

Uncharted Territory
Written By: Clara Hixson
-a board game is only a board game, when there's space to play-

Prologue
New York City
7:55 PM (Eastern Time)
Sadie

Sadie's house was generally quiet that evening, as she grabbed her car keys off the countertop to head over to Nicole's. Walking towards the door, the only sound she heard was the clip, clip, clip of her dachshund Flash's paws on the tile floor behind her. She stepped out of her house, making sure to lock the door behind her, and was met with the chilling autumn wind. She shivered and wrapped her sweater tighter around her body. Desperate to escape the wind, she quickly walked to her car and got inside. Ouch! Sadie's keys had dug into her hand, and she had somehow cut herself. That's odd, my keys aren't even that sharp. She peered at the tiny beadlets of blood appearing on her palm with curiosity, before carefully starting her car, and putting Nicole's address into her phone's map. But...when she opened her phone, the basic lock screen image of Flash in her backyard, wasn't what appeared. The screen instead glowed an eerie shade of blue, the same blue as the hologram that her friend's sister Riley used to be. In a swooping, silvery, cursive font, a challenge was written word by word, slowly across the phone.

Sarah Davis' Challenge #1
-make it to Nicole Calrissian's house-
P.S. -whatever it takes-

Okay! That's not alarming at all. The most concerning part wasn't the fact that it was telling her to go where she was already going, but that she recognized the perfect handwriting. She had seen it a year ago in her car, on the way home from work. It couldn't be. Oh, but it could. She started driving, panic rising in her chest, her heart beating what felt like a billion miles per minute. Calm down Sadie, it's going to be alright. Just calm down. Sadie told herself over and over again, trying to take deep breaths. But the sharp pain she had felt in her palm had spread, and the game wasn't supposed to start again until next year. Her legs and arms were stinging with discomfort. Two minutes to Nicole's house, she could make it two more minutes. Right? Sadie wasn't so sure anymore, and the burning, stinging sensation had risen to her head. Her ears were ringing, her head and heart pounding in distress. Outside of the car, it was like a tropical storm had started. Things were being thrown at her car, left and right, and she was having to swerve to avoid hitting the massive trees falling in her path. What the heck? Sadie hadn't remembered leaving the window rolled down, but all of a sudden, a large rock flew into the window and hit her directly in the middle of the forehead. Her head pounded with dizziness as what looked like blood started to fall into her eyes.

"AH!" Sadie's car came to a sudden crunch against a tree trunk, throwing her through the front windshield. She opened her eyes to see Nicole's house, warmly lit from the inside, against the darkness of the night. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. Everything hurt. The storm was gone, and her car sat perfectly in the driveway, but Sadie was far from fine. Long scratches ran down her arms and legs, and she felt her forehead to see that yes, there too was a gash. She pushed herself to her feet, pausing a moment for her dizziness to clear. It didn't. As long as I get inside, I'll be able to find some medical supplies and bandage my wounds. Sadie pulled her feet up the sidewalk, up the walkway, and up the steps to her front door, barely able to hit the doorbell. She stopped to catch her breath, the door swaying in front of her. This was not good. She was not okay. What was happening? A blurry figure stood in front of her, distorted words coming from his mouth. Xander? She could barely make out the silhouettes of her friends behind him before she fell, darkness and silence overtaking her. But she knew one thing for sure. None of them were safe.

Chapter 1
New York City
8:05 (Eastern Time)
Xander

Panicking, Xander felt for Sadie's heartbeat. It was faint, and after falling over the threshold, fainting, waking up just to tell them that their ultimate doom was imminent, and fainting again, she wasn't looking too good. Xander didn't want the game to start again, of course he didn't, but he had a nagging feeling that he didn't really have a choice at this point. Xander called to those in the kitchen for a glass of water and bandages for Sadie, and a cup of coffee for himself. His mind was racing, thoughts going in a billion places, and his friend was on the couch in pieces. Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. But she definitely was not okay. Jess pressed the bandages into his hand, and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. He took a deep breath and began wrapping the wounds that covered Sadie's legs and arms. The head wound would need more direct care. Ah! Something wet and cold suddenly bumped into the back of his knee, startling him. He turned around quickly to see two dogs, one a full grown golden retriever, the other a small Australian shepherd pup.

"Robyn, can you come get your dog? He's distracting me! Same goes for you Nicole!" Xander called out to his friends, desperate to get back to work. Nicole rushed towards him, followed by a very apologetic Robyn.

"Sorry about that!" Robyn explained, "Atlas has separation anxiety. I couldn't just leave him at home!" He picked up the Australian shepherd and carried him over to the kitchen area, where Riley immediately took the puppy out of his arms, and began playing with him.

Nicole nodded in agreement. "Sorry on Oakley's behalf too. I thought Atlas needed a buddy." She hurried to the kitchen with the others, as Xander returned to helping Sadie. He could hear her breathing steadily now, and decided that it would be better to let her rest. He bandaged up her forehead and grabbed his coffee mug, walking to join the others. It was only seconds after he stood up that the doorbell rang yet again, and Campbell let out an annoyed sigh.

"What is it going to be this time? A dead body?" He asked, obviously frustrated at how the events of the evening had gone. Riley was not so amused at this comment; however, and fixed him with a death glare. It didn't last long though, because her attention was drawn to the small puppy jumping at her ankles. "Well is someone going to answer it or-" Campbell was cut off, and Jess spoke in his place.

"I will."

Chapter 2

New York City

8:08 (Eastern Time)

Jess

Jess was tired. Tired of the games, tired of whatever cruel intentions the world had plotted against her and her friends. She just wanted to enjoy spending time with them, time with Xander. If there was danger, might as well look it right in the eyes, and give it a good hard slap against the face. That would do it. She walked to the door and opened it, the cold air sending a chill through her bones. But no one was at the door. Instead, a medium-sized, metal, seemingly innocent box sat on the welcome mat. Absolutely not. It had been only a few months since Jess had moved out of the countess' house and started her own successful business in Chicago, but it had been enough months to know that it's probably not the best idea to pick up unaddressed packages off the front porch in the middle of New York City. At night. So, as any other completely rational person would do, Jess kicked it hard, sending it flying into the street, and watched it get crushed by a passing taxi cab. That would do it. She headed back inside and shook her head.

"What was out there?" Nicole asked, from her position on the floor. Her golden's head was in her lap, and so she sat there stroking the dog's velvety ears. How Jess wished she had a dog. Maybe when she got back to Chicago she would get one. But that wasn't what was important right now.

"Nothing." Jess said dismissively, but she knew the others could hear the lack of truth in what she had said.

"Jess?" Xander asked, a smirk on his face. "What's on Nicole's porch?" Jess' eyebrows raised at his question, but answered, a smile spreading across her face.

"Nothing! At least not anymore." At this Xander stood from his seat at the counter, and quickly walked to the door, opening it and then closing it behind him. It was only seconds later that he returned, now a very squished tin box, in his hand. He laughed, and placed it on the counter.

"Want to explain yourself?" He said, as Jess' friends gathered round the small box.

"Well, Sadie said the game was starting again, and I wasn't a big supporter of that, so I might have accidentally kicked it into the middle of the street where it was promptly run over by a taxi cab. Just that." She explained, completely calm and collected.

"Guys?" A very raspy, small voice spoke from the couch. Sadie. They rushed over to the couch leaving only Riley and Robyn standing at the counter. Sadie was awake. Thank freaking goodness. She didn't look her best, but at least she was alive. Sadie looked around the room, squinting, as if unsure where she was. "Um, where am I?" She asked. Nicole stepped forward, putting a gentle hand on Sadie's shoulder.

"You're at my house. Don't worry, you're gonna be okay. Can you tell us what happened?" She asked, talking to Sadie like she was a small, fragile thing, capable of breaking at any point. Sadie nodded, but fear grew in her eyes.

"Hey, hey, hey. It's okay." Gwen reassured her, "If it's too much right now, you don't have to say. Just get some sleep." But Sadie didn't agree. She shook her head and pulled her phone out of her pocket. Despite what she had been through- whatever it was- the phone (and screen protector) were in mint condition. She turned it on, and on the screen in silver script was a challenge with a green check mark beneath it, something about getting to Nicole's house. Nicole's eyes widened.

"Oh shoot. Sadie, it's all my fault. It's my fault you got hurt. If you hadn't come here, you wouldn't be like this. Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry." Nicole's voice cracked, and she fell to the floor, her arms wrapped in a hug around Sadie.

"It's okay." Sadie's scratchy voice offering comfort, "I don't think it was your fault."

"Oh no. No. No. NO!" Robyn's voice echoed loudly in the kitchen, his hands placed firmly on either side of the tin container. "Sadie was right." Everyone ran to the counter to see nine sets of matching black shirts and pants, in varying sizes. A small note stuck to the bottom of the container was all that remained. It's sloping, silvery scrawl simply read:

Let the games... begin
And with that, everyone's phones simultaneously buzzed.

Chapter 3
New York City
8:12 (Eastern Time)
Robyn

No. Robyn didn't want to look at his phone. He didn't want to pick it up off the counter. Because this wasn't supposed to happen. But he did. He picked up the phone, turning it over to see a blue screen, interrupted by silver writing that matched the note in the box. Step 1: Put on the fitting attire Well that wouldn't be hard to do. Each set of clothing was labeled with their names. He picked up the one assigned to him and looked to Nicole.

"Is there somewhere we can- put on our 'fitting attire'?" Robyn asked her, sarcasm ringing clear in his voice. "Yeah, if you go up the stairs and down the hallway, you're gonna take a right, and then a left, and then you're gonna go through the curtain, take another right and then- you know what, I'll just show you." She led them up the stairs, and into separate rooms to change into their outfits. But clothing wasn't the only thing that they received. On the back of their name cards, a small, braided bracelet was tied with a small heart charm. Great. The heart rate monitor was back at it again. It brought back less than pleasant memories for Robyn. Memories of being unable to breathe, choking on a mysterious poison of some sort, and his heart rate getting "higher than it was supposed to." Well no duh. He was choking. He headed out of the room and back downstairs where he met the others, all similarly perplexed by the bracelets. The phones buzzed again. Step 2: Walk outside

"Absolutely not." Nicholas spoke up, "This is an exact copy of last time, and I'm pretty sure none of us want that to happen again. Well, I mean, we were supposed to do it again next year, but not this soon." Everyone was in agreement. No one knew what was going on or how.

"Wait, hold up." Riley still looked completely lost, and unlike the others it wasn't because of the bracelet on her wrist. "If Griffon and I are no longer controlling the game, who is? And how do they know where we are?" She was right. How did they know where they were? They were lost. Suddenly, Atlas ran to the door and started scratching at it.

"Atlas! Come here buddy!" Robyn called after his dog. But his dog didn't respond, and continued scratching the door. Oakley soon joined him, and their scratches started becoming visible in the paint on the door.

"Oakley! Oakley stop!" Nicole ran to her dog, pulling her from the door. Robyn did the same, picking Atlas off the floor to yet again return to the kitchen. Campbell, calm and collected, walked to the door and pulled it open. But was surprised to find that the air outside was no longer the same autumn air that it had been earlier in the evening. It now acted as a vacuum pulling himself, Robyn, Nicole, and the two dogs with it.

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"Campbell? Robyn? Nicole?" Riley called, but none of them answered. The group rushed to the door to find it swinging open with nothing outside but the sound of the wind in the trees. "Guys?!" It was urgent now. All of a sudden their phones buzzed with a new challenge. Riley looked down at her phone, the screen blue with silver font.

Riley Jenkins' Challenge #1
-find your brother and friends-
P.S. -before it's too late-

