyond that similarities are nonexistent. All that matters to me is that we all get along. I don't like arguing. It's kinda hard to get a word in when you are scribbling down complaints on paper. People just pretend not to see what you wrote or even worse, go ahead and do what they want to do anyway. After all, what am I

going to say? Nothing.

Mr. Tronner enters the room, just a few minutes late as usual. He strokes his beard and stares at his desk and it makes him look funny. He might be the only teacher that doesn't start the lesson the minute he gets in class. He is wearing a typical dress shirt and suit pants but he's sewn patches onto the back of his shirt. He's a pretty big guy but his humor and geekish appearance offset any intimidating vibes. The patches display Mighty Atom from his favorite manga. The shirt had fueled a heated discussion about why he liked the Japanese version instead of the American Version, Astro Boy, last week.

"Hey, guys," he says while passing out papers to the front row, "We're gonna take a break from the group projects today. We'll finish those next week because I realized the majority of you don't even understand the basics apparently even after several detailed lessons."

Everyone in class smiles, but I sigh. I hate it when teachers change up the schedule. I was gonna disable the software the school used to spy on us and play Pac-Man on our Chromebooks the whole period.

He takes out a marker and walks over to the dry erase board. He writes a couple of letters on the board and then writes a bunch of random symbols. "That's cryptography guys. End of lesson." We all chuckle and looked at the board but Mr. Tronner just sits in his seat smirking. It's part of his charm, I guess.

"I'm serious guys," he adds, still smirking. "Let's see who figures that out first."

Some of the 'academics' in the front take out a piece of paper and start scribbling words down as fast as they could but us in the back just waited.

After a few minutes of annoying silence, I raise my hand. Mr. Tronner perks his head up. He's surprised. He's a cool teacher and all but that doesn't warrant my participation in his class. "Andrew?" he says inquisitively.

I take out my notebook and begin writing. — '#1 says *you couldn't guess it* & #2 says *Wow you guessed it*' — I let myself enjoy the kind of grin that Know-It-Alls permanently wear above my

head so he could see it.

A couple of people chuckle, probably assuming that my answer is incorrect. They go back to writing until Mr. T says, "Yep, good job," and nods approvingly.

"How did you get that?" he asks.

Hmmm. Follow up questions. I didn't sign up for this.

— '#1 you took each letter and went up 1 letter in the alphabet. Except for z. For that one you put a.' — He smiles and nods his head, prompting me to go on. — 'The second's harder. It's called a Pigpen cipher. To understand it, you have to know what a Pigpen Cipher is' —

"Well, either way, good job. Does anybody know what the process of figuring out a code is called?" Nobody raises their hand and Mr. T looks at me. I had made a mistake by answering his ciphers. If I don't do something soon, then I am going to be a teacher's pet. Instead of raising my hand, I look over at Erica.

Before I met CG, Erica was my Best Online Friend. We went on Facebook and had public chats but used encrypted ciphers like Pigpen. When someone finally figured out what we were saying they'd usually respond and we'd find a new secret language to confuse people with.

When she noticed me looking at her, she shook her head and low-key smiled. After a few more moments of silence, he said, "Decryption." He looked at me disappointedly and seemed kind of annoyed. Oh, well. I didn't sign on to being a teacher's pet. The whole experience taught me a valuable lesson about raising my hand in class: Don't.

He has us take some notes for the rest of the class then he lets us do schoolwork on the Chromebooks. I pretend to read to avoid confrontation but spend most of the time just thinking about Erica. She was always taking risks that I wouldn't take online. That was why we stopped being friends. I was always afraid of breaking the law and she just wasn't. She looked different than she had when we were friends. She wore darker clothes and stopped using her contacts. She never changed her hair color like the others in her new group of friends though, which made me think that she might not be so different.

I debate what to do on my Chromebook as the period comes to an end. Extra credit or games? I press F4 on the computer to see the code and then disable the software that the guidance counselor uses to see our screens and open a new tab, typing *PacMan* in. Class went quickly after that. It was the most entertained I'd been since I got there.

"Drew?" Mr. Tronner calls after me when the period finally decides to end. My face scrunches up in anticipation, but I make sure to fix it before I'm at his desk. Adults in general, don't seem to like anything other than auspicious expressions. "I really liked that you raised your hand today. I really think you'd excel if you did that more. All the teachers can make extra accommodations for the fact that you don't talk."

After nodding and smiling, I write that I'd try to raise my hand more, but I'm not sure whether I'm lying or not. Either way, the ultimate goal is to get out of here.

Finally, my free period is here at last. And it's only the second period of the day. On the bus, Pablo said that he wanted us to go to the Transparent Event. If he's going to be persistent, he might find me and pull me out of school to go. Either way, I am going to enjoy the beginning of my alone time. Naturally, my free spirit rejects studying in the library like we are supposed to and I walk off to the hallway on the other side of school. After I look to see that nobody is in the hallway, I slip into one of the Janitors closets and use my phone flashlight to navigate around mops and brooms as I find my way to the back of the closet.

There is a little space between the wall at the back of the janitor's closet and the wall leading up to it that I can fit through. I do this and within a second I am not in a janitor's closet anymore. I am in my own private space. I had put a thin mattress there and some blankets as well as a charger for my phone. If anybody ever found out about this place I'd be dead.

I take off my shoes and put them in the corner and then lie down on my mattress when I feel something soft. I can't believe it. I take the blanket and rip it off the ground as fast as I can while using my phone light. Under it, Erica's lying down watching something with earbuds on. I gasp and she turns around on the mattress.

She takes out her earbuds and cusses me out quietly. I can't even hide how taken aback I

am. Who's she to be cursing me out in my own *private* space.

I take out my phone and text, 'What're you doing here! This is my spot,' which I instantly regret because we both remember we have each other numbers, but never talk.

She looks at me stunned for a while and then smiles really wide. I looked at her as she just laughs and lies back down. I swear it takes me at least a full minute to understand why. She's not taking me seriously.

When I do, I sit down on one end of the mattress, far from where she is laying down. People never ever take me seriously when I try to argue with them using my notebook. It is just a fact of life by now. After all, it really isn't my fault that I was mute. I didn't do this to myself—not really.

She didn't wait until I calmed down to say, "Chill, dude." It's difficult to stay mad at her. I remember that from our friendship. "I was just trying to hide from the Vice Principal when I saw this crack in the wall. I didn't know it was your spot."

I slip back out the crack without another word.

Erica VanJay

12:00 PM, Friday Afternoon

School gets way too boring after the first period. As I look at my phone, I'm not entirely sure that I want to stay here any longer. Apparently, there's a Transparent Event somewhere in the city. I'm not usually down for those, but I'm fairly certain Drew is not gonna be there, and I feel like it'd be awkward to see him again, even in the halls. And it's really not my fault he didn't hide the entrance to his spot in the janitor's closet better.

I step out the door quickly, trying not to draw any attention from anyone who might be in the hallway. I walk a few steps, check that I'm alone, and then walk to the cafeteria and exit the

building. It's the only place where you can skip school easily, so you'd think that the principal, or teachers, or administrators or *somebody* would take precautions to keep people inside, but no one does and I'm not complaining about that.

The Uber's outside of the school parking lot in minutes and he doesn't make any attempt to ask why I'm leaving school or anything. He just skids away as quick as he can silently.

Checking Transparent, I tell him the address and check my messages: 5 unread. That's a record, especially considering I don't talk to anybody on the app. The first one's from Drew. Hmmm. That's new.

Drew: Hey, I'm sorry I just got so mad, my bad hmu if you wanna hang out again like old times. plz.

Nope, no thanks, I'm good. I click on the next emails. They are all from somebody called The Creator in 4 different languages. English, Spanish, Mandarin and French.

THE 7334 CR3AT0R: Hello, Erica Marielle VanJay, you do not know me but I am the creator of the app you're on right now. I've always paid special attention to the Dare Account, ever since it started gaining traction and since then I've took it over. I would like you to know that you've been promoted. Good job.

Below the text is a link. I don't want a potential virus, but my curiosity gets the better of me and I click. It brings me to a page on the app. It's the DARE channel page, except there are changes. Instead of the normal lists of videos, there's a single list with links.

On top of the list is my face, the number 1948 below it, and a link to my skydiving dare. Then there are other names and other numbers and they were all people who did dares. The list went to twenty and then four sentences rested at the bottom: 'There are 697,963 people on this

app. They all have one vote and their vote can go to the DAREr that they think is best. On Friday, October 15th, exactly one week from now, the person who is first on this list gets one hundred thousand dollars. Let the games begin!’

I reread it. I reread it again. I don’t know how to feel. On one hand, I’m in first and am currently on the path to one hundred thousand dollars. On the other, people are insane. People are *insane*. I now know how I feel. I mull it over while I reread the list again, when The Elite Creator texts.

THE 7334 CR3AT0R: let the games begin, Erica. I’ll enjoy watching.

me: what if I don’t play

THE 7334 CR3AT0R: it’ll be easier for you and your father if you do

{CHAT DELETED}

Shit. The Uber stops so I pay the guy and walk out. I’m left in front of an eerie looking apartment building. Apparently, someone was watching for me because a buff goth guy with earrings and a black suit walks out and opens the door for me.

“7th floor,” he says, smiling.

“Thanks,” I respond, rushing up the stairs.. “Oh my god,” I say as I open the door.

A bunch of high schoolers, holding red cups in one hand and phones in the other, jump at me and scream, “Surprise!”

Yes, yes I am. Out of the group of strangers comes my best friend Angie. I wince, fully aware that I’m going to get a stern talking to from her about how I didn’t tell her I did dares. She’s always pissed when I keep secrets from her. We’re not actually friends, I think. Nothing more than a veil of superficial but amiable gestures.

“Erica!” she basically yells at me. “I love you but why wouldn’t you tell me about this! I’m your best friend.”

"I know, you are," I say in a genuinely apologetic voice. "I'm sorry, I just didn't want you to be worried about me."

"Please," she says. "I know my BFF can handle her stuff."

I laugh and music starts playing—or rather resumes playing. A couple college dudes offer me a beer but I decline their offer. I don't drink. Correction. I don't *usually* drink.

Angie gladly takes two cups for herself though and downs them before I can even laugh. Then she swipes my shoulder and leads me around the apartment. But it's not really an apartment. Nor is it a party. All of the rooms were taken out of the apartment and couches and chairs were everywhere. This place was engineered for parties. And even so, there are so many people squeezed into the space that this doesn't really seem like a party. It is just too big for that word.

As Angie leads me around, people turn to congratulate me on being first and I say thanks. I can't really muster any feeling into it though. I know the same people who persist in commending me on my feat are the same people who are going to nearly kill me in the following week. There's no question about that.

About seventeen beer pongs and three fainted people in, everyone looks at their phones and then me. Then I feel a buzz on my phone. Jack Parker has passed me for the Number One spot.

"Well, it's time to get me some dares," I yell, in an effort to have people looking at me for a *good* reason.

I'm screwed.

Drew Goyover

2:30 PM, Friday Morning

Any school clock reminds me of death.

Unless you have a terminal illness, which technically would be the majority throughout human history, you never know when you're going to die. Mostly, the whole situation will span out in less than an hour, if that. Maybe you're shot, or stabbed, or you're unaware that you've been poisoned, if we're looking for a more theatrical passing. Either way, it hits in a day, and boom, you're gone.

The school clock is the same. It strikes and you're gone. No matter what.

Just as I thought, Pablo waited and found me after the bell and dragged me to the Transparent Event. We still had to skip last period but I don't really mind, since I'd rather not be thinking about school right now.

I make sure to be careful because Pablo will steal a mile if I give him an inch, but that's fine sometimes. Pablo's always been the person who takes me out of my comfort zone and I've always been the person who tells Pablo when something is going too far. The only exception is that I'm only hesitant if it has anything to do with social situations and Pablo is only hesitant if it's dangerous. He's a wuss. I'm a wuss too.

In the driver's seat of the car is Pablo's cousin Ricky, who's a senior at our school, two years ahead of us. He always gives us rides, sometimes for free and sometimes for cash, but either way it is cheaper than getting Uber drivers everywhere. We're not the rich kids.

As we pull up to the building, Ricky sticks his hand out and Pablo puts a few dollars on it, which earns him a scoff and a, "Get out." The Transparent Event is in an apartment building, which is odd. The party that Pablo and I went to before was held in an abandoned car graveyard, and it was far enough from the city that everyone could escape if the cops were called.

As we walk in, a creepy looking dude points to the elevator and says, "Seventh Floor."

Pablo says, "Thanks," as I walk slowly behind him to the elevator.

There's only one room on the seventh floor. And that would definitely be odd, but it's a

Transparent Party. This is right up their alley. Pablo opens the door again, and I walk in behind him.

The room's empty. I take out my phone and text Pablo. 'Empty, guess we should go'

But Pablo keeps walking and eventually I hear what he's following. Loud whispering seems closer and closer as we get towards the balcony and then I see where the party-goers went. They went to watch a dare. I thought we were going to a semi-normal party. Guess I was wrong.

I walk through the crowd with Pablo to see what's going on, when I see none other than Erica hanging off the side of a building. The apartment building has protruding bricks hanging off and they all look old and chipped, with mold from years and years of weather.

Erica climbs up the building carelessly, as opposed to carefully, which seems to excite everybody watching. This is exactly why we aren't friends anymore. I push through the dense crowd, who all seem to be recording this, when Erica notices me.

After she gets up five floors from where we are, she slips and catches herself on one of the stable bricks. We all gasp, but one idiot, with his phone out says, "You got 20 seconds, girl. That's three floors, right there," with a triumphant chuckle.

She's not going to make it. The bricks on the top three floors, are even looser than the rest. They're an entirely different color. She was going too fast in the first place, which is why she slipped.

Erica and I seem to have the same thought, but instead of giving in, she speeds up.

She gets up the next floor easily, when she stops. The bricks are crumbling on her fingertips.

"15 seconds, woman!" the guy yells laughing, which earns a few disgusted stares.

Erica shuffles to the side where one of the windows is, and just as everyone gives a relieved sigh, she climbs up it and jumps off the flimsy windowsill. Grabbing the window of the next floor, she swings herself up and shuffles to the brick again.

"Jesus," the guy whispers, loud enough for all of us to hear over the deafening silence and

suspense. "That's \$1500, man," he says to his friend, who sympathetically pats him on the back.

As she finishes scaling the building and we count down, Pedro and I get educated on why my friend almost just died and why at least two hundred people are currently cheering like someone just won in a sporting event. And then someone walks forward and cheers for me too, because I'm now in second place in this dare site, I've never been to.

Apparently, I'm the greatest daredevil the site has ever seen.

*Second greatest daredevil.

Erica VanJay

4:00 PM, Friday Morning

I jump off the building as soon as I see the cops come. As soon as I finished climbing up the building, somebody else gave me a dare. She said she'd give me a hundred bucks to jump off of this building to the neighboring building. That wasn't nearly enough money, but schools just ended so a new group of people came to the 'party'. New people are new votes.

I check my phone as people start to chant for me to jump, and I realize that I'm back in first place. My score is only about fifty or so people ahead of Andrew's though so, I could use the votes from the people who just came in. Potential votes aren't *that* important. And I'm not in this for the money. So I might as well do it.

I pace at the top of the building, pretending to be scared. The people below are buying every second of it. After a few seconds, they quiet and I back up out of their view. Then I sprint forward and scream while I leap off the building, roll out of the jump, and immediately feel my heart skip a beat. I grasp my shoulder as I jump up off the gravel on the top of the building and am met with cheers.

I raise one hand, completely and utterly unable to raise my other arm when we all hear them. The police. We all hear the sirens at the same time because they cheering ceases at once

and within a few seconds everybody's disappeared from view.

I try to run too, but my heart is pounding too hard. Every thump against my chest feels like a tiny gorilla tearing me apart from the inside. Maybe it's the heat. I walk away slowly to the stairs and am relieved to find that the service door is open.

After one or two flights of stairs, the thumping more or less subsides, and I'm left with a headache. I feel like if the police are going to come for me they would already be here, so I take a seat on the stairs and lay down awkwardly. I take out my phone and check the time. 4:17. I need to go see my brother. After a few minutes, I sit up and walk, ignoring the pain.

The guards let themselves relax and high-five me when I get through the gates, which is honestly sad. I've been coming to this prison every week for years now, which is way too long for my brother to have been in prison. I was the only one who came to visit him and if I ever missed a day he wouldn't see me for two weeks which I can't bear the thought of. My father has always been cold, but after Joey got arrested, it's been unbearable. So I'm the only one who ever visits him.

As I step through the guarded doors, and receive my pass, I can see him. They stopped with the handcuffs a few years ago now, but he still looks dehumanized. Joey never looked good in orange, but who does? And I can see stubble on his face, which just makes him look dirty. When he lived with us he was always clean. He never smelled, even after basketball practice. And he'd only wear expensive clothing brands, which drove our parents crazy. I'd only ever seen him like this after Mom died.

"Hey, bro," I say smiling. I try to sit as normally as I can without breathing too hard. I still feel my heart thumping through the roof of my chest, as if it's trying to kill me.

"How's life, sis?"

"You first. Mine's a doozie."

"A doozie? Are you okay? Have you been reading Mom's old books again?"

I roll my eyes. "That's a perfectly normal expression and you know it."

"All right," he laughs, but he quickly gets quiet and thoughtful.

"What?"

"I wasn't sure whether I should tell you this or not, but I guess I am now." Another quiet pause. "Look, I was talking to one of the guards and he thinks the warden or whoever is gonna grant me clemency."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that he thinks they might either reduce my sentence, or pardon me and let me go."

I jump up to hug him, but I'm quickly shot down by the piercing whistle on one of the guards. After sitting down quickly, I whisper, "That's great. Why wouldn't you want to tell me that?"

"Because I don't want you to get your hopes up." Yet another thoughtful pause. "Look, if this is from Dad, tell him I don't want it, ok. Tell him, I don't want anything from him."

"Look, he has pull, but this is a federal facility and Dad wouldn't expend that type of energy for us. You know that. And even if it was from him you would take it. I would make you take it." I lower my voice. "You're only here because of me, ok. It's my fault that this mess happened."

"Erica, please. This is hardly your fault. I was with you when it happened and I was the oldest and closest to being an adult. I was the only one that could take a fall for it, okay. Don't start blaming yourself. What's your news?"

"Nothing, it's not important. You wouldn't want to know about it anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

The rest of the conversation goes about normally, talking about everything and nothing until it's finally time to leave.

As I walk out the building, the guards greet me again, and I flash the finger under my

jacket. They can't see me and still smile, and I start to feel guilty. But who do they think they are?

I walk on a side street, so I can walk off my frustrations when a shiny black car pulls up. I ignore it at first but it drives ahead of me and large men in jet black suits walk out. I pretend to tie my shoes and then walk the other way but when I check to see where they are again, they're right behind me with a gun.

"Get in the car. The Creator wants to talk to you."

Chapter 2

Drew Goyover

5:00 PM, Friday Afternoon

As soon as I hear the cops, I'm off. Apparently, I'm the first to hear because it's another few seconds and a few questioning stares, before other people start running. I figure that the police are going to come up the stairs and I couldn't remember if I'd seen an elevator so I look around the floor for another exit.

A fire escape.

I run through the hordes of scared kids and open the window. After jumping through, I climb down and look around. I start running when I realize I forgot Pablo. My feet freeze up, and switch back and forth until I realize with disgust what I'm thinking about doing.

In an instant, after a sudden 180, I'm behind the building, near the service exit and dumpster. I turn around to see the cops through the alley. A sliver of a police car with blue lights flashing violently around it and a cop yelling, "Phil, they're just some teens man, let's chill. Can we go in unarmed? You know what happened to Coulson in the other department."

Holy...I try to fidget my hands and realize that my muscles seem tight like my skin is trying to hold me back. Trying to mess with cops is straight up not a good plan, but I don't have another one and I know that everybody from the party is still up there.

"Drew...Drew...bro!"

A bunch of teens jump down from the fire escape swiftly, and with such agile movement it makes you wonder how many times they've done it. How do they know my name? After a flawless landing, an older looking kid appears from the back, covered in ungroomed hair that

vaguely resembles a beard.

"Kid?" he snarls, scrunching his face with disgust.

"Yeah," I manage to nod. The kid seems like a thug and I'm not trying to get caught with a thug while cops are looking for us. Oh yeah.

The cops are looking for us.

"You looking for that fat kid?" he asks.

He's not fat, you ass. I nod plainly.

"Kid," he snarls, reading my thoughts. "He's still up there. Idiot thinks hiding is gonna save him. Guess he's never met a pig." *A pig? When someone calls cops pigs, that's how you know you're hanging with criminals.* He steps closer to me and I put up fists, but he slips past me and checks the cop cars. "Come with me."

We wait out a steady stream of eerily but understandably silent kids, stampeding down the stairs and escaping into the back alleys and then we run up ourselves. In the building, the older guy walks up to the only closet in the empty room, which is definitely the only room in the place.

He knocks on the door a few times, waits a few seconds, and then breaks through the flimsy door with a deafening kick, wincing at the sound and pulling up Pablo, who's crying like a baby. I can't contain myself for a second and when he finally looks up and realizes who it is, he's on his feet in a matter of seconds.

The older guy, grabs him by the collar and as we start to run away, we hear cops banging the front door in. Being faster than the other two, I'm on the staircase in a matter of seconds but the old guy won't let go of Pablo and it's slowing both of them down.

I want to yell at them, but I stop, and for once I'm not sure why. Everything kind of slows down for a second. This would be the perfect time to talk. Staying alive and out of trouble is important, at least to me. Doesn't seem that important to the thug. I should yell that at him. Nah.

As they get closer, I start running down the stairs as quietly and quickly as I can and

suddenly I'm at the bottom and sprinting. I run a few alleys when I look back, hear a shout and see the thug pointing a gun at me.

Ok, so Pablo's being kidnapped.

My gut drops twenty feet to the floor my stomach and my heart's rigid for at least a minute but I walk over to the car, hands up, face down, thinking about how I could shiv him if I have to. The older dude's brandishing a pistol pointed at me and shoving Pablo into the back of the limo. After a second of concentrated thought and a century of staring me down, the kidnapper eggs the gun toward the car and I get in behind Pablo.

I slip through the door without a fight and squirm when the thug slams the door. As soon as the guy does, elevator music starts playing and the *clicking* sound of the lock rings in my ears. I've never been kidnapped before but this is low-key kinda nice.

Meanwhile, Pablo's passed out on the narrow floor wedged into a pool of his own vomit. He looks passed out but I'm not brave enough to check. I stare at the partition separating us from the driver. The car ride is very short.

The driver steps out of the car and I can somehow hear his steps through the car's walls. I can't remember it ever being this quiet. It's nice. The man opens the door. I'm in a warehouse. There are seven other limos and they are all arranged in a circle. Other drivers are opening doors for other kids my age and they're all almost as disoriented as Pablo.

A guy in a wheelchair who looks twenty years old, rolls through two limos dramatically and stands in the center. He's wearing a penguin suit and Tony Stark glasses and has like three watches on. His british accent is annoying. It's probably fake.

"What the fuck, guys? I told you to do it lightly. Why do you think I gave you *limos*. Jesus fuck, men. Do you not remember the word 'gentlemen' in my little speech in the morning." He points to me and laughs. "Look at this kid. He looks scared out of his wits. How's life, man? Probably shit." He walks over to my limo and backs up at the sight of Pablo.

"Holy sh..!" he whines, censoring himself. "Driver's, you're dismissed."

The drivers all walk out of the warehouse and the kids fidget. Wheelchair guy looks afraid that we have weapons. He takes mental notes of all of us until he lands on a girl in a dark corner. "Erica VanJay, is it? Congrats, lad. Could you walk forward please?"

I look at the limo he points at, and all of the sudden I see her standing next to him. I knew she was slowly turning crazy, but was she working with him? She did this to Pablo? She's worried. On second thought, they don't seem like they've ever met. But she doesn't seem nearly as beat up as anyone else. She's even less beat up than me, and I was barely touched.

"Hey, how you doin' E? Can I call you that? I'm gonna call you that, sis?" His smile is creepy, like he was practicing in the morning, staring at himself for hours.

"Hi," she virtually whispers. I've never heard her whisper. She's one of the types that'll let you talk but make sure you knew when it's her time to talk.

"As you might be able to tell, you all have a lot in common. You're all high school students for one and you all pick Dare, when you're playing games at parties," he says, pausing for laughter but it's deadly silent. At least 13 faces are glaring him down, probably sizing the chances of a revolt.

Looking back in the car, I see my best friend behind me, still laying down, passed out in a pool of his vomit and wonder if anybody is going to fight. I'd fight if I had to, if I needed too. Pushing down my eyes and ignoring the tickling sweat, I wait until the hacker guy is facing completely away from me and slip through the open door, quietly scramble to find something sharp, and slip back out.

Two or three eyes were glancing towards me, but I looked back at them with a concerned but what I hope was also optimistic expression. I'd been so stressed that I hadn't even seen what I'd picked up. It was definitely cold, hard metal and sharp too.

I'm too scared to look down and arouse anymore attention, so I keep as still as I can and pay attention to what's happening again. The guy seems to have stopped ranting, but he's still talking. I want an explanation. Why am I here.