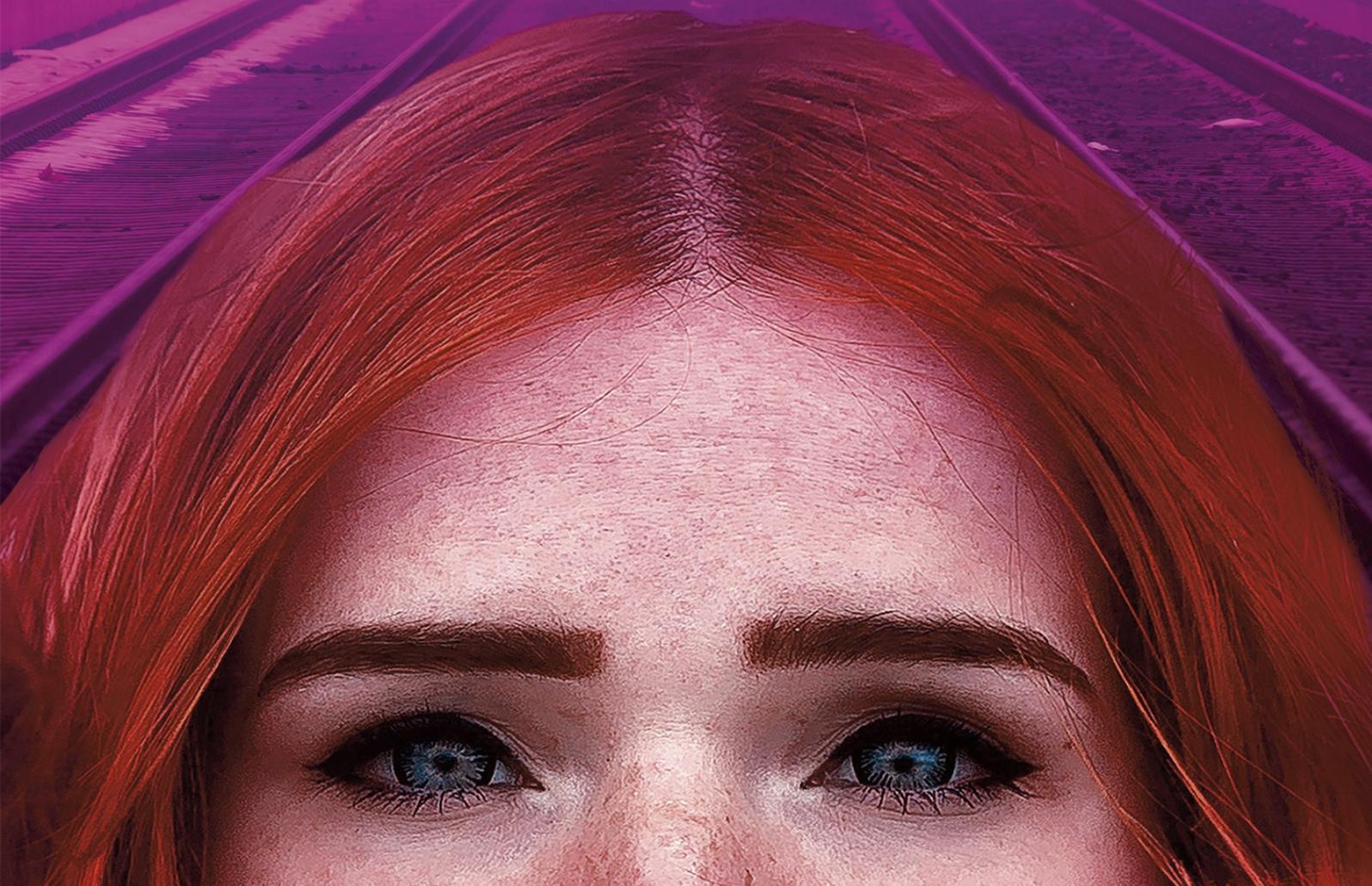


LISA M. CRONKHITE

# FLIX TIME



# CHAPTER ONE

“Just do it!” Rose demands, as we creep around the school grounds like two lost rats. “I swear Pen, I know you want to,” she continues as we edge toward the graffiti-covered bleachers to find shelter.

Rose’s hair flaps and waves like a brown flag in the high winds. She’s shivering, trying not to drop the tiny round pill in her hand. I think if I look hard enough I’ll be able to see my reflection in its slick black casing—like it’s telling me to take it.

“Let me in, let me in,” it’s saying.

Rose crouches down, her bones protruding through her clothing. The drug is eating away at her. She almost loses control, rocking back and forth as if the repeated motion will speed up time. Her delicate skin has begun the transformation from its natural caramel color to a lighter shade of tan these days. Her jittery body is almost unbearable to watch. But Rose never seems bothered by the side effects.

I give her one hard look, like I am finally going to quit this time. I woke up this morning planning to quit. And now, here I am. Maybe just one more time?

I haven’t seen Nate in days and I miss him terribly. The only reason I get high is to see him. He’s the one good thing in my life since everything else is so screwed up. And he needs to know the truth. I need a chance to explain that I’m quitting.

“I’m so fucking serious, Pen. Mine’s kickin’ in right now, so make your mind up already.” She pulls my left hand out and plunks the pill into my palm. It melts into the fine lines of my hand. Would it really hurt to take it just one more time? After overanalyzing and watching Rosario shiver, I chicken out about kicking the habit. I bring the pill to my mouth, popping it like candy. What the hell.

As the pill rests in the middle of my tongue, Rose tugs at my parka.

“Hurry up,” she urges. The gel-like covering dissolves quickly and the liquid center begins to drip down the back of my throat. I could spit out the polluted

shot at any moment, but Rose would have a fit if I waste any, so I swallow the sloshing juice and try to straighten out my nerves.

“There, that’s better. Now I can see everything,” she says, a Cheshire cat grin spread across her face, scanning the scene with her newly doped-up eyes. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Are you sure you wanna do this, Rose?” I ask her, hoping she’ll change her mind and want to ditch again. I seriously can’t face those jerks at school. Sneaking in high has its own risks. I know all the ways to get in and out of school undetected. But since Kelly Becker went missing a few weeks ago, the school’s security has been tight. I can’t afford to get caught.

“Don’t worry,” Rose tells me, widening her grin to an almost-believable smile. “Nothing’s going to happen, I promise.”

We race toward the school. Clearly, she’s excited since she’s now higher than a freaking kite. I suppose I would be too if I got all the attention that she gets at school. I’m not even sure why a pretty girl like Rosario Rodriguez would want to hang out with someone like me. She wouldn’t be caught dead in the flannels and plain blue jeans that I wear. Everything Rose wears must have a famous designer name attached to it. And Rose has this long, lustrous hair, while I keep mine shoulder length, changing colors each week. This week it’s a bright red.

Rose laughs wickedly as we pick up speed across the football field to get to the front doors.

“This is a riot,” she laughs. “You should see what I’m seeing.”

Each person has their own unique experience while they’re on Fix. I’ve never taken any other type of drug, but my friends who have experimented say that nothing really compares to it. Fix gives you some control over your hallucinations. When you trip on crack or meth, you have no control. Or so I hear. But on Fix, you can change how you see things. You can deepen the sky into a purple haze or tune in to your favorite music just by thinking about it. Yet, I know of no one that has an invisible friend like I have in Nate. And not many of my friends know about him, either.

We make it inside before the first bell rings. The Monster energy drink I had for breakfast comes up, fouling my mouth with sour ginseng aftertaste. I feel like I’m about to throw up, but I manage to hold it in. Not everything about being high on Fix is fun.

Rose and I begin to separate as I get close to my locker. “Keep your eyes open, Pen. Remember, don’t fall asleep,” she says, slowly walking away as I turn toward my locker.

“I can’t. I won’t,” I tell her while cramming my backpack into my locker. But apparently, I am talking to myself. When I swivel back around, she’s already gone.

I slam the locker door shut, and it all kicks in. Suddenly, I can almost see inside my head—snippets of memories floating around like tiny dust particles. Little feathery fibers drift about, distracting me as I head to class. Once I clear them away, my senses rise like an ascending elevator. From the cafeteria, the smell of burnt meatloaf wafts in the air and the taste of soupy mashed potatoes lingers on my lips. The sounds of students walking through the halls vibrate in my bones. Conversations, both loud and quiet, bounce off the walls. Yet with the drug, I can easily tune them out.

I look down at my arms, watching them dangle and become numb. I’m literally floating to homeroom, yet in the sea of students that flood the halls, not a soul notices.

The light changes from the early Monday morning brilliance to a pale purple glow with a tinge of orange. And instead of the principal’s announcements over the intercom, I tune my mind into an alternative station and glide through the halls like a ghost, drifting inside first period homeroom.

Nate begins to materialize in the corner of the room. Excitement and anxiety clash inside my body. The smell of raw metal lingers in the air. That’s what Nate smells like.

Dark shadows in the shape of a slender young male appear like a dancing ribbon of smoke. I keep looking around to see if someone notices. No one does.

Then I lock eyes with my ex-boyfriend Walker. I’m paranoid and wonder if he knows what I’m up to. Walker always makes me feel guilty about Nate. Now he’s eyeing me up from the front row. He thinks that with his icy-blue eyes and sexy hair he has power over me.

“Don’t,” he says, staring me down as I walk past him to my seat. “Remember what happened before ... just don’t do it.”

“Shh,” I whisper back. “Just leave me alone.”

I wave Walker off as he gives me one last look of disapproval before glancing away.

Once I take my seat, Nate’s dark shadows continue to solidify. His translucent skin swirls into a tan flesh color. I softly signal for him to wait. If I could just make time slow down, then I’d be ready to escape.

Nate’s standing there, in the corner of the room—still, silent, waiting. The teacher scribbles on the whiteboard oblivious to the changes I’m seeing, as are all the students—everyone but Walker. His cautious eyes poison me with a look of dread. I can’t help but think Walker’s jealous of Nate. I don’t know why. God, Nate isn’t even real. Even though Walker does Fix, too, he still judges me for taking it. We’ve been friends forever, but ever since that night we first took Fix together, things haven’t been the same.

Nate’s long, wavy hair nestles around his porcelain face as black symbols etch themselves into the fine lines of his skin. They’re the branded symbols that show he isn’t real—a tattooing of sorts. And there always seems to be a new one every time we see each other. I wonder, for the first time, how much control I really have over him.

I raise my hand to be excused. The teacher nods and gives me a bathroom pass. I crawl out of the desk-chair and walk toward the door. From the corner of my eye, I see Nate trailing not far behind.

Once we get into the hall, he looks at me with loving eyes, still waiting for my every command on what to do and where to go next.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I tell him, softly. “Just stay close and follow me.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Once we head outside, the cold stings my exposed skin. The temperature dropped big-time since Rose and I were out earlier this morning.

Nate clings tightly to my hand, trying to provide warmth to my body, but it's barely working. His nervous energy knocks my thoughts around. Am I making the right decision? How will he take the truth?

"Is everything alright, Penelope?" Nate asks.

"Yes," I say. "Just trust me."

Though, honestly, I don't trust myself. I don't trust myself to make this final decision for him. For us. But deep down, I know quitting is the only way. This has gone on long enough.

Nate and I walk hand in hand over the frost-covered football field. I want to take him to where this all started—the Tower. For almost a year, Fix has clouded my mind into one big, disorderly mess. Memories of me and Nate in the past jumble together with thoughts of the future, while the present just stands still. It's like a dream repeating over and over. This madness has got to stop.

The longer we stay here, the worse it will get. Plus, it isn't safe to be walking around with an imaginary person. I'd probably be hospitalized if anyone saw me talking to myself. I take Nate to the parking lot and head to my car.

"Hurry, we haven't got much time," I tell him.

"Please, Penelope, tell me what's wrong."

"Shh ... Nate, I need to do this."

I nervously slide into the driver's seat and put the key into the ignition, revving up the engine. I try to stay positive and think of the things I *can* do. Like for instance, I can change the hue of the sky—or the sounds that I'm hearing. I can tune out things that are right in front of me or listen to a conversation in the distance. Sometimes though, I'm not sure if they're real or just in my head.

We pull out of the parking lot and drive away. The dusty autumn leaves float

through the open windows. Crisp, crunchy fall flavors tickle my taste buds as if I just finished eating cornflakes without the milk. The earthy smells clog my nostrils and cause me to cough. All my five senses are more pronounced when I'm on Fix. That's one of the biggest attractions of the drug. But once it wears off, so does everything else. And the crashing side effect of coming down is like your brain hitting a brick wall at top speed. I'm not looking forward to the end of this high.

Instead, I focus on the here and now and my beautiful Nate. Right now, I've managed to keep the sky tinted purple. It always reminds me of my sister, Tabatha. Plus, it quells my worries. The dimly lit sun could almost pass as an off-color moon. Even though it's only ten in the morning, this change in light feels very real to me.

We finally get downtown to Al's Parking Lot. Nate's been oddly quiet this whole time. Fix only lasts about four hours, so we'll have to hurry. I wouldn't want to get stuck somewhere and not be able to get back home. When I'm off the drug, everything seems to go wrong.

We park my sister's Oldsmobile Cutlass—one of the things I got when Tabatha passed away. After getting out, we walk straight for the Tower. The dilapidated building sticks out like a massive scar, sandwiched between two newer buildings. I glance at Nate every now and then, watching him as he looks up at all the tall structures. I'm afraid he knows what I'm about to do.

"Is everything okay?" Nate asks. I turn toward him, jiggling his hand, and tell him not to worry.

"This is the place, isn't it?" he asks, stopping in front of the Tower doors.

"Yes ..." I want to say more but haven't the heart. My eyes travel upward to the very top, the place we first met.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah ..."

We walk down the narrow, musty alleyway to get to the back of the building. I can't imagine what it's gonna be like to never see Nate again. But I also can't keep getting high. I know I love him. But that's messed up. He isn't real.

I try to focus on where we're headed. These days, the Tower is a rundown apartment complex full of junkies. Last year when I first started Fix the Tower

wasn't so scary. Now a bunch of druggies live here. Most of them stay here to create their own world. But to normal people, it's a decrepit building that should be demolished.

We walk through the restricted construction area, crawling underneath plastic tarps and a cracked cement walkway. Some of the building's glass windows are shattered. At the very top of the structure looms an ever-present cloud. I don't know what it is—a rain cloud or fog or perhaps smoke, or just something of my own imagination. But it's there. And it just so happens to be where we're headed—the rooftop. The very place Tabatha fell to her death.

## CHAPTER THREE

“It’s never too late to change, Penny Girl,” Tabatha always used to say to me. But my sister has no say in things now. Sometimes, I hate her so much I want to go where she is now just to slap her senseless.

Nate and I stand at the back of the building, freezing from the cold until he pries the door open. An even colder wave of air gusts past me as we step inside. Flickering fluorescent lights give an eerie glow to the walls. The halls are strangely quiet. I start to think no one’s in the building until we hear soft echoes from the upper floors.

“Where to next, Penelope?” Nate gently asks. I shiver so hard I can’t stop my body from vibrating. He stops in front of me, looks up, then comes close to give me his warmest embrace. His barely clothed body makes my skin prickle with goose bumps.

“Thank you,” I manage to say through chattering teeth.

“My pleasure,” he says. “Penelope, it will all be okay. I promise.”

Once I warm up, Nate loosens his grip, pausing for a moment or two in the hallway.

“Feeling better?” he asks with a smile.

“Yes.”

Honestly, I don’t. The more time I spend with him, the less I want to quit Fix.

As I walk through the halls, my mind organizes, separating out each individual thought. The drug is trying to straighten out my brain, but it only makes things more confusing.

“Come on, Penelope, let’s go somewhere safe,” he urges.

Dread floods through me. No place here is safe. I should have never brought him to the Tower. He gives me a saddened look, like he knows I’m about to say something bad, so I tell him in a firm tone, “Let’s keep moving.”

He swings a door open and we both start up the steps. As we ascend, floor by floor, faint voices mingle in the stagnant air. Luckily, as we approach each level, no one bothers us. The whole time we’re climbing the stairs, I’m thinking

this dreamworld will end badly if I don't end it first. I have to be smart about this. I have to quit.

"Almost there, this way," he tells me.

How does he know where I want to take him? Is he on to me yet? Maybe he wants out of this madness, too.

"We're here," he says, standing by the rooftop entrance. He then turns around to look me in the eye. "Sure you're okay?"

"I'm not sure anymore." I look down at the cement floor and watch it spin. Before I can lose my balance, Nate grabs me so I don't fall down the stairs.

"Nothing's going to happen to you as long as I'm with you," I hear him say, yet his lips didn't move. Did he just say that? Man, am I hearing things? Why am I so unsure of everything?

"Huh?" I ask again. "What'd you say?"

Nate holds me close, cups my chilled face in his warm hands and says, "My whole purpose is to keep you safe. Always remember that."

He opens the door and lets me walk out to the roof first, then then follows behind me. The cold, icy flooring is slick and hard to walk on.

"Be careful," he says. "I'm right here."

I look down for a while so I can ingest the beautiful words Nate has spoken to me, trying to win the tug-of-war in my mind. I'm not sure if it's Fix starting to wear off or if it's something else.

He holds me tight so I don't slip on the thin, black ice. The rooftop is covered with cracks as though I just might fall through into a deeper hell. Gray plumes of smoke loop upward from the chimneys. We walk through the foggy maze toward the dark brick edge.

"I want you to be okay," Nate says.

I put my hands up to his chiseled face to warm his stone-like skin.

"I know," I tell him, without having to explain much. "Just stay with me right now, okay?"

"I will. I will stay with you for as long as you need me," he says, holding me

close. He gazes into my eyes and lets me see inside his soul. It's a vision of when we first met.

Staring into his silver eyes, he shows me the scene as if I'm watching a small TV screen. It's the night of the party in the Tower, when I first took Fix. I'm standing there—the same place I'm standing now at the edge of the building. I wanted to get away from the crowd that night so I went to the rooftop, leaving Rose, Walker, and my other friends back inside. My hair was longer then, a natural golden blonde, before I cut and dyed it. I'm wearing a small black cocktail dress, something you would never see me wear now. I'm crying ... remembering Tabatha and when I lost her, the ache in my heart, the pain in my mind. All I kept thinking was why? Why did she do it?

"Please, Nate. You don't have to remind me," I tell him as I watch the scene inside his eyes.

"No, Penelope, you need to be reminded. I can't lose you."

As I continue gazing into his eyes, pictures form. He shows me on the ledge, my hair feverishly blowing in the wind. There I am, crouching down, holding on to the small brick slab at my feet. I remember the city below lit up like tiny stars in an underground sky. The downtown streets were in constant motion. Everything just kept going and going. There was no change, no difference in the world. Life went on without my sister. I figured life would go on without me, too.

My mother was already on her fourth boyfriend and didn't care about me. And my father drank himself into an early grave right after my sophomore year of high school. Things were already rocky with Walker.

Nate's eyes continue to play out the picture. I see myself stand up and lean over the edge.

I say to Nate, "I know what you're trying to tell me. Believe me, I'm not going to try to hurt myself like that again." It was the worst decision I ever made, trying to copy what Tabatha did.

I plead for Nate to stop, but he keeps showing me. His growing concern for me sends chills through my body. He knows something is wrong. But if he thinks I'm going to attempt suicide again, he's wrong. How am I going to tell him that I want to quit? That I'll never see him again?

“Just watch, you need to be reminded,” he urges again. I’ve never heard him be quite that direct before. The vision in his eyes replays that scene. I’m right back there, at the ledge, looking down. And just when I teeter forward, warm arms wrap around my waist and pull me inward. When it happened a year ago, at first I thought it was Walker, but when I turned around and opened my eyes, there Nate was. He startled me. He was a stranger. It wasn’t until later that I realized my subconscious created him because, even in my Fix-altered mind, I didn’t really want to die.

“Nate please stop, I’m done. I’m done with all this!” I shout out. He looks at me in shock and begins to change.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Stay back,” he warns, his silver eyes flaring into a bright Mediterranean blue. His muscles quiver as his tattoos begin to move, slithering around his neck and face.

Fear snaps me into a still photo. I can’t move. I tell him to calm down. But it’s probably not very effective since I’m freaking out, too.

“What’s happening to you?” I ask, taking a step back, trying not to slip. Tears stream down his face. *Oh my God! What have I done?*

Warm green haze swirls in his irises. I realize he’s charged up—hyper with energy in a way, and yet he’s completely sad at the same time. The sky opens as threatening clouds roll in. Nate begins to rise; his feet no longer touch the ground. His eyes transform into two mood rings. I’m in awe. My first reaction is to run away, yet it is as if lead fills my bones. *This cannot be happening!*

I manage to creep backward, watching his pale skin transform into a pinker hue. He is beaming with light. *Dear God, what is he?*

“Nate, please calm down ... you’re scaring me.”

He says nothing, rising up, just floating there.

Silence. Nothing but pure silence between us. The stunned feeling invades my thoughts like a plague. I don’t know what to say. I don’t understand. Nate has never looked any different. I’m afraid of how he looks now.

“Please tell me what to do. I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Nothing,” he says in a firm voice.

My eyes widen in shock. My mind races in circles and back to the beginning again. Not sure of anything. I’m trembling and can’t seem to shake it off. *Do I make a run for it?*

We are still like statues. His magnificent beauty ropes me in tight. I stare in shock as my thoughts stiffen.

“Tell me what to say ... tell me what to do, Nate, please!”

And just then, as softly as ever, he whispers, “Do you love me?”

Speechless, my thoughts are trapped inside me. I do love him, but I've always found it to be a comforting companionship kind of love. Not romantic. Yet, now this is ... this is so, God ... I just don't understand. Am I in love with my own creation? Oh, God ... or is he something else?

"Say something!" He pleads with me with his dimming eyes, and looks away as if he has lost something—me. I can tell that my hesitation is making him more concerned. The whole light inside of him fades.

"Please, Penelope, tell me the truth."

I look back into his eyes, not sure if I can. I just don't know anymore. Confusion has me tangled up inside.

The prolonged silence is slowly starting to kill him in some way. Warm salty tears of bewilderment travel down my face. I can't bear to see him like this. But I must be real here. I can't just fly away into whatever happily ever after. Can't stay on Fix forever. I don't want to live in this dream-like state anymore. I have to quit. I have to say good-bye.

"Please, Nate. I'm sorry. I don't know! Please believe me!" I plead with him, shying away from my feelings.

"I'm afraid I don't. You can't even look at me anymore."

He begins to turn around and leisurely step away—farther and farther away.

"Nate, wait!" I scream out.

"It's over, Penelope. You made your decision," he says. His words are distant, traveling off into the wind.

"Nate, stop, don't! Come back to me, please!" I yell out again. "Wait, you don't understand." I race after him as he slowly descends off the ledge.

"Jesus Christ, Nate, why won't you listen to me?" I reach into the foggy air. I close my eyes, for only a split moment in time and when I open them, he is gone.

*Oh no! What time is it? I gotta get outta here!*

The drug wears off, crashing me into reality. It isn't safe. I'm all alone on the rooftop of the Tower. Some druggie can come out and rob me, or worse.

I look over the ledge to see any signs of Nate, but he just vanished into thin

air.

*Okay, okay ... keep it together.*

I swivel back around and rush to the exit door. Gradually, the walls change from the normal white they used to be to a chipped black. It's even worse than the way I saw it when I was stoned. I reach into my pocket for my phone to see what time it is—10:45 in the morning. *Damn!* I've missed too much school already. I wonder if they've called my mom yet.

I race down the stairs, taking a few deep breaths along the way. My heart is beating a million miles per minute. My hands sweat as I try to hold onto the railing, but I can't get a good grip. *Get a grip!*

I trip on the last stair, hitting the ground hard. My exhausted body drops instantly against the hard floor. I struggle to get up. The back of my head is bleeding. *Why do I put myself through this?*

I manage to get up and walk to the back exit on the main floor. Once I swing the door open the bright afternoon light hits me like a swinging baseball bat to my face. Dark watery liquid rushes up my throat and spews out like a black fountain. It's like the liquid in Fix. It's almost as if it multiplies and creates all this extra fluid inside me. Then piercing cramps contract inside my abdomen, causing me to buckle in pain. *Damn!* This happens nearly every time the drug stops working. *Jesus Christ, help me keep it together.* After the pain in my stomach subsides, starvation carves a hole in my belly.

I grope my hands along the brick wall of the building for support and find a shady spot in the alley. I look around and see my car isn't there. *What the hell? Great. As if things couldn't get any worse. Crap, now what?*

My head pounds as if a drummer from a rock band went haywire in my skull. I check the back of my head again. *Ok, good. The bleeding's stopped.* I pull out my phone and dial Rose. It takes three rings before she answers.

"Hey, Pen, what's up?" she says to me, smacking gum over the phone.

"Rose, you have to help me. I'm stranded by the Tower."

"The Tower? Shit, girl, what possessed you to go there?" she asks, still popping her gum.

"Just get Clay to pick me up. I'm hurt pretty bad."

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