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**JACK
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For Venetia, who waited

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‘Answer me, mechanist, has Nature arranged all the springs
of feeling in this animal to the end that he might not feel?’
—*Voltaire*

THE BASEMENT

I can't move my legs.

No matter how hard I push or pull, nothing moves below my waist. It's like my feet are encased in concrete. When I try to reach down, searching for the problem, I discover that my arms are frozen too.

My shoulders won't flex. My fingers won't bend. I can't even turn my head.

Someone has glued me to the wall.

The shock of this, the panic crushing my throat, is so great that it takes me a moment to realize I don't know who I am. Where there should be a name, a birthday, a childhood, instead I find an inky void, sucking me into it. I'm nothing.

I try to struggle free, but my limbs won't move even a centimetre. I'm numb from the neck down. A hot ache compresses my temples. I can't breathe.

Not glued, perhaps. Paralysed.

However I got into this situation, I don't have long to get out. I'm already dizzy—in a minute or two, the lack of air

will give me brain damage. Perhaps it already has. Maybe that's why I can't remember who I am.

The windowless walls are made from crisp new bricks, tinted blue by the lonely neon tube above. Box cutters, saws, and pliers hang from rusty hooks. Timber is propped up in the corner, cut to varying lengths. This could be a garage, except that the machine lurking in the shadows isn't a car.

It's as big as a train engine, ribbed with plastic tubing. A network of pressurized canisters stands amongst the thick legs. Behind plexiglass panels, syringes are clamped to the ends of robotic arms. A standby light blinks beside the power switch.

My eyes roll wildly to the other side of the room, and I discover that I'm not alone.

'You're awake,' the girl says, wiping her palms against her jeans.

She's somewhere in her mid-teens, with a glittering nose stud and long, neatly clipped nails. Her mascara and foundation are slightly too thick, as though she hopes to be mistaken for an older woman. Her rosewood eyes reveal no fear.

'Help me!' My own voice is surprisingly clear, but completely alien to me.

The girl tucks a tightly knotted braid behind her ear. 'Help you?'

'Please,' I say. 'I can't breathe!'

Her chair squeaks as she swivels on it. 'You're not supposed to be awake yet,' she says, staring at a computer monitor.

Then I see the unconscious woman.

She's sprawled on a bench under a wall of screwdrivers and soldering irons. A grey tank top clings to her chest.

Boxer shorts hang from her hips. Her face is concealed by the girl at the computer, and I can't move my head to get a better view.

'What is this place?' I ask.

The girl glances over, and almost smiles. 'Your new home.'

As she moves in her chair, the rest of the woman on the bench is revealed. But I still can't see her face, and then I realize it's not there.

Her whole head has been removed.

My scream is shrill as a smoke alarm. The sound fills the room, leaving no space for anything else. The girl jumps up from her chair and grabs a torn, oil-stained T-shirt from the workbench before shoving it into my mouth. She pinches my nose shut.

My vision blurs, more from terror than from lack of air. It feels as though I'm plummeting down a well, with my head thudding against the stone as I fall.

I black out.

Awareness returns slowly, in glittering fragments, like the first few stars after sunset. I recover from my delirium to find the girl fiddling with her computer again. She has changed clothes—she's wearing a sweater and cargo pants. How long was I unconscious?

She glances over at me, sees me staring, and turns back to the monitor.

The gag is gone, but still I smell the bitterness of the oil. When I try to scream again, only silence comes out. My vocal cords are frozen, like the rest of me.

'Looks like you died of fright,' the girl says, and sighs. 'I didn't know that could happen. This wasn't supposed to be so hard.'

I'm surprised to see the decapitated corpse still on the workbench. Part of me had expected it to fade away, as nightmares usually do. No blood stains the neck. Somehow, the head has been detached as neatly as a Lego brick.

The girl turns to face me. 'I'm going to give your voice back now. If you scream, I'll take it away. Maybe permanently. Understand?'

I can't say yes, or nod, so I blink. She turns back to her computer and clicks the mouse a few times. I feel something heat up inside my throat, like a sip of hot tea.

'What are you doing?' I ask. I'm startled by how suddenly my speech has returned to normal.

She ignores the question. Her eyes are fixed on mine. 'Tell me your name.'

'Who are you?'

'Answer the question.'

'I can't,' I say.

She frowns. 'Can't?'

'I don't know it.'

'Tell me your name,' she says again, as though the answer is going to be different.

'I can't remember!'

'You're supposed to know this,' she says. Her eyebrows knot together. Her lower lip droops. I have the absurd urge to apologize.

'I don't remember my name. I don't know who I am. I don't know anything.'

'Your name is Chloe,' she says. 'Your parents are Graeme and Kylie. You study at Scullin High School. You don't recall any of this?'

I try to shake my head, but it still won't move. Claustrophobia looms on all sides. 'No.'

The girl curses, and goes back to her computer. 'Why?' she mutters. 'Why isn't this working?'

'Whose body is that on the table?' I ask.

She stares at me, as though the answer is obvious. 'It's yours,' she says.

Before I have time to scream again, she types a command on the keyboard. My consciousness whirls away like storm water down a drain.

~

I, Chloe Zimetski, open my eyes.

This is the basement of the house I've lived in for my whole life. The hammers and saws belong to my mum, who used to build things down here before she took on more shifts at work. One of the cardboard boxes under the workbench holds a plywood glider she made for me, along with the trebuchet we used to launch it.

Mum's name is Kylie Samuels. She kept her name when she married my dad, Graeme Zimetski. At age three, I was a flower girl at their wedding. A photo of me munching on the petals was part of a slide show at my thirteenth birthday party—I was horrified.

The machine in the corner, with its tanks and pipes and needles, is a 3D printer. Mum assembled that too, using a kit she bought online.

The pressure on the sides of my skull has become a throbbing pain. My memories have returned, but they explain nothing. Why am I a prisoner in my own basement? Who is the sadistic girl keeping me here? How did she sever my head without killing me?

She is doing something to the body—*my* body. The straps of an apron are knotted behind her back. A mirror leans against the wall.

I'm deeply unsettled to see that my headless body is now naked. Beneath her apron, so is the girl.

'What's your name?' she asks, without turning around.

'Chloe Zimetski,' I say. 'Please let me go.'

'How old are you?'

I tell her. Before she has the chance to speak, I ask, 'Why are you doing this?'

Her shoulders and elbows flex as her hands roam across my flesh, pausing here and there. 'What do your parents do for a living?'

'Stop touching me!' I cry.

She spins. A brush the size of a knitting needle is balanced in her hand. A droplet of milk-chocolate paint hangs from the tip.

'You're in no position to boss me around,' she says.

'I'm not bossing. I'm *begging* you. Please just let me go.'

Turning back to her work, she says, 'Soon, OK?' She seems to be half talking to herself.

If I yell for help, she'll just take my voice away again. Right now, my voice is all I have.

'Tell me what your parents do for a living,' she says.

'Mum does admin work for the postal service. Dad's in the defence department.'

'Doing what?'

'I don't know. Office stuff. He doesn't talk about it.'

She dips the brush in a tray filled with paint. 'What's the password to your email?'

I could refuse to tell her. But there's nothing in my inbox

worth dying for. ‘Darival,’ I say. ‘D-A-R-I-V-A-L.’

‘Why did you choose that?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘What’s your PIN?’

‘There’s less than eight hundred dollars in the account.’

‘Tell me anyway.’

Eight hundred dollars isn’t much, but I worked all summer for it. I missed Henrietta’s birthday party and half a dozen trips to the cinema because I was busy vacuuming hotel rooms.

‘Don’t keep me waiting,’ she warns.

‘Two, five, eight, zero.’

She drops the brush into a jar of water, where paint uncoils from the tip like incense smoke. Switching on the black-and-white television on her desk, she plugs in a digital antenna and an unmade bed fuzzes into view, along with a cluttered bookcase and a poster of a hip hop artist.

‘Is this where you sleep?’ the girl asks me.

‘That’s my room. You put a camera in my room?’

‘You sleep there?’

‘Yes.’

She changes the channel. Our bathroom appears on the screen. ‘Where’s this?’

My scalp tingles with fear. ‘How did you do this?’

‘Answer the question.’

‘It’s my bathroom.’

‘Yours, or your parents?’

‘Both. Why do you need to know?’

‘What’s in the cupboard under the sink?’

‘Hair gel. Soap. Toilet paper.’

She changes the channel again. The screen shows our living room. A man and a woman are sitting at the dining table, which holds a vase of slightly wilted daisies. The man is bearded and bulky, with the nose of a kick boxer. He wears a grey T-shirt and nurses a mug of coffee. The woman—slight, redheaded—sits cross-legged as she skims what looks like a TV guide.

‘Who are those people?’ I ask. ‘What are they doing in my house?’

‘You don’t recognize them?’ she says.

‘No.’

‘They’re your parents.’

‘No they’re not,’ I say, frowning at the screen. ‘My parents don’t look like that.’

‘What do your parents look like?’

‘They . . .’ I hesitate. I can’t picture them. Frightened loneliness climbs up my throat.

‘Your facial recognition isn’t working,’ the girl says. ‘Damn it.’

‘Graeme?’ The woman’s voice crackles in the speakers. ‘Did you pick up any pizza bases on the way home?’

It’s the face of a stranger, but it sounds like Mum. I stare at her, half expecting to see a puppeteer.

‘There’s still two in the freezer,’ the man says, with my father’s slow cadence.

‘If Mum and Dad are here,’ I say, ‘how did you get into my house?’

‘Shut up. I’m thinking.’ The girl pulls off her apron and struggles into a khaki dress.

‘What do you *want* from me? Why are you . . .’

The girl touches the keyboard, and suddenly I’m unable to

talk again. I scrunch my eyes shut, fighting back the rising tide of panic.

I hear her trot up the stairs, open the door, and close it again. A lock clicks.

‘Where have you been?’ the woman on the TV asks.

‘Downstairs. Just working on my science project.’

I look at the TV. There’s the girl, with her arm around Mum’s shoulders.

‘Don’t forget to do some clarinet practice before bed,’ Mum says. ‘You skipped yesterday.’

I look over at the mirror the girl left behind. For the first time, I see myself—a severed head on a dusty shelf, held upright by a padded vice. Except for the horror in my eyes, my face is identical to that of my captor.

~

She is stealing my life.

My mind is racing. If the girl can convince my own parents that she’s me, what hope does anyone else have? She’ll be able to keep me down here as long as she likes. No one knows I’m missing.

And once she has all the information she needs, there will be no point keeping me alive. Whatever disturbing mechanism she’s used to resuscitate my head independently from my body, she can just switch it off.

I try to wriggle free of the vice, but none of the necessary muscles are attached. Looking at my reflection, I see my disembodied skull hasn’t moved at all.

‘Can you feed yourself tomorrow night?’ Dad asks on the screen.

‘Nope,’ the impostor says. ‘Guess I’ll starve to death.’

Mum rolls her eyes.

‘Where are you off to?’ the girl continues.

I’m shouting inside my head: *Look* at her! That’s not your daughter!

‘We’re going out with Henrietta’s parents,’ Dad says. ‘Your mother wants to see that new Cate Blanchett film.’

‘And your father,’ Mum adds, ‘is doing an excellent job of pretending he doesn’t.’ She folds the corner of a page and closes the magazine. ‘I’ll make a salad for you before we go.’

‘I could fry those lamb chops instead,’ the girl offers. ‘Then I could eat one and you could reheat the others when you got back.’

‘I don’t want you burning the house down. Salad will be fine.’

‘OK,’ the girl says.

I’m not a kid any more, I would have said. *I can cook without starting a fire*. But there’s no sign that Mum or Dad has noticed ‘my’ strange behaviour.

What can I do to save myself? I can’t move. I can’t even talk unless she lets me. My only bargaining power is my knowledge—she probably wants more of it. I can stall her, or tell her lies. She can’t steal my whole identity with just my email password and PIN.

But she already has more than that. She has my *face*. If I become too unreliable, she might just kill me. A landslide of anxiety covers me as I picture her sawing the rest of my body into pieces and burying them in the back yard while Mum and Dad are at the cinema. Anything she doesn’t already know about my life, she can just pretend to have forgotten. Who would believe she wasn’t me?

I look over at the 3D printer. I’ve watched Mum use it to make mixing bowls, owl-shaped candles, even a pair of

sunglasses. She positions the object under the laser scanners, and then the syringes drip various materials—wax, resin, silicone—in layer after layer of intricate patterns until the object is complete.

Maybe the girl removed my head, placed it in the scanner, and used the printer to create a hollow mask, realistic enough to fool Mum and Dad. A few days ago, I wouldn't have thought this was possible. But a few days ago, I wasn't a severed head on a shelf in the basement.

It won't be enough just to tell her lies. I'll have to tell her the kind of lies that will get her noticed. The kind that will make my family suspicious enough to come down into the basement and have a look at her 'science homework'.

But I need something that won't make the impostor suspicious when I say it. And I don't know how much time I have.

'Mum?' she says, on the screen. 'You want me to do the dishes before I go to bed?'

'Don't worry about it.'

'You sure? It's no trouble.'

'They can wait.'

The impostor looks crestfallen—as though she really wanted to do the dishes. She says, 'Well, good night then,' and kisses Mum on the cheek.

Dad is staring at a potted fern in the corner. He says, 'Night, Chloe,' without taking his eyes off the leaves. Is a camera in there? Has he seen it?

The impostor walks out of frame.

Mum and Dad remain seated.

I stare at the TV, willing them to say something about their daughter's odd behaviour. But they don't. They sit in

silence for a while, before Mum gets up and asks Dad if he's done with his coffee. Dad says no, and Mum leaves.

After a while, Dad gets up too. He walks over to the fern, and peers into it.

I'm thinking, Come on! Yes! Go Dad!

He clenches his fist around something inside. 'Gotcha,' he mutters, before washing his hands and following Mum.

No camera. It must just have been a bug.

After that, there's no sound down here but the faint whine of the television and the toneless rumbling of the heating ducts. I wonder how long I can stand this before I go insane.

Part of me wonders if I already am.