

IF YOU HIT YOUR HEAD hard enough, your brain gets shaken up inside your skull. You might see stars or pass out for a few minutes, and after that, a bunch of things happen. It doesn't matter how you got hurt—whether you slipped on ice or had a car accident or fell from a tree. People will start flashing lights in your eyes, talking about concussions and traumatic brain injury. And even though your head hurts and you're exhausted, they won't want you to go to sleep.

They'll shake you awake every couple hours, shining lights, asking questions. Your head will throb, and you'll be dizzy, and you might throw up.

But that's not the worst part.

The most terrifying thing about hitting your head so hard is when you wake up missing pieces of yourself. Pieces of the person you were before it happened.

Things you should remember—who found you after you fell from the tree stand, why you were dizzy and hadn't eaten lunch,

what kind of bird you were trying to see when you leaned forward too far—are gone. Things you could once do—kick a soccer ball without losing your balance, play air guitar with your best friend, climb into a kayak, or stand steady on the houseboat deck to pinch dead blossoms off the geraniums—all gone. Erased. Whole pieces of you are missing because your brain bumped against your skull.

That's why I wanted to go to I-CAN. As soon as Mom showed me that *Scientific American* article about the International Center for Advanced Neurology, I could tell she thought it was the answer. The feature talked about I-CAN's revolutionary treatment program combining traditional drugs with light and oxygen treatments, exercise, and gene therapy. "MIRACLE CLINIC IN THE SWAMP," the headline called it, and a miracle was what I needed.

I believed it, too. I thought if I went to I-CAN, I'd wake up found.

And all the missing parts of me—lost balance, scattered memories—would snap back into place like the jigsaw-puzzle pieces Mom pulled out from under the wicker sofa. She blew the dust off and placed them into the holes in our carnival scene, one by one, until the last piece patched an empty gap in the sky. And then it was whole.

That was what I wanted. To be whole again.

There are plenty of hospitals around the country with head-injury clinics, but at first, Mom and Dad hated the idea of sending me away. Before I was born, they thought they'd never be able to have kids. Then I showed up, an only child, wrapped up in love. I'd never even been to camp, and that was fine with me.

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When we read about I-CAN, though, everything changed. I watched Mom's and Dad's frustrated faces fill with hope and possibilities. Maybe if I went, I'd be normal again. Maybe I'd be happy again. Those maybes found their way into my heart, too. I told Mom and Dad I wanted to go.

Then everything came together so quickly—the referral from my pediatrician, phone calls, work schedules rearranged, plane tickets booked, plans whipped up as fast as instant brownie mix.

I didn't have time to get nervous. Not until Mom and I stopped for lunch at Camilla's Grille in Everglades City, right before I got admitted.

The air was thick and wet, full of mosquitoes and deerflies, and all around my feet, little black crabs scuttled up through cracks in the deck, playing hide-and-seek in the shadows.

The waitress almost stepped on one when she came out of the main dining room. Kelly, her name tag said, looked about Mom's age and wore a faded, rumpled apron tied over a T-shirt and cutoff jeans.

"Your order's about done," she said, and propped open the swinging screen door with a big conch shell. A crab got trapped in the little triangle it made with the wall of the building. It kept running along the edges, looking for a way out.

Thunder rumbled, and wind fluttered our shade umbrella. "I hope this storm isn't bad," Mom said. She slid the bucket of paper towels and ketchup to the side, reached across the table for my hand, and smiled a tight smile. "Remind me again. No more than eight weeks, right?"

"Look on the bright side," I said. "Eight weeks without loud

music or soggy water shoes left on the kitchen floor. Fifty-six whole days before you find another sticky, peanut-butter-covered spoon in the sink.” Mom jokes that my favorite snack is the bane of her existence, so I thought that would make her laugh. Instead, her eyes welled up.

She blinked and spun the paper-towel roll around in its bucket. “I know this is where you need to be to get better.” Mom missed the old Cat, I knew. She wanted her daughter back, the one without the mood swings and headaches. The one who could have fun and be happy.

I wanted that, too. But it was still awful saying good-bye to Dad at the airport. Good-bye to the cool wind off the bay and our houseboat that rocked me to sleep at night. Good-bye to my bedroom with its faded denim bedspread. Good-bye to the big oak tree silhouette that Aunt Beth painted, branching all over one butter-yellow wall with little shelves that held my clay birds. I only brought one with me here—the cardinal—because it reminded me of Mom’s reddish hair.

I looked up at her. The humidity here made her curls all frizzy and wild. I smiled. “You look kind of like Lucy’s poodle right now.”

She laughed and then took my hand across the table. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“It’ll go by fast.” I looked down at a grease-stained newspaper someone left on our table. My welling-up tears blurred the headlines, but I could still read them.

• TERROR SUSPECT NABBED IN LONDON •

• FLORIDA SENATOR PROMISES CRACKDOWN ON NATIONS THAT

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HARBOR TERRORISTS: WILEY SAYS MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

COMMITTEE HAS “SECRET WEAPON” ·

· CITY COUNCILOR CALLS FOR ADDED WATER USE RESTRICTIONS ·

· NEW NATURE CENTER OPENS DOORS TO VISITORS ·

· POACHERS ELUDE FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENTS ·

· DRY SEASON BRINGS RECORD WILDFIRES:

WEATHER SERVICE SAYS FORECAST OFFERS LITTLE RELIEF ·

“Cat? You okay?”

“Of course.” I blinked fast and turned my attention to the four old guys eating oyster sandwiches at the table next to ours; one still had a price tag on his fishing hat. Beyond them, a young couple was smooching at a table way in the corner.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Because—”

“I’m sure.” I wasn’t, but I told Mom what she needed to hear and turned away from her, toward a tired-looking guy sitting by himself at the bar, next to the speakers. Mud streaked his pants and shirt and even the notebook next to his beer. The music was so loud the waitress had to shout over “Cheeseburger in Paradise” when she said “Hey, Brady!” and asked if he wanted the usual. He shouted yes; I could hear him all the way out on the deck. She asked what he was working on, and he shook his head and flipped some pages in the notebook, but I couldn’t hear what else he said.

Then the waitress hurried back to the kitchen and picked up our plates—crab cakes and salad for Mom and a cheese quesadilla for me. I wasn’t hungry, but ordering was better than admitting my stomach hurt as much as my head.

The waitress pushed the newspaper aside to make room for my plate and frowned. "Haven't seen this kind of trouble with poachers in years," she said. "Got a few fellows who come in here late, all covered in mud, with flashlights in their belts, and I wonder. Makes me worry about letting my boys go out in the canoe, but they sure do love to fish."

Mom glanced at the waitress's name tag and smiled. "How old are your boys, Kelly?"

"Fourteen, twelve, and eight." She pointed out the back window of the restaurant, where a short kid was practically tackling two taller ones as they played basketball. Kelly smiled and shook her head a little. "They're a handful. You need anything else?"

"No, this looks great." But Mom frowned when the waitress walked away. "I don't like these poacher stories." She sighed. "But the clinic building is a former military base. I'm sure it's safe, and I know this is your best chance for a full recovery."

*Full recovery.* My head pounded under the words. It had only been a few months since my fall, but I couldn't remember a day without headaches, without losing my balance and my train of thought. I wondered if I'd recognize my old self.

Mom picked at her salad, and I moved tortilla triangles around on my plate until the waitress brought our check.

Mom took a deep breath and smiled. I could tell she was trying not to cry. "Ready to go?" she asked, tossing a twenty on the table and reaching for her backpack. "The airboat will be waiting."

"Yep." I stood up. That dumb crab was still trapped behind the propped-open door, running along the wall, back and forth, over and over. "One second." I moved the screen door, reached

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down, and cupped my hands around the tiny crab. It didn't pinch me, but its little legs prickled my palms. It was still frantic, looking for a way to escape. The second I put it down, it scuttled away and disappeared down a crack.

It made me wish I could go home, too. Back to San Francisco with Mom. Dad could pick us up at the airport, and we could all go to the houseboat and eat spaghetti and watch pelicans diving for fish out the window.

*No, I reminded myself. Mom and Dad want you here, to get better. And you want to be here, too.*

I ignored the awful knot growing in my stomach and followed Mom down to the dock.



“WATCH YOUR STEP; WE DON’T want any more bumps on your head.”

Sawgrass Molly—that’s what she said to call her—stood on the dock in muddy boots, work pants, and a long-sleeved shirt, with a red bandanna tied around her neck. A long gray braid hung down her back, and the skin on her face looked tough as a sea lion’s.

Mom introduced herself and me, and Molly loaded our bags onto the airboat.

“Come on aboard, Miss Cat.” Molly reached down to help me onto the deck, but a wave of dizziness washed over me.

I closed my eyes and tried to catch my balance, but suddenly, I was there in the tree stand again, my stomach in knots over what had happened in the school cafeteria that day, and watching—was it a northern spotted owl? Closer . . . leaning . . . leaning . . . tipping . . . flailing back toward the platform too late . . . and falling . . . falling . . .

“Cat?” Mom said my name softly. She had to do that a lot, to bring me back.

“I promise you this boat is swamp-worthy,” Molly said, her brown, spotted hand still stretched out toward me. When I held it and stepped down, the boat dipped and bumped against the dock. I held on tighter.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. Would I ever be fine again? “Guess I need to get my sea legs.”

I slid into a seat and rummaged through my bag for my bird book while Molly looked past me, waving to a freckly teenaged boy and a short, tired-looking woman walking beside him.

The kid was Ben, with his aunt Wendy, from Washington State, I learned when Mom started chatting. I moved to a seat away from the boat’s giant fan and controls, away from the conversations, and opened my bird book. I could tell Mom wanted me to come over and talk, make friends, but I couldn’t. My head hurt, and I was afraid I’d say something grouchy or mean and make Mom cry, and she didn’t need that right now.

White-and-black birds on the page blurred to gray, and I had to close my eyes. I didn’t want friends here. I wanted Lucy.

We’d been best friends since third grade, but she’d sort of faded away when we started middle school, and especially since my concussion. Too much was different. I never knew when my headaches would come, so I was always on edge, waiting, wondering if I’d be this way forever.

I had to give up soccer a month into the season. I was never good at it anyway. I’d only signed up because Lucy was so excited.

The first day of school, she was my partner for drills, but I kept messing up. I couldn't help watching the girls' cross-country team, laughing together and running into the hills where the trails snaked all through the trees, while we kicked balls back and forth on the same green rectangle. The second day, Lucy was already doing a drill with Mae Kim when I got to practice, and they were partners every day after that. But I still sat near them on the bus, and I cheered for Lucy from the bench until I quit.

Now she never called anymore, and I missed so much school I hardly ever saw her in class. I used to be one of those kids who never got sick, but these last few months had been different. I'd wake up feeling okay and go to class, but by sixth period, my head hurt so bad I felt like throwing up. I did once, all over my math quiz because Mrs. Stillman didn't want me to leave until I finished.

I missed who I used to be, and if this clinic in the middle of nowhere could bring me back, it was worth anything. I forced my eyes open and turned around. Everyone was looking at me.

I tried to smile. "Hi. Sorry, I'm woozy from the boat."

They all nodded, but only Ben looked as if he really understood. His eyes stayed on me for a second before he turned back toward the water. His aunt started to say something, but Molly started up the airboat and drowned her out. That thing was *loud*.

Molly handed out earplugs, then looped the airboat in a circle to turn around. I hadn't slept well the night before, and my head was still throbbing, so I put in the earplugs, lowered my head to my hands, and closed my eyes.

I don't know how far we'd gone—maybe half an hour—when the boat slowed and Molly called out over the idling engine.

“Alligator!” She pointed. “See it? Small one, up on the bank.” It was all stretched out, sunning itself, still as stone. “Soon, we'll come up on One-Eyed Lou. She has babies in the nest, though, so we can't get too close.”

The airboat's fan roared back to life, and we cut through the swamp, pushing through tall grasses that blew in waves. When we rounded a bend in the river's path, Molly slowed the airboat and shouted, “Don't lean, but if you look off to the side there . . . see the trap in the water?” I made out the murky lines of some kind of cage.

“What's that?” Ben asked.

“Blue crab trap.” Molly grinned. “Better known as dinner. I got a few out here, check 'em around sunset. They're great eating.”

She maneuvered the airboat around another snaking curve, then killed the engine. “Keep your eyes open, because up here on the left . . .” She craned her neck. “Yep, see? That's One-Eyed Lou.”

“Whoa!” Ben stood up until Molly's glare set him back in his seat. “He's huge!”

“She. Lou's a she. She's about eight or nine feet, but there are plenty bigger,” Molly said. “You won't find a more aggressive gator, though. You get near those babies, and she'll snap at you like nobody's business. Take you right off your feet with that tail.”

She kept the engine off and paddled the airboat ahead, where the shoreline was cluttered with a mess of tree trunks and roots

all tangled on themselves. “These are mangroves,” she said. “They make islands all over the swamp. Most of the small ones are quiet, a few old plume hunter’s camps—I been known to spend a night or two in those when weather comes in fast.”

“You sleep out on some island by yourself?” Ben raised his eyebrows. “Don’t people think that’s weird?”

His aunt elbowed him, but Molly laughed. “Doesn’t much matter what they think. You can’t let other people decide who you’re going to be.”

She peered into the tangled branches. “Look close in here. You’ll see a couple poachers’ huts.” Weathered wooden boards showed through the trees.

“There was something about poachers in the newspaper.” Mom’s voice wobbled, but Molly didn’t seem worried.

“Yep. They go after alligators. Plume birds. Sometimes endangered butterflies. But you stay outta their way and you’re okay.” The airboat drifted toward the trees, and we had to duck to keep our heads out of the branches.

Molly started the engine again and brought us through a wide tunnel of mangroves. “Here we are. . . .” She hit the throttle as we pushed out of the trees, onto an open lake. A huge island stretched in front of us. There was a dock, a modern-looking building that looked half hotel and half hospital, and an older building that might have been a garage or airplane hangar.

The airboat drifted up to the dock, where a man with curly brown hair waited in shorts and a faded blue golf shirt. Two kids who looked about my age stood behind him—a boy with dark skin and wire-rimmed glasses and a short, skinny girl with a

bouncy, dark-brown ponytail. She plopped down on the dock and plunked her feet into the murky water, while the curly-haired guy waved us in. “Welcome, welcome, everyone. Good trip, Molly?”

“Just fine.” She looked like she was about to say something else, when an osprey swooped down from a dead tree and dove straight into the water.

The girl jumped up, water dripping down her pale ankles. “That bird’s got a fish!”

In its talons, the bird clutched a fish nearly as large as itself. But the fish was fighting back. Its tail slapped the water as the osprey tried to take off with it.

“What kind of fish is that?” Ben asked.

“Looks like a snook,” Molly said, squinting. The sun flashed on the splashing water as the fight continued. “Maybe a bigger one than that bird can handle.”

I’d seen birds catch fish before on the docks at home, but never a fish that size. Molly was right; it was *too* big. No matter how many times the osprey tried, how hard it pumped its wings, it couldn’t fly. In fact, the bird looked exhausted, and the fish was starting to pull it down into the water. “Why doesn’t the bird let go?”

“Can’t,” Molly said. “Has its talons in too deep.”

I could feel the osprey’s panic as it struggled. We watched as bird and fish battled in the glittering water, until finally, the osprey went under for the last time and disappeared.

“Whoa,” Ben whispered.

“It truly couldn’t let go, and the fish overpowered it.” Molly

shrugged, as if this sort of thing happened all the time here, not just on TV nature shows. “Sometimes the prey wins.”

Finally, we turned our attention back to the man on the dock as he tied the airboat to a post.

Dr. Mark Ames. Back then, I thought he looked a little like my uncle Steve, with dimples and a young face, younger than the rest of him.

“Welcome to the clinic, Ben . . . Cat. I want you to meet Quentin and Sarah.” He gestured toward the two kids who’d been waiting with him. “They arrived two weeks ago, and they’re already feeling quite a bit better, so they’ll help me out giving you and your parents the grand tour. You can leave your suitcases and backpacks right here on the dock; our orderlies will take them to your rooms. Should we start with the pool?”

“The pool . . . where you’re not allowed to dive, splash, or otherwise overexert yourself,” Sarah said, rolling her eyes.

Quentin grinned. “She’s still mad they made her get off Trent’s shoulders in the shallow end last week.”

“Do you like to swim?” Sarah asked. “Or play Frisbee or shoot baskets?”

“Umm . . .” I couldn’t imagine doing any of those things the way my head was throbbing. But she looked so excited. “Maybe when I feel better.”

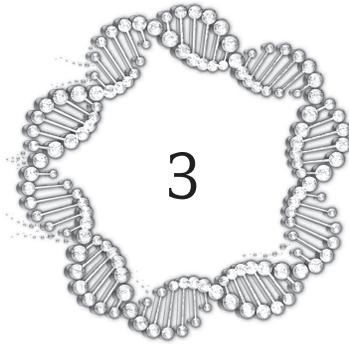
Mom gave me a tentative smile. I knew what she was thinking. *It’s nice here. They have a pool . . . and birds. Remind me that this is the right thing, that you’ll be happy and safe, so I can leave you without falling apart.*

I smiled back at her and reminded myself this was where I

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needed to be to get better. I liked the birds. The kids were friendly, and Dr. Ames seemed nice, too. Like he cared about us, like he wanted to make sure we felt safe and happy. Like we were important to him.

I guess we were, in a way. Just not the way we thought.



“WOW,” MOM SAID AS WE walked up the sidewalk to the swimming-pool area. “Are you sure you don’t need parents to stay and chaperone? Or do dishes or anything? I could get used to this.”

It was beautiful—a sparkling Olympic-size swimming pool with cushioned deck chairs and tables with shade umbrellas mixed in. There was a paved area with a basketball hoop and a net for badminton or volleyball over on the lawn.

“Even if you’re not up for much physical activity yet, you can bring your lunch out,” Dr. Ames said. He frowned and pulled a cell phone from his pocket. “Excuse me one moment.”

“Watch out for seagulls, though,” Sarah said, kicking off one of her flip-flops and skimming her toes along the water. “One swiped half my turkey wrap yesterday.”

But there were no seagulls around then. And there were no other people. “Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Everybody like who?” Sarah kicked some water at Quentin.

“We’re here. You’re here. Kaylee never does anything fun, so I bet she’s in her room.”

“Probably sleeping. Dr. Ames told us her injury was more severe, so we never see her,” Quentin explained. “She just goes to treatment and sleeps a lot. And Trent—”

“—is a big jerk,” Sarah interrupted. “He was supposed to shoot hoops with me after dinner last night but he never came outside. I haven’t seen him today, either.” She turned to Dr. Ames, who was tucking his phone back into his pocket. “Hey, Trent didn’t leave or something, did he?”

Dr. Ames chuckled. “Relax, Sarah. Trent’s doing great, but I’m sure he would *never* go home without saying good-bye to his basketball buddy.” He turned to Mom and me. “Trent is in the final stages of Phase Three, so he’s spending more time in treatment these days. But Cat will meet him soon, I’m sure.”

“Now Phase Three is . . . the gene therapy?” Mom asked, even though she’d read everything on the I-CAN website a zillion times.

“Exactly,” Dr. Ames answered her, and turned to me and Ben. “Do you guys understand how that works?”

“Kind of,” I said.

Ben shrugged like he didn’t care how it worked, but Dr. Ames included him in the conversation.

“Well, when you guys got your concussions, it damaged your brain tissue. That’s why your heads hurt so often, why your vision gets blurry, and you can’t always seem to think and remember stuff the way you used to. In order to fix that for you

permanently, we need to replace the damaged tissue with healthy brain cells.”

“You happen to have some healthy ones sitting around?” Ben sounded skeptical.

His aunt nudged him. “Don’t be rude,” she whispered, but Dr. Ames chuckled.

“They’re not *that* easy to come by, Ben.” Dr. Ames smiled at him. “I appreciate a man who’s not afraid to question things. But I do like to think we work some magic here. We have a process that can actually *make* healthy brain cells.”

“Yeah?” Ben raised his eyebrows.

“Yep. With your own DNA. We insert it into something called a retrovirus. You guys know what a virus is, right?”

“Like cold viruses and flu viruses?” I asked. That didn’t sound like something that would make us feel better.

“Similar. Viruses are tiny organisms that infect a host cell and use it to reproduce. Retroviruses get inside a cell and then spread their *own* genetic material.”

“So . . . if you have a retrovirus full of *my* genetic material . . .”

“You got it!” Dr. Ames’s eyes lit up, and he nodded. “In that case, when we introduce that retrovirus to your system, we get new, healthy brain cells, reproducing to give you back what you lost. Pretty awesome, huh?” He turned and started toward the big building that I figured must be the clinic. “Now, let’s continue our tour.”

“Have you guys started that gene therapy yet?” I asked Sarah, who was hopping over cracks in the sidewalk.

She shook her head. “No—we’re still on Phase Two. But I hope it’s soon. It’s totally boring here with so few kids.”

“So, wait . . .” Mom rushed to catch up with Dr. Ames on the sidewalk. “You have these four, and . . . two others? Only six patients?”

“At the moment, yes. We have six *guests*.” He pulled open the clinic door and held it for her. “Our numbers vary. We get people home quickly once they’ve recovered.” He pointed down a long white hallway. “Come this way, and I’ll show you the rest of the facilities.”

He stopped at a set of glass doors partway down the hall. “Here’s our cafeteria, where you’ll have your meals unless you’re having a rough day and need to eat in your room.” We filed into the big, bright room. Potted plants grew along the windows, and there were four round tables that looked like regular kitchen tables in regular houses.

“Where do those steps go?” Ben asked, pointing to the staircase in the corner of the room.

“Up to the roof,” Dr. Ames said. “Killer view. You can go up anytime you’d like and check it out.”

“They’re allowed on the *roof*?” Mom tipped her head like she’d heard wrong.

“It’s more of an upstairs deck,” Dr. Ames said. “Totally safe, completely fenced in.” He held his hand up to his waist to show Mom how safe we’d be. “You want to see it?”

Mom looked at me.

“Not now,” I said. What I really wanted was to finish this tour so I could lie down. I think Dr. Ames could tell I was

starting to fade because he put an arm around Mom and led her back to the hallway.

“Our MRI and electroencephalography labs are down this way,” Dr. Ames said, gesturing to his right.

“Electro-huh?” I looked down the hallway.

Dr. Ames laughed. “It’s a mouthful—just a fancy name for another kind of brain scan. I’d show you, but those rooms are in use right now and I don’t want to interrupt.” He continued down the hallway. “Here’s my office.” He unlocked a door and led us into a bright, open room with a big wooden desk.

“What a lovely view,” Mom said, stepping up to one of the windows that looked out over the swimming pool and, beyond that, the docks. I leaned against the desk, and my hand brushed a manila folder; there were a bunch of them, fanned out next to a laptop computer. The folders were labeled ENRIQUEZ, HAYES, JACOBS, MCCAIN, PERKINS, and mine, GRAYSON. Probably full of our medical files from home. A green Post-it note on the ENRIQUEZ folder read “Procedure Discontinued 4/18.” I was wondering if that patient had already gone home, when Dr. Ames swept up all the files and dropped them into a drawer below his desk.

“Sorry about the mess. I meant to tidy up, but time gets away from me. Shall we continue?” He waited for us to leave, then pulled the door closed and locked it behind him.

“This is Dr. Gunther’s office.” Dr. Ames opened the next door.

This office had a smaller desk with an open laptop. Behind it, a wiry man looked up from the papers he was holding. “Oh! Hello there. I’m Dr. Gunther.” He closed the laptop and pushed himself

to stand. His white hair was long on the sides, combed over a bald spot on top. His face was pale and yellowy, and so were his office walls, empty except for a glass shadow box full of pinned-and-preserved butterfly specimens—one red and black, one brilliant yellow, and one glowing blue.

“Dr. Gunther is the real brains of this operation. He oversees all the treatment details,” Dr. Ames said as Dr. Gunther shook our hands. His hand was papery and cold, even though the window was open, the room full of warm Florida air.

“Nice dead butterflies,” Ben said. His aunt glared at him.

“Ah . . . thank you. It’s a hobby of mine.” Dr. Gunther hurried back to his chair and reached for his papers. His hands were all shaky.

“You’re reviewing the updated files, I gather?” Dr. Ames raised his eyebrows.

“I am.” Dr. Gunther sighed. “I’d like to talk with you before—”

“Later.” Dr. Ames cut him off sharply, but then his voice softened. “We’ve got a grand tour to finish before Molly takes these folks back to the mainland.” He nodded toward Ben’s aunt and my mom, and I felt a twist in my stomach. I kept forgetting Mom had to leave.

“You’ll want to see the guest rooms, I’m sure,” Dr. Ames said, leading us back to the hallway. He paused at some big glass doors on our right. Behind them were a bunch of empty treadmills and exercise bikes. “This is the exercise therapy center,” he said. “We’ll have you down here in a few days, once you’re ready for Phase Two of treatment.”

“So soon?” Mom asked. “Cat still gets dizzy going up stairs sometimes.”

Dr. Ames nodded. “Totally expected,” he said, tapping the glass door with his long fingers. “But here, we introduce a very gradual exercise program, and we’ll have her monitored.”

“It’s tough at first,” Quentin said, “but it gets easier every time, and they don’t push us too hard. Nothing like my football practices back home. Just enough to make you sweat a little.”

“It’s better than sitting around all day,” Sarah added. That was easy for her to say, I thought. She hadn’t stopped moving since Ben and I arrived; if she wasn’t walking, she was jumping or bouncing on her toes or stretching.

“It’s an important part of therapy,” Dr. Ames said. “This carefully regulated return to activity helps to restore the brain’s auto-regulation mechanism, if that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Ben said, leaning against the wall.

“Sorry. Here’s the regular-guy version . . . When you do a cardio workout—even a mild one—it kind of resets your body’s systems. That’s why exercise is good for people who have been traveling and have jet lag—it helps reset the body’s internal clock. And in your case . . .” He stepped right up to Ben and put a hand on his shoulder. Ben tensed but didn’t pull away. “. . . that exercise will help reset your brain so it can control blood pressure and the blood supply to your brain. That can help repair the concussion damage. Now does it make more sense?”

Ben nodded. “When do we get in there?”

“Probably early next week, but you seem like a pretty fit guy. If you’re feeling up to it, I’ll see if we can get you started sooner. Fair enough?”

“Cool.”

All this was cool, if it would really work the way he said. I was almost afraid to hope, but when I looked at Mom, she was smiling. I could tell she was imagining me running on that treadmill, maybe running along the dock at home, kayaking again.

“The other therapy room, where we do light and oxygen treatments, is just past the exercise area,” Dr. Ames said, looking at his watch, “but I’d like to get you to the guest rooms so we don’t run out of time. Molly has to leave soon, and she won’t be making another run with the airboat tonight.”

My gut twisted again. Soon, that airboat fan would roar to life and take Mom flying away over the swamp, back to Everglades City and then to the airport and Dad and home—without me. I was staying here.

“Let’s see,” Dr. Ames said as we followed him down another bright white hallway. “We’ve already got Quentin in room 104 and Sarah in 100. Cat, you’ll be in 108. And my buddy Ben’s in room 111. Three ones for good luck.”

We got to my room first. “Welcome home, Cat.” Dr. Ames opened the door to a bedroom with calm blue walls and a queen-size bed. It was cold in there—the air conditioner must have been cranked—and bright, with a window looking out at the pool and the pond.

“You’ve got your own bathroom here,” Dr. Ames said, opening a door to reveal a sparkling clean shower, sink, and toilet. “If there’s anything you need—shampoo, toothpaste—let me know and I’ll send one of the orderlies.” He looked at me, waiting.

“It’s lovely,” Mom jumped in. “Not at all like a hospital room, huh?”

“Thanks,” I managed, walking to the dresser. My suitcase and backpack were already here, like Dr. Ames promised. “I guess I’ll get settled.”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Ames said. “Let me take Ben to his room, and I’ll be back in a few minutes to walk your mom back to the dock.”

He pulled the door closed with a quiet click, and then it was only Mom and me. I didn’t know what to say, so I started unpacking my suitcase. I put my clothes in the dresser, unwrapped the clay cardinal I brought from home, and perched her on the windowsill. I pulled out my pencil bag full of sculpting tools and the big hunk of clay I brought, all wrapped up in plastic so it wouldn’t dry out. It was only enough to make three or four birds, but Mom thought it would help me pass the time, make me feel more at home. I set those on top of my dresser. Maybe I’d start a new bird later. An osprey like that one we saw.

The only thing left in my suitcase was the picture of Mom and Dad and Aunt Beth and Kathleen with Lucy and me. I pulled it out and set it up on the dresser. It was from our camping trip in the Redwoods last summer, before Lucy went to her sleepaway camp and met Mae Kim and Corinne. Before she decided she liked soccer and them better than hiking and me.

My eyes started burning, so I picked up my binoculars and went to the window. Half a dozen white birds milled around in the shallow-water weeds.

“What do you see?” Mom asked.

“Ibises, I think. They’re smaller than the egrets in my bird book, and their beaks are curved.”

I glanced at my watch—four thirty in Florida was one thirty at home. In an hour, Lucy would be getting out of classes, probably going for cupcakes with Corinne and Mae Kim. I wondered if she ever missed coming over after school, if she ever thought about weekends like that camping trip. We'd stayed up so late around the campfire, and Aunt Beth played her guitar, and we all sang with her. Lucy and I made up silly new lyrics for her seventies songs, and we laughed and laughed.

When I turned back to Mom, I couldn't hide the tears in my eyes.

"Oh, Cat." Mom wrapped her arms around me.

I pulled away and wiped my cheeks. "It's just . . . you know the concussion makes me all moody. I'll be fine." I said it again. "I'll be *fine*. This is where I need to be to get better."

Mom nodded, hugged me again, and didn't let go until Dr. Ames knocked on the door.

"I don't want to rush you, but Molly's down at the dock when you're ready."

"I'm ready," I said.

"Really?" Mom held me out and looked at me close, as if she could see for sure whether I was telling the truth.

I wasn't. "I'm ready," I lied again. "You can go."

She hugged me one more time. And then she left.

I didn't walk to the dock with her or even look out the window. I didn't want to go to the pool or see the roof or get to know anybody or eat dinner. All I wanted to do was sleep, so I dug through my suitcase to find my pajamas and put them on.

I flopped too hard on the bed, and my head thumped like

K A T E M E S S N E R

somebody had drumsticks whaling away inside my skull. I pressed my pillow over my ears, but it couldn't drown out the sound from the dock.

The roar of that airboat leaving with my mom on board. Leaving me here.



WHEN I WOKE, THE SUN was shining through my window, reflecting off the pond outside, making sparkle waves all over my ceiling. I blinked at the clock by my bed. Eight o'clock. If I got up now, I'd have time for breakfast before the MRI on my schedule for nine.

I sat up and braced myself for the dizziness that always came when I went from horizontal to vertical, but it didn't come.

I stood up and waited. And felt . . . weirdly okay. I turned my head to the left and right. I could tell the headache was there somewhere, behind my eyes, waiting, but it wasn't coming after me yet.

Maybe it was the medicine Dr. Ames brought me last night. He came to my door around nine with a turkey wrap, water, and two pills—my usual medicine for the headaches and something else that was supposed to increase blood flow to my brain and help repair the concussion damage. Could it be working already?

I was hungry, too, so I took a quick shower, dressed, and headed for the cafeteria.

Quentin and Sarah were side by side at a table, eating eggs and fruit. Ben sat across from them, reading *Horse and Rider* magazine. He didn't have a plate of food, only an unpeeled orange that he rolled back and forth on the table while he read.

"Oh, hi!" Sarah waved me over as if I might have a hard time spotting her through the crowd. "Sit by me. Want me to take you up to get food?"

"She can probably handle that herself," Quentin said, smiling. His smile was different from Sarah's, like he wanted to be friends but understood if I needed time to start liking him. It made me like him faster.

"Well." Sarah sounded offended. "I was just going to warn her about Elena's toast."

"Who's Elena?" I asked.

"One of the workers." Sarah pointed toward the kitchen area, where a woman with short, spiky hair was scrambling eggs. "She always burns the toast. Always. Get a bagel instead, and don't let her put it in the toaster."

That made me laugh. "Couldn't I ask her to toast it lightly?"

"She doesn't speak English. None of the helpers do." Sarah ticked them off on her fingers. "Olga and Elena and Viktor and Sergei. They're part of some medical exchange program from Russia."

"Got it," I said. "Plain bagel." I headed for the kitchen area, where a tiny buffet was set up. Elena-of-the-burned-toast was at the counter, cracking eggs into a mixing bowl.

I filled a plate with strawberries, melon, scrambled eggs with cheese, and my untoasted bagel and headed back to the table. Sarah scooted close to Ben to make room for me between her and Quentin. Ben turned away and pretended she wasn't even there.

Something about Sarah—her smile or that hey-be-my-friend look in her eyes—reminded me of Amberlee, the girl from my art class who'd tried to join our table at lunch the day I fell out of the tree stand. Lucy and Corinne had stared at her as if she'd burst into a private meeting. Amberlee stood there with her tray, swaying back and forth like a tree about to blow over in the wind. I could have moved over to make room for another chair, or I could have gone with her to a different table—I've thought a million times since then about what I could have done—but I sat there like Ben. I stared at the little cup of applesauce on my tray, and when I finally looked up, she was gone.

"So what's the deal with you guys?" Sarah asked, bringing me back from that other cafeteria. I wasn't ready to talk, so I took a bite of my eggs, then held up a finger while I chewed. She got the hint and turned to Ben. "Like, I'm from upstate New York. Way, way upstate, by Canada. Where are you from?" She gave him a nudge, and finally, he looked up from his magazine.

"Washington." He looked down and turned a page.

"DC? My hockey team went to the Smithsonian when we were there for a tournament once!"

"No."

"Oh. Washington State?"

"Yeah."

"That's cool. So how'd you get your concussion? I got checked

into the boards playing hockey. This girl was absolutely huge, and she was flying. Do you play sports?"

"No."

Elena came to the table with a tray of orange juice and gave us each a glass.

"Thanks," I said. She just smiled.

Sarah poked Ben. "Well, if you don't play sports, what *do* you like?"

"Riding horses."

"I should have guessed that from your magazine, huh? Do you have a horse?"

"Yes."

"So how'd you get here?"

Ben finally looked up again. "Dude, were you not right there when we pulled up on the airboat? Or was that some other annoying skinny girl on the dock?"

"Hey," Quentin said quietly, spreading cream cheese on his untoasted bagel. "She's trying to be friendly." It should have made me happy that he was standing up for Sarah, but somehow, it made me sad. I stared at him, wondering why. "We're going to be here together a while. We might as well be friends."

Then I figured it out. Quentin was that kid I *used* to be before middle school—the one teachers chose to show new students around because they'd always be kind to kids like Amberlee. Maybe when—

"Look, this ain't summer camp." Ben slammed his magazine on the table, and his tray jumped. "I'm not here to make friends and learn archery. I'm here to get better so I can ride again."

“That’s why we’re all here, Mr. Personality. Besides, I wasn’t asking how you *traveled* here; I was asking what happened. Like my hockey crash.” She put a hand to the left side of her head as if talking about it brought back the pain. “This is my second concussion, so my doctor said no more hockey for the rest of the year at least.”

“Well,” I said, “this place is supposed to work wonders.” I hoped it was true. For Sarah and for me. “The website makes it sound like you end up smarter than you were before your concussion.”

“Yeah.” Sarah let out a sharp laugh. “I think that’s what my parents are hoping.”

“So, um . . . Sarah already knows this. But I got hurt playing football,” Quentin said.

“He’s on the school team. You play quarterback, right?” The bounce in Sarah’s voice was back.

“Yeah.” He hesitated, then sat up a little straighter. “Quarterback.”

“You get sacked or what?” Ben asked, finally peeling his orange.

“Uh, kind of. I went down pretty hard. I still get headaches, and sometimes when I’m doing my math homework, I can’t remember stuff, you know? Like I’m supposed to have the information and it’s probably in my brain somewhere, but it feels like everything got knocked out of place.”

Sarah shrugged. “My brain always feels that way when I do math.”

“What about you, Cat?” Quentin pushed his glasses up on his nose and squinted at me.

“I fell out of a tree stand.” There. Embarrassing moment over. “I was watching birds up there.”

I waited for them to laugh or say bird watching was an old-lady thing. But they didn’t.

“Cool,” Sarah said. And Quentin nodded. And then we all looked at Ben.

He took a long time chewing a section of his orange, then swallowed and said, “I . . . uh . . . fell off my horse.”

“Wow,” Quentin said.

“Yeah.” Ben paused but then went on. “My aunt and uncle have a stable where they run programs for disabled kids. I ride there a lot.” He shrugged like it was no big deal, but his face changed in a way that only happens when you’re talking about something important. “I did, anyway, until I got thrown.” He looked back down at his magazine, turned to a new story. And I could tell he’d told as much of *his* story as we were going to hear.

Dr. Ames came striding into the cafeteria then, jingling keys on a keychain. “Oh, good! Glad you’re getting to know one another. I hate to steal you away, Cat, but you’ve got an MRI this morning so we can see what’s going on in that head, okay?”



He walked me to the lab near his office and flicked on the lights. This room wasn’t the stark white of the MRI lab at the hospital back home; it was painted a deep blue and had art prints on the walls—water lilies and meadow scenes that were probably meant to be soothing. But the most soothing thing to me was

the MRI machine itself. “It’s a lot more open than the one at home,” I said.

Dr. Ames smiled and looked at me like he understood. “Those old models are pretty claustrophobic, aren’t they? I think you’ll find this more comfortable.” He glanced at the clipboard in his hands. “I’ve got the wrong chart,” he said, and gestured toward the examination table next to the MRI machine. “You can change into a robe and hop on up. I’ll be right back.”

He closed the door behind him, and I reached for the soft cotton robe draped over the table, but then I remembered my music. Back home, I’d get so nervous in the MRI machine it was hard for me to be still, and then they couldn’t get a good scan. I’d always move and mess it up, and then I felt awful because they’d have to start over.

So Mom had the lab technicians play my favorite music—my *real* favorite music. Not Lucy’s dark, moody new playlists that I listened to on the soccer bus and pretended to like. My playlists were full of happy, upbeat bands like GizMania and the Stealth Acrobats, and they helped a ton. I looked at the machine here; I’d probably be okay, but it couldn’t hurt to see if I could grab my music player.

I put down the robe and opened the lab door, but Dr. Ames wasn’t back yet. I looked down the hallway and saw his office door was closed, but the one next to it, Dr. Gunther’s, was cracked open, with voices coming from inside.

I walked down the hall and was lifting my hand to knock, when Dr. Ames raised his voice.

“No! Not when we’re so close!”

Why would he be yelling at Dr. Gunther? I lowered my hand and took half a step back.

Dr. Gunther said something I couldn't hear, and then, "... far enough. Think what could happen."

Dr. Ames's response came through loud and clear. "*You* think what could happen, Rudolph. Have you forgotten how we came to work together?"

I don't know if Dr. Gunther answered or if Dr. Ames kept talking over him.

"At that time, you were found to be violating federal laws that regulate genetic engineering research. At that time, you were charged with a felony. And at *that* time you were never going to set foot in a lab again. You were never going to finish your clinical research; you were never going to find your cure for Parkinson's disease. And you. Were. Going. To. Die."

That last word hung in the air. Maybe Dr. Gunther said something back, but I couldn't hear, and my thoughts were all jumbled; it happened a lot since my concussion. I could remember things from last year, but I'd forget something I heard a few minutes ago. And this . . . this was all too much to understand.

It sounded like Dr. Ames was threatening Dr. Gunther. But why? They worked together, didn't they?

Trying to sort it all out made my head hurt. I stepped back. Why was I even in this hallway? I was supposed to be in the lab having an MRI.

They were still talking in there, but only scraps of their conversation made it out the door.

"... tumor continues to grow, and I really think . . ."

“... better with the other first-round subject.”

“... procedure has taken, but it’s early yet, and ...”

“... proceed as planned.”

“... must contact the girl’s parents—”

“I said NO.”

Dr. Ames’s voice sounded so loud, so sharp, so close to the door that I jumped back, scrambled across the hall to the lab, and stumbled into the exam table. Dizzy ... I always got dizzy when I moved too fast, and then the nausea washed over me. I put my head down and breathed in the clean detergent smell of the cotton robe until the spinning slowed and I could stand up again.

When I did, Dr. Ames was in the doorway.

“You all right, Cat? Take your time.” His voice was soft again, his face concerned but not angry at all. Why was he so upset with Dr. Gunther? And did they say they were calling someone’s parents? Whose? I tried to remember the conversation but it broke apart like a staticky phone call.

“Cat?” Dr. Ames stepped to my side and put a gentle hand on my arm.

“Sorry.” I shook my head. “I got dizzy when I started to change.”

“I see you didn’t get far,” he said. “Do you want Olga to come give you a hand?”

“No, that’s okay.” I picked up the robe and took a deep breath. “It’s going away. I can get changed.”

“Great,” he said. “I’ll be outside; give a knock when you’re ready.”

The door closed, and I concentrated on moving slowly, smoothly, so I didn't jar myself dizzy again. I concentrated on the feel of the cotton and the smell of the lab. On everything but the words I couldn't sort out, because my head felt foggy every time I tried.

I knocked on the door. "I'm ready."

Dr. Ames came back with his clipboard. "Great. Climb on up."

I hoisted myself onto the exam table and leaned back.

"Relax and let your arms rest at your sides, okay? You want some music?"

"What?" The words made my heart jump, and I leaned up on my elbows. I never told Dr. Ames I wanted to go get music. Had he seen me in the hallway? No, he couldn't have known. I didn't even mention it. And why was I so scared that he might know I was in the hallway? Somehow, even though the words didn't make sense to me yet, I knew I'd heard something I shouldn't have.

"I asked if you wanted music." Dr. Ames was standing by a computer on the counter. "Some of our patients find that music makes it easier to relax for the MRI. I've got some light jazz, a bunch of classic rock . . . Bruce Springsteen, Journey . . . I'm probably dating myself, huh?" He grinned and shrugged. "Sorry I can't offer you something more current."

"No, that's okay," I said, settling on the exam table. "Classic rock is fine. Everything's fine."

*Maybe it was*, I thought.

Dr. Ames flipped a switch on the wall, and my table moved slowly toward the scanner that was going to take pictures of my brain.

WAKE UP MISSING

Everything had to be fine. I pushed the echoing words I'd overheard down into the shadows of my head and took a deep breath.

Everything was fine. These were doctors, after all, and this was where I needed to be to get better. I had to trust them.