

Chapter 4

Location Unknown

Time Unknown

Campbell

Campbell's heart pounded as he looked around at the darkness that he had been sucked into. Nicole's house was no longer behind him, and gone was the soft chatter of the evening. Where was everyone? His heart started pounding harder and harder, until he felt something bump up against his wrist. The bracelet. Campbell forced himself to take deep breaths and studied his surroundings more closely.

Darkness. Darkness for miles and miles, never-ending and hopeless. When the light finally came, Campbell found himself standing at the edge of a cliff. Well, there goes my heart rate. Images of last year's challenge flashed in his memory, making him shudder.

He had jumped with the group, faced his fear, and taken the leap, just to hit his head on a stupid rock and fall unconscious. That definitely hadn't helped his already very healthy fear of heights, and his current state was not improving, to say the least. He attempted to take in a calming breath, but instead it came out shaky, exposing his true emotions. He closed his eyes instead, shutting out the clouds so far below where he stood. The air made it hard to breathe, and Campbell knew he wouldn't last for much longer if he stayed where he was. A sudden rumble alerted him to the fact that, along with his shaky breathing, every few seconds, the cliff would raise at least ten more feet into the sky. He cursed under his breath and took a second glance towards the ground, his hands clenched in attempts to stop them from shaking.

It would be okay, he knew that, but his heart wouldn't stop pounding and he knew he had to get off before his heartbeat reached its limit, and before he ran out of oxygen. He closed his eyes, and with a shaky breath, he jumped.

Thud. Opening his eyes with caution, Campbell took in his new surroundings. Gone were the towering cliffs and unbreathable air, and in their place was a grassy field, and a small tin box, not unlike the one they had received earlier in the evening. Rolling off of his stomach, Campbell reached towards the small box. But before he could grab it, a sudden buzz filled the air, and vibrated against his skin. Frantically, he felt in the pockets of his new black pants to find his phone, the screen glowing a familiar blue. Riley.

The blue reminded him of his sister who, just last year, had been trapped in the game as a hologram. He shook the thought away, and kept his focus on the phone, which remained blank. No new challenge had appeared. What? Why had it buzzed then? Campbell checked his messages to see a new message from the very person he had just thought about, his sister. It was straightforward, to the point, and he could sense the amount of stress put behind every word. Just like Riley. He laughed to himself and opened the message.

Riley:

Campbell. Where are you? Where are Nicole and Robyn?

Riley:

Please respond.

Campbell looked at the message with mounting worry. What was going on? What did the others have to do? He sent back a quick reply.

Campbell:

Chill, I just had to jump off a very, very tall cliff. And now I'm at the bottom. Only a slight panic attack. But all is well now. And I'm by myself, no sign of Nicole or Robyn.

Approximately five seconds after he sent the message, he received another, making him chuckle.

Riley:

Heights, really? Dang, that's harsh.

Campbell:

Yeah, but it's fine. Somehow my heart rate didn't reach the limit for the bracelets. I'm not saying I'm ungrateful or anything but still. It's weird.

Campbell:

What do you guys have to do?

Campbell:

Riley? Are you there?

Campbell:

Hello?

Campbell looked at the previous texts, his worry mounting. What was happening over there? He stuffed the phone back into his pocket, in an attempt to push the stress away, before making his way to the tin box that lay still unopened in the grass.

He opened the lid and was met with a very stylish pair of sunglasses. Nice. I jump off a giant rock in the sky, and my reward is a pair of sunglasses. Just my luck. He pulled them out of their box, and cautiously put them on his face, before looking around for a difference.

Nothing.

Suddenly his phone buzzed and he looked to see another text from Riley. He opened it, relieved that she was at least alive enough to respond to his texts. But it wasn't relief for long. Fear spiked in his chest as he read the words that she had texted just moments before.

Riley:

Something's wrong with Xander.

Riley:

Please help

And then Campbell blacked out.

Chapter 5

New York City

8:18 (Eastern Time)

Nicholas

Everything was fine. Until Nicole and Robyn and Campbell got sucked out the doorway. It also didn't help that they had all received the same challenge, to find their friends before it was "too late." Whatever that meant. And it also didn't help that Xander had started acting up. Every few minutes, he would have what seemed like seizures, that usually ended with him on the floor.

Nicholas looked around the room in hopes that, hidden among the furniture and decorations, there might be some sort of clue to help them find the others. But no. As Nicholas paced through the house, three of the girls were sitting in the living room, speaking in hushed tones. Only Jess and Xander stayed in the kitchen, at the island, prepared if Xander was to start shaking.

Again.

And of course he did. Typical Xander. While Jess stayed next to him, making sure he didn't harm himself, the others cast cautious glances at him from across the room. But something was different this time. Xander wasn't acting the same. He was still shaking, but now there was something in his eyes, a film-like substance over the surface of his eyes.

Suddenly, Jess let out a horrific scream, and everyone turned to see that Xander had grabbed a knife off of the kitchen counter and stabbed it directly into her stomach. Leaving the knife where it was, Xander walked, in a half-dead, half-asleep manner, towards the girls sitting in the living area.

Seeing his movements, Riley stood up and backed away, taking her phone with her, and being closely followed by Sadie. But not Gwen. Gwen was frozen in place, her eyes mirroring the fear held in Jess'.

"Gwen move!" Nicholas called out to her his panic rising. But she didn't respond. It was like she was frozen in place, and nothing he said would get through to her. "Gwen!" He yelled again.

Right before Xander would've reached her, Nicholas ran to push him aside. Startled, Gwen ran back with the other girls, no longer frozen in place. Nicholas and Xander fought back and forth for minutes upon minutes, while Jess sat, crying out in pain, in the kitchen. Finally, Nicholas whacked Xander hard enough in the head that he fell unconscious, landing on the hardwood kitchen floor.

Nicholas looked back at his friends in the living room, his hands shaking. "What do I do?" He asked, uncertainty and fear in his voice. As a group they decided to lock Xander in one of Nicole's guest bedrooms, before they hurried to help Jess.

Her breaths were shallow, and blood was seeping through her shirt. Her hands were already covered in blood, and tear drops tracked their way down her cheeks, her eyes red and puffy. Sadie gathered the supplies previously used on her own injuries, before setting them down on the counter.

"Sadie, how can we help Jess?" Gwen asked gently, but Nicholas could hear the uncertainty in her voice. However, Sadie didn't respond. "Sadie." Gwen spoke up again, her voice rising. Suddenly, Sadie collapsed on the floor, her eyes wide with tears.

"It's all my fault," she sobbed, her words choppy, and interrupted by tears. "I can't save anyone, and we're all in danger, and I'm useless to this group. And-and I'm not doing anything right, and if I just hadn't come here we wouldn't be in this mess, and-" Nicholas cut her off, worry and a bit of impatience in his tone.

"Sadie, it's okay. It's not your fault. How can we help Jess?" He asked. But she just shook her head and sobbed, his words bouncing right off.

"It's hopeless." She cried, "and it's all my fault."

Chapter 6

Unknown Location

Unknown Time

Nicole

There were only three things in life that truly scared Nicole: mold, spiders, and needles. Gosh she hated needles. And at that current moment she was surrounded by them.

The darkness had been suffocating, emptiness as far as the eye could see. Nicole knew that this was just a challenge, just a game, but she couldn't help but panic. It felt so real. But suddenly, it wasn't just dark. Small pinpricks of light were slowly approaching her at an uncomfortable speed. What were those? She squinted and was alarmed to see a flash of silver metal, the length of her pinky finger.

Her eyes widened in fear as she took a step backwards, but the needles were coming from all around her.

Her heart started pounding, so hard Nicole thought it could be heard for miles. "Ah!" She felt a stinging pain at her ankles and looked down to see a needle stuck in her skin. The pain started to spread, up her ankles and to the tops of her legs. Nicole could hardly breathe, her entire body shaking, not just from fear now, but from pain. She took in a shallow breath, and looked around her. The needles weren't slowing down, and she could see the sharpened points about to bury themselves in her shaking hands. After a worried glance at her surroundings, Nicole closed her eyes and took a deep breath. But the pain in her hands didn't come. She opened her eyes carefully, and was surprised to see needles, centimeters from her face, hanging frozen in the air.

What? What had made them stop? With a crash, all of the needles hanging in the air dropped to her feet and disappeared. The darkness evaporated and she stood in a big grassy field.

"Campbell?" He was laying on the ground, wearing a pair of sunglasses, and looked like he had just woken up. His eyes widened and he looked behind Nicole and smiled. Oakley was there, sitting and wagging her tail, her big, pink tongue hanging out of her mouth. Nicole petted her head gently, before turning back to Campbell. His eyes were on her ankles, and he looked confused. She looked down and saw that needles still covered her legs.

"Why do you look like a pufferfish?" He asked. Nicole laughed and pulled one of the needles out, wincing.

"I might have a deathly fear of needles." She said, before gesturing to his sunglasses. "Nice shades." Campbell reached up as if he had forgotten they were there, before taking them off, and inspecting them.

"I guess. They were here when I got here. Did you just get here? I blacked out so I don't really remember much." He said casually.

"Yeah I did, what fear did you have to face?" She asked, curiosity bubbling up inside her. Campbell shuddered and shook his head, as if it was painful to remember.

"Heights"

Nicole nodded. She remembered last year, when Campbell had jumped off the cliff, and hit his head on the rock. A sudden buzzing alerted her to the phone on the ground next to Campbell. "Texting someone?" She asked.

Campbell nodded, worry returning to his face "Riley. Something's wrong at the house." He grabbed the phone and looked at the message. "Xander's under control now, but Jess isn't doing well. At all. Where are you guys?" Campbell read the message, his eyebrows raised.

Where was Robyn? Why hadn't he joined them already? Nicole's worry for her friend instantly spiked. If Jess wasn't in good shape, how were the others? A sudden gust of wind knocked Nicole onto her back, landing in the soft grass. Two silhouettes were making their way towards her, their figures outlined against the endless blue sky. And one was a dog.

"Robyn?" Nicole pushed herself to her feet, and walked towards Robyn and his puppy. Robyn looked up at her, and only then was she able to see the red lining on his neck.

Chapter 7

New York City

8:21 (Eastern Time)

Gwen

Gwen couldn't believe her eyes. Everything was falling apart and she had zero control over it. Heck, she might just pull a Sadie and fall on the floor in uncontrollable sobbing. But no. She couldn't do that. She wouldn't do that. So instead, Gwen did the reasonable thing. While Riley and Nicholas tended to Jess, she would help Sadie. That wouldn't be hard, right? Right? Her thoughts and decisions were abruptly interrupted by a new round of sobs from Sadie. Oh goodness.

Gwen knelt down next to her, and put a gentle hand on her shaking shoulder. "Sadie. Sadie, look at me." Sadie did as she asked, and tilted her head up towards Gwen's. Her wide blue eyes were puffy and red, and tears streaked their way down her face. "Oh, Sadie. I promise it's not your fault." Gwen wrapped Sadie into a hug, as her tears slowly subsided.

"Gwen?" Sadie's scratchy voice was barely heard over the commotion in the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"My phone just buzzed." This made Gwen's heart race. Another challenge. No. No, Sadie had been through too much already. As Sadie pulled away from the hug to grab her phone from the couch, she was suddenly overcome with fear. Fear of what would happen to everyone. To her best friends. To Nicholas. "Um, Gwen?" Sadie's face was scrunched up in confusion, as she reached her hand into her pocket, the one that no longer held her phone. Her hand shifted and as she pulled it out, a small, black, earbud was clutched between her fingers. "I think I'm supposed to give this to you."

"Oh. Okay?" Gwen reached for the earpiece and put it quickly into her ear.

"Anything?" Sadie asked, curious.

"Mmm. Nope." Gwen looked around the room, before standing up and pulling Sadie to her feet. Nothing was playing. No noises filled her ears. "Oh! Hey Sadie, can you help Jess out? She's... um... well she's kinda-" Sadie's eyes widened and she rushed over

to Jess, looking flustered.

"Oh my gosh, yes of course!" Sadie worked gently on Jess as minutes and minutes passed, when finally she woke up. "Jess! Oh my gosh are you okay?" Jess slowly blinked, taking in her surroundings, before touching a hand to her stomach. She pulled her hand away, and saw the leftover blood still on her fingers.

"Guys?" She looked scared. "What's going on? What happened to me? And where's Xander?" Everyone looked around at each other, not wanting to say anything. No one wanted Jess to hurt herself, she was already in enough pain. It was finally Nicholas who spoke up.

"Xander's fine, and you will be too once you rest." However, when Nicholas told Jess that Xander was fine, a painful ringing sounded in Gwen's ears, and she grabbed at her ear, startled. Nicholas looked over at her, "Gwen, what is it?" But she just shook her head. The earpiece left her ears ringing, and she could barely hear anyone over the rush in her head. A sudden banging disrupted their worries. Nicholas looked at Gwen, and their eyes connected. "It's Xander."

Chapter 8

New York City

8:25 (Eastern Time)

Sadie

Those two words threw Sadie into yet another panic attack. It wasn't like she'd already had five that evening. They rushed to the hallway where Xander was being held, and put their ears to the door. However, Sadie put as much space between her and the door as she could, instead backing up against the wall parallel to the door. The force of Xander's fist ramming against the wood made the door shake, and made Sadie jump every single time.

"Guys let me out! Please! What's going on?" Xander's voice echoed in the hallway. Nicholas looked at everyone.

"He's talking. That's a plus. What do you think we should do?" He asked the group, ignoring the repetitive sounds behind him. We should let him out. He doesn't deserve to be trapped in there, but how do we know it's safe? Looking at the faces of the others, Sadie was sure they felt the same way, but it was Riley who made the decision.

"I think he's fine now. I don't know about you guys, but if this game is anything like last time, we're gonna need all the help we can get. Also, Jess might feel better, knowing that he's not actually dead." She said resolutely.

"Well he did almost kill her," Sadie said quietly.

"Okay, well that's not the point. I don't think he knows that." Riley turned towards the door before turning the lock, and opening it cautiously. "Xander?" They walked into the room, wary of the danger of "before Xander." But they had nothing to fear.

"Sadie?" He asked quietly. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall and his head in his hands. "What did I do to Jess?"

Sadie panicked. Why did she have to be the one to tell him? And why did he listen to her through the door? Instead of directly telling him, Sadie simply said, "It's better if you see her for yourself."

They walked with Xander downstairs, where Jess lay on the couch, a bloodied bandage wrapped around her torso. Xander's eyes widened, and he cursed. "Jess. I-" He sat down next to her, but only after seeing the knife that lay on the floor. "I did that to her, didn't I?" Sadie nodded, before rushing to the kitchen to grab fresh bandages. She reapplied them to Jess' wound carefully, but not carefully enough. Jess winced and sat up slowly, careful not to damage herself further. But she looked relieved when she saw Xander.

"Xander, what happened?" She asked, confusion mounting in her voice as she saw his concerned face. But he wouldn't respond. Sadie wondered how he felt. Was it guilt? Worry? Sadie felt sorry for both of them. But Riley put a comforting hand on Jess' shoulder instead.

"That doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that you're both okay, got it?" Despite her words, her eyes suddenly flashed with fear as she suddenly reached for her phone pocket. "It's a new challenge."

Chapter 9

New York City

8:29 (Eastern Time)

Riley

Riley Jenkins' Challenge #2

Answer the door

The second Riley read the message, the doorbell rang. Show offs. Riley ran to the door and pulled it open to see thank goodness Campbell, Robyn, Nicole, and the dogs. They all looked horrible. Well all of them except the dogs and Campbell. So pretty much just Nicole and Robyn looked beat up.

"Riley! Thank goodness! I thought this was the right house." Campbell hugged her, as Riley inspected the new pair of sunglasses on his face.

"Campbell, it's dark outside."

"Yes, and?"

"You're wearing sunglasses."

"Oh right that." Campbell seemed to have forgotten that he was wearing sunglasses. He pulled them off and held them up to the light before returning them to his head. "Yeah, they're actually night vision glasses. Nifty, right?" Riley just stared at him.

"Night vision?"

"Yup?"

"Just casually?"

"That's what I just said, yes."

"Gotcha." Riley suddenly realized that she hadn't let Robyn or Nicole inside yet. "Oh-Oh my gosh, sorry guys I didn't reali-Robyn. Are you-" Nicole quickly interrupted her as they stepped inside.

"Let's not talk about that right now. Are y'all okay?" She asked as their dogs ran around the living room, jumping into people's laps. Riley gestured to Jess on the couch, and Nicole's eyes widened. "Ah gotcha." Riley was concerned. And concerned would be an understatement. Nicole's arms and legs were covered in tiny spots and cuts. She limped over to a chair and sat down next to her dog. Robyn however, was a different matter. His eyes were dark and scared, he was completely quiet, and gone was his usual friendly personality. Faint red marks lined his neck, which he rubbed every few seconds, as if checking to see that it was still there.

"Nicole, can you come here?" Riley asked, her concern mounting. Nicole willingly stood up and walked towards Riley slowly, her obvious limp slowing the process. When Nicole finally reached her, Riley voiced her own concerns. "What's going on with Robyn? What happened to him?" Nicole looked down at her shoes, before Riley could see the worry mirrored in Nicole's eyes.

"I don't know." She said quietly.

"What? What do you mean you don't know?"

"What I mean is that he won't tell me." She said frustrated, "I asked him, but he seems to have some sort of PTSD about it, and hasn't spoken to me yet."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry for me, I'm the one that's still talking to people."

"Right." They walked back towards the group in silence, before joining the conversation, in which Riley learned the details of her brother's leap of faith, resembling the one that he had taken last year. When the doorbell rang again, Riley was the one to get it. Obviously. That was practically her job by now. Instead of people, this time there was yet another box. Woohoo. As she set it down on the coffee table, Sadie pulled off the lid, and saw the contents.

"Oh?" She picked up a small charm bracelet in the box that held five charms on it. And it had a tag with Jess' name engraved on it. "Well I guess this is for you." She handed it to Jess who carefully put it on, after giving it an inspection. The items were handed out, one by one. A pen for Riley. Of course she got the boring one. A watch for Nicholas. A pair of contacts for Xander. But there was no gift for Nicole, or Robyn, or Sadie.

She assumed that Campbell's gift was his glasses, and Gwen's was the earbud, but still, a piece of paper lay blank at the bottom of the box. Riley pulled the paper out and turned it over. Only four words were written there in the dreaded handwriting that she was so tired of seeing. It read: Riley. Use the pen. Use the pen? What did that mean? She looked at the sleek black pen in her hand and uncapped it. Instead of the usual inky point, a small flashlight head was placed inside of the pen. She clicked it, and the light turned on, casting a bluish-purple glow onto the paper. She could see the outline of words. A black light pen. She shone it closer to the paper, and was a little surprised to see a list. It showed each item's capabilities.

"So um, Campbell, you already know what your glasses do. Gwen, your earpiece is a lie detector, Nicolas, your watch is a decoder, and Xander, those contacts have x-ray vision." She looked up to meet the wide eyes of everyone in the room. "So, yeah."

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, but before Riley could get up to answer it, Jess' brother Griffon rushed in. He was already wearing the black suit that matched theirs' and he looked frantic.

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late."

Chapter 10

New York City

Who Knows At This Point (Eastern Time)

Jess

No. Absolutely not. NO. The game was already bad enough but Griffon? He deserved better than to be there.

"Griffon, what the actual heck?" She yelled. He looked at her confused, his eyes squinting in the light. "You shouldn't be here, it's already bad enough!" Griffon looked hurt by her words and started to inch away from her, guilt apparent in his face.

"I-I thought that I could help, I- there's something I need to tell you all." He explained.

"No, Griffon, no. The only thing you need to do is go home where it's actually safe, and you won't risk your life like the rest of us. You've already been involved in this for three years, you don't need to add on to your record." She said stubbornly.

"But Jess-"

"No."

"But Riley gets to be here!"

"I said no."

"I'm an adult!"

"And I'm your older sister."

"But-"

"Griffon. No." She said with final clarity. Suddenly, Xander stood up from his spot in the living room and moved over to where Jess sat, with her arms crossed over her chest, flinching every time they touched her stomach too roughly.

"Jess. Listen to me. I know, I know that you're in pain right now, and that you're angry at Griffon, at me, at all of us right now. But maybe we should let Griffon stay and listen to him. Maybe he will make you feel better." He said with gentleness. Robyn spoke up for the first time since he had gotten back from the challenge.

"I agree with Xander. We need all the help we can get." Jess shook her head in release and closed her eyes.

"Fine. But I swear. If something happens to you, or you get put in danger in any way, I am sending you straight back to Los Angeles. Okay?" She asked.

"Yes, yes, fine. I understand. I just need to tell you all something first though."

Jess reopened her eyes with irritation. "What, did you have to kill someone or something? Or, oh I don't know, go through immense pain and almost die from blood loss?" Griffon looked at her, his eyes the side of saucers and filled with concern. "Guess I'll take that as a no."

"Jess what happened? Are you okay? What did they do?" Griffon's eyes glared around the room at each and every person in it with suspicion.

"It was me." Xander put his hand over Jess' and looked directly at Griffon. "A few of us had to face our worst fear, I don't really know what mine was, but I ended up stabbing a kitchen knife into your sister's stomach." Jess and Griffon stared at him with horrified eyes, Griffon's brimming with the slightest hint of hate. "Do I feel extremely guilty about it? Yes. Do I wish there was

something I could do to make the game stop so that we didn't have to go through this and so that Jess didn't have a knife wound on her stomach. Definitely. Is there anything I alone can do about it? Probably not."

Xander leaned back against the armrest of the couch, his eyes closed and his hand still on top of Jess'. Oh my gosh. So that's what had happened. XANDER HAD STABBED A FREAKING KNIFE INTO HER! Wow. And now her brother was here to take out all of his anger on him. And for the sake of Xander, she hoped that Griffon restrained himself.

After Xander's confession, and everyone grew comfortable again, they all returned to the living room in lively conversation.

"Um, Griffon?" Riley asked from her spot next to him on the couch opposite Jess and Xander's.

"Yeah?" He looked at her, his eyes mirroring the laughter that filled the room.

"Weren't you gonna tell us something? The thing you needed to tell us?" At this, everyone leaned in, suspense filling the air.

"Oh right, that." Griffon cleared his throat, sat up straight, and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "So, I'm sure you all have been receiving challenges through your phones right?" Everyone nodded, and he continued. "So, that's not the only way I've been connected to the game. Me and I think two other people, have been forced to make choices, about what is going on." One by one, everyone's eyes widened, and then Nicole burst into tears.