

OASIS

KATYA DE BECERRA

{Imprint}

MAKE YOUR MARK

New York



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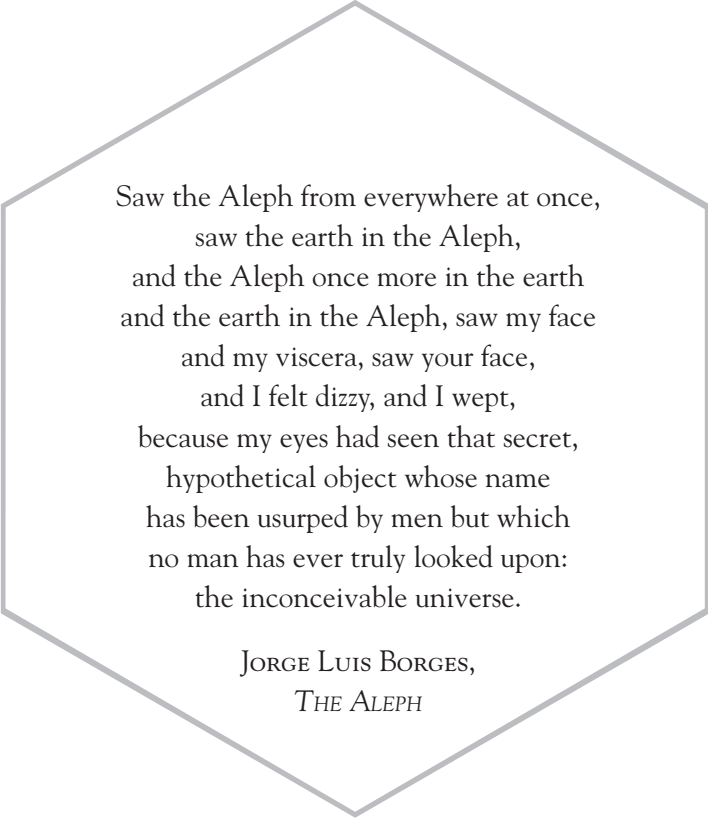
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The insatiable oasis will hunt down the thieves of this book and tear them apart,
limb by limb, devouring their screaming souls and spitting out bones.

*I dedicate this book to my grandparents:
a Siberian labor camp survivor,
a decorated air force hero,
a stylish meteorologist, and
a hard-bitten chef.*



Saw the Aleph from everywhere at once,
saw the earth in the Aleph,
and the Aleph once more in the earth
and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face
and my viscera, saw your face,
and I felt dizzy, and I wept,
because my eyes had seen that secret,
hypothetical object whose name
has been usurped by men but which
no man has ever truly looked upon:
the inconceivable universe.

JORGE LUIS BORGES,
THE ALEPH

FERNWEH
(IS GERMAN FOR
“WANDERLUST”)

I was going to rediscover myself last summer. Possibly fall in love for real. Maybe have my heart broken. I was going to learn Arabic and reconnect with my Middle Eastern roots. And most of all, I was going to spend some quality time with Dad. I imagined the two of us out in an archaeological field, bonding over trowels, mattocks, and leaky water basins while labeling and filing precious ceramic fragments his squad of research students dug up from the ground. And to make this vision even more perfect, I was going to have my best friends, all four of them, along for the ride. With school now behind us and university not far ahead, this trip was our last chance to do something fun together before our paths diverged and we got too busy to hang out.

I was so proud to have made it possible for my friends to join me on this trip. Though rummaging in the dust while being assaulted by the desert sun wasn't exactly their idea of fun, the prospect of visiting Dubai had gotten my friends pumped. That's why I chose not to correct them whenever they'd mention Dubai and all the sightseeing it promised; we'd be spending most of our time at Tell Abrar—the site of an ancient settlement east of Dubai city, where my dad, Andreas Scholl, the head of the archaeology program at Dunstan University, was leading an international excavation campaign. Regardless, my excitement was so epic it was almost a living, breathing thing made of nervous insomnia and short on patience. I just knew the summer was going to be remarkable. Or, at the very least, *different*.

It took me weeks to get ready and pack, two days to sort out my vaccinations, and an entire weekend to decide whether to cut my hair super short and dye it green or leave it be. Lori and Minh shared in my fretful enthusiasm, sure, but they didn't seem to suffer from any overwhelming impulses to get rid of their luscious locks or dye their hair some outrageous color. Dad diagnosed my travel fever as an acute case of *fernweh*. It's German for an "ache to visit distant places," an all-consuming craving to travel. And, rest assured, I had gotten *fernweh* bad.

The nonstop flight from Melbourne to Dubai was going to take fifteen hours. The five of us—Lori, Minh, Luke, Rowen, and me—were cramped in economy. We were just settling into our seats when Rowen sprang out and strode to where Lori was already seated, next to a cute stranger wearing a Formula 1 McLaren T-shirt. I poked my head in the aisle and watched Rowen. He leaned in to talk to the McLaren supporter, slipping the dude a fifty. A *fifty*. With quiet dignity, McLaren took the note and left his seat, which was immediately claimed by Rowen. That was quick. When Rowen Syme Jr. wanted something, he went for it. And what he currently wanted was Lori Bradford.

I relayed what I just witnessed to Minh and Luke, both seated in my row.

“How romantic,” Minh said, voice drenched in sarcasm. She used to be tight with Rowen, their epic friendship an important ingredient to our friend group’s overall cohesiveness. But lately something had shifted between them. And now Rowen was openly pursuing Lori while Minh was left rolling her eyes. And given how Minh Quoc was the most sensible person I knew, this new eye-rolling development was rather disconcerting.

“My only wish is that one day someone coughs up fifty bucks for the honor of sitting next to me in smelly coach,” Minh concluded.

To Minh’s right, Luke scoffed and tilted over her lap

to say, “And I’m lucky enough to sit next to the two of you for free.”

Content to have the last word, Luke retreated back into his space and watched baggage handlers throwing bags onto the conveyer that fed into the belly of the plane. Minh asked Luke if he was keen to give up his window seat for either of us; he laughed and said no way. I guess Luke didn’t have a crush he wanted to impress. Or, at least, his crush wasn’t present on this flight.

“You know we’ll just take your seat when you leave for the bathroom, right?” I asked.

Luke wrinkled his freckled nose and ran a hand through his reddish hair, muttering, “I intend to hold it in.”

“Not for fifteen hours, you don’t.” Minh’s laughter was devilish. It was good to see her energy redirected from Rowen.

“We’ll see about that.” Luke withdrew even deeper into his space but not before winking at me suggestively. Even after being friends with Luke for years and surviving high school together, I was still struggling to figure him out. He was a chameleon, adapting to each new situation quickly and effortlessly, the transition near seamless every time. He’d assume a funny-guy persona in one social setting and switch to a brooding, moody cool kid in another. What was really hiding behind his multiple facades? Maybe this summer the real Luke Stokowski was going to show himself at last. And I’m sure I wasn’t the

only one curious about him—the five of us were close and tended to get all up in one another’s business.

I watched Minh as she rubbed the tip of her index finger over her white gold pendant with a turquoise “evil eye” encased in the middle—a protection charm. I’d brought it from Egypt, from when I was on a dig with Dad two years ago. I gave an identical necklace to Lori, but I’ve never seen her wear it. She never admitted it to my face, but I suspected the design itself or perhaps its meaning clashed with her style, and therefore the necklace was now gathering dust in some dark drawer. Well, at least one of my friends appreciated my taste in jewelry. But even if at times I found Lori’s uncompromising nature grating, in my mind it was balanced by Minh’s acceptance of all aspects of me. My friends were very different, but together we worked somehow.

When I was little, I used to spend my summers in the United States, where Dad grew up (I still measure stuff in feet and pounds because of that), but the rest of the year I was Melbourne-bound. After my parents divorced, my dad and I had to move to a new place, meaning I had to change schools in the middle of seventh grade. My new school was private but nothing fancy, not like Scotch College or Grammar—famous bastions of Australian wealth. There were cliques and there were bullies; there were nasty kids and there were nice kids. Melbourne’s increasingly diverse population

was reflected in my classrooms, with third-generation Vietnamese Australians hanging out with some recent arrivals of assorted Eastern European extraction, while a handful of Aboriginal kids (who self-defined as Koori) had to sit through some eyebrow-raising whitewashing of Australia's settler-colonial history. Good thing our teachers were great and open to having challenging discussions in our classrooms.

My mother was born to Jordanian parents after they immigrated to England. My father is a born-and-bred American, though his parents came from Germany to settle in Pennsylvania in the fifties. Mom and Dad met in Australia, where they both were study-abroad students in Sydney. They got married there and eventually settled in Melbourne. Although I could pass in most cases, my assumed whiteness lasted only until someone took a longer look and spotted my "foreign" features—expressive brown eyes, slightly arching eyebrows, darker olive complexion, thick wavy hair, and countless other, subtler notes. My name was also deemed "foreign," but that was a different story.

I counted myself lucky to have settled into my new school fairly quickly, thanks to Lori. Anglo Australian, light-skinned and coming from a moderately wealthy family, Lori was mildly liked, but, because of persisting sexist standards too opinionated to be universally popular. Lori took me under her wing, her friendship saving

me a lot of social anxiety, in exchange for her never having to sit alone at lunch. We were symbiotic and perfectly happy like that. Then one day Minh and Rowen, who were forced to be friends pretty much as babies because their grandmas were neighbors, approached us for a group project. The four of us stayed close after that.

Luke Stokowski, the middle son of third-generation Polish immigrants, was last to join our little band of misfits. I suspected that Luke gravitated toward us because he was subtly rejected from everywhere else. As far as high school cliques went, we were his last resort. Still, the five of us stuck together and managed not to date or alienate one another all throughout high school—for the most part. And now we were set to have our first-ever summer break overseas as a group. While the rest of my friends didn't exactly share my tender love for archaeology, I was excited to have them by my side all the same.

Lori's lilting laugh came from down the aisle, the sound so perfect it had to be fake. Whatever Rowen was whispering into her diamond-stud-bejeweled ears couldn't be *that* funny. Rowen's idea of humor was retelling entire *Seinfeld* episodes but totally botching the punch lines. Lori's laughter could mean only one thing: She was really into him. I exchanged another look with Minh. I could tell from her sour expression that this new Rowen-Lori development was bothering her. I didn't

think hers was a love-fueled angst; in the years that I'd known her, not once had Minh mentioned any romantic aspirations involving Rowen. Perhaps she just missed having him to herself. After all, they used to do everything together—random school clubs and homework Monday to Friday, and then surfing and lazing around the beach most weekends.

I didn't want to ask Minh about it. I told myself I didn't want to pry, but deep down, I also didn't want some kind of personal drama of hers to overshadow our summer. Our circle of friendship meant we didn't gossip about one another. Those outside our group, however, were fair game.

Case in point, Minh murmured to me over the hum of the jet engines, "Is Mr. Tall-and-Brooding going to meet us at the airport?"

She was referring to Tommy Ortiz, my dad's research assistant. I didn't really feel like discussing Tommy with Minh. Tommy was my long-term unrequited crush—a kind of crush that just wasn't going away. I had to hide my annoyance whenever Minh flirted with him—said flirting intensifying when Rowen was around. But Minh was waiting for me to reply.

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Dad can't come to pick us up himself. There's a lot going on with the site. He's still not done setting up the camp. Plus he's got volunteers to train."

“So he’s sending his brightest pupil,” Minh said sweetly, training her dark hazel eyes on me.

I nodded, hoping she’d just drop the topic. But she had other plans.

“So did you find out if Tommy has a girlfriend? Or something?”

I would’ve liked to know, but then again, I’d rather strip naked and run across the street during rush hour than get caught asking around about Tommy’s availability. I kept reminding myself what Mom once told me during one of our rare deep-and-meaningful chats: No guy is worth the trouble. Especially so, I thought, if the guy in question paid me little to no attention.

To Minh I said, “I’m sure he’s got a girlfriend . . . or whatever. I mean, I *think* he does. I don’t know for sure, but come on.”

Tommy was three years older than us, of Colombian Australian heritage, and a rising star of Dunstan’s archaeology program. For the past year, he’d been laboring away on his honors thesis in preparation for the big leagues—PhD research. He was also as gorgeous as they came. Aside from that, I knew little about him.

“Right.” Minh deflated. Her long, slim fingers, nails cut short, started bothering a loose lock of her inky-black hair, curling around and releasing it. She leaned back in her chair and made a point of playing with her entertainment screen, flicking through movie options.

The plane was moving, engines roaring, as the crew started to prep for takeoff. Just when I thought we were done talking about Tommy Ortiz, Luke said, “I really don’t get what you see in him.”

I didn’t even know he’d been listening to the conversation.

“The dude is so intense he’ll totally crack one day. Remember my prophetic words.”

“Shut up, Luke,” I replied with a grin.

Minh arched an eyebrow and put on her headphones.

But Luke was far from done. He leaned over Minh, ignoring her protests and exaggerated sighs, and said, “If Ortiz is so perfect, why is he deliberately endangering your dad’s research by spreading ridiculous rumors?”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Luke got his smartphone out. “Here . . .”

My curiosity triggered, I focused on Luke’s phone, held out for me and hovering above Minh’s knees. Making an even bigger point of ignoring us, Minh focused on her entertainment screen as much as was possible with Luke and me invading her space.

The thing Luke wanted me to see was a short piece in *Dig It*, a quirky archaeology blog run by a group of Dunstan graduate students. I was usually up-to-date on their posts, and not just because Tommy frequently wrote for them, but in the weeks leading up to this trip I simply

had no time to do anything other than pack, read up on Dubai's archaeological history, and agonize over my hair color choices.

I took Luke's phone and skimmed through the post. It mentioned the site of Tell Abrar and provided a brief history of Dad's latest excavation efforts before briefly saying how the site had a bad rep with the locals because some workers went missing from an active dig back in the nineties, leading to the site's temporary closure. There was also some vague reference to the area nearby being a meteor crash site in the early twentieth century. All of it seemed to be based on verbal accounts rather than any physical evidence of an impact site. The post in question was indeed authored by Tommy. Which was odd, since Tommy didn't strike me as a conspiracy buff, but who really knew what lurked beneath his bright-eyed surface? It was the stream of comments below the piece that really made me frown. While most were written by rational people laughing off the "spooky stuff," there were a few actually accusing Dad of bothering "restless spirits" and the like. There was nothing about any "spirits" in Tommy's piece, at least.

I had to give the phone back to Luke when a flight attendant sternly asked me to switch off my device.

"It's just an article," I told Luke after his phone was back in his pocket. "Bringing up the site's history like that might be a smart move, actually. It could attract

some unorthodox sponsors. Dad can never have too many.”

“Sure,” Luke said on a long exhale.

Maybe he *was* onto something. Putting whatever grudge Luke had against Tommy aside, I had to admit reading the article left me fidgety. Not a good state to be in right before embarking on a long-haul flight.

When the jet took off and started gaining altitude, I managed to shed my unease over Tommy’s blog post. It was a speculation, what he wrote. Just good-old Tommy trying to generate some external interest for Dad’s dig site. For all I knew, my father was behind the feature, masterfully directing his research assistant’s hand.

For a while, I managed not to think about Tommy and the local lore surrounding Tell Abrar. I disappeared into a world of free movies and never-ending snacks. I was on my second feature film when the first proper meal was served. I took off my headphones so I could toast alongside Minh with a plastic cup filled halfway with soda. I said Lori’s name loudly, the sound carrying over the engines’ buzz, and she stood up in her seat two rows ahead to wave at me. I raised up my drink to salute her. Minh joined me, and the three of us yelled “Cheers” almost at the same time. Luke was asleep by then, and I suspected Rowen was drifting off too.

After the meal, I fell into that special type of drowsiness that comes with long flights, when you manage to

sleep while still acutely aware of your body and its sorry state of being cramped into an uncomfortable seat. But slowly, my lungs adjusted to the cabin's brand of cold air-conditioned air, and I truly slept. My dreams of the sunburned desert and invisible, human-devouring monsters roaming the sands were shaped by the monotonous growl of the engines working hard to keep this miracle of engineering afloat in the air.

TELL ABRAR

Today's Melbourne is a city of immigrants. Given my parents' very different heritages, I could even be Melbourne's poster girl. I have freckles but they barely stand out against my darker complexion. Seemingly the only German thing about me is my last name. Also my punctuality, Dad says, but it's meant to be a joke because I'm never on time. What else . . . I have Mom's chestnut hair and brown eyes. I love my nose, which is slightly crooked. Minh says it's charming. Lori says it's time for rhinoplasty. I agree with Minh. Lori can be mean sometimes.

About my name: Alif is a version of *aleph*, the first letter of Arabic and Hebrew and other Semitic alphabets.

Aleph stands for *familiar* or *tamed*. The written symbol for *aleph* represents the oneness of god—which makes Alif a rather peculiar name choice for me since both my parents are atheists. I read somewhere that when carved into a golem’s forehead, *aleph* helps spell the word that can bring the being to life. *Aleph* also means an ox. Yes, *an ox*. Minh says it makes perfect sense—I can be stubborn like an ox. Personally, I prefer to believe that my name was inspired by that Borges story about the entire universe being concentrated in one spot, located in some old house’s cellar.

I used to get teased a lot because of my name. Kids can be cruel, you know. I was called “Olive,” “Autumn Leaf,” and even “Palmolive.” In particular, there was one boy in school who made tormenting me a daily sport. Nicky was his name. The whole Nicky-bullies-Alif situation improved after Lori befriended me, but only somewhat. I never knew for sure why Nicky singled me out, but I had my suspicions. Racism can be so subtle, yet so pervasive, and Nicky’s routine of ridicule always made me suspect the worst. With time though, I got so used to it that I almost stopped paying attention. Lori, and then Rowen and Minh, became my shield in a way, allowing me the luxury of forgetting that the outside world, with all its casual cruelty, existed. But then Luke Stokowski joined our little circle. The five of us were in the school cafeteria for lunch one day when Nicky called me out. Without giving it a second thought, Luke punched Nicky

right in the face. Blood streaming from Nicky's nose all over his mouth and neck was the fuel of my nightmares for days to come. Luke's act of sudden violence and his refusal to apologize to Nicky, even under the threat of expulsion, solidified Luke's place in our group.

Though I had nothing on Nicky's grade of nasty, I wasn't the nicest kid in my school either. I never bullied anyone myself, but I also didn't stand up for the truly miserable kids. And yes, there were those who had it way worse than I did. Before I became friends with Lori, my plan for surviving school was to mostly just drift along, to keep my head low. I was also planning on legally changing my name the first chance I got. I thought I'd become Kylie or Britt.

But now I think I'm fine being Alif.

Our plane was readying to land, and all I could think about was how to rid my breath of that particular taste-scent of coffee and soda and long-haul journey that clings to you no matter how many mints you consume.

Minh stirred awake by my side and lifted her head from my shoulder. Her hair was sticking to her face with travel sweat. "There?" Her question made me smile. She was too tired to form coherent sentences.

The seat belt sign switched on before I could get up and fight my way to the bathroom against my fellow passengers. Luke, who was still asleep, remained true to his

word and hadn't left his window seat during the entire flight. There must have been something wrong with him and his bladder.

As the plane descended, turbulence gave it one serious shake. I was never scared of flying, but still my fingers dug into the chair's armrests as everything around me continued to tremble. Luke jolted awake and started to unbuckle his seat belt. When he attempted to climb over Minh on his way to the bathroom, a flight attendant demanded he remain in his seat. The attendant's smile was pleasant, but there was a steely glint of annoyance in his eyes. Luke swore under his breath.

I couldn't help but laugh at him. "Try not to look too nervous at passport control," I suggested. He just glared at me.

The turbulence subsided, and our plane landed without a hitch. Luke took off the moment our group cleared customs. He dashed toward the bathrooms, nearly slipping as he rammed into the door. The rest of us formed a small cluster, keeping our luggage close. I looked around me and savored the air, my lungs quivering with excitement. Even with the airport's air-conditioning system blasting in full force, and despite its being January, one of the coolest months in this part of the world, I could sense the heat outside the airport.

While we waited for our ride, Rowen went for a stroll around the arrivals area. He exchanged some money

and bought enough candy to feed an army. He offered us some of his haul, which was almost completely made up of Al Nassma camel-shaped chocolates, wrapped in white-and-gold foil. Lori immediately stuffed her mouth, competing with Rowen for the highest number of chocolates a human can consume in under a minute.

We stood there, snacking on chocolate through our jet-lagged confusion. Overeager taxi drivers kept approaching our group with offers to take us to our hotel, but we just smiled at them and shook our heads politely. Minh and I perched atop our luggage, sitting side by side. For someone who'd never left Australia and for the most part led a pretty sheltered life, Minh seemed to be doing fine. I watched her while she was eyeing Rowen, who in turn was too deep in conversation with Lori to notice anything.

His reddish hair in wet spikes, Luke returned from the bathroom. Smiling sheepishly, he stood next to me and started saying something, but my attention drifted once I caught a glimpse of Tommy Ortiz in the crowd.

Tommy couldn't see us yet, which allowed me a rare chance to ogle him as he walked tall, comfortable in his body. His strides were confident, and his dark hair gleamed in the too-bright fluorescent light. He was wearing standard dig attire—dark olive khakis, sturdy hiking boots, and a white long-sleeved shirt. When he suddenly met my eyes, I was caught staring. Self-conscious, I focused on my feet.

"Tommy! Over here!" Minh was waving at him,

beckoning him like he hadn't just seen our mismatched huddle. When Tommy reached us, he issued a polite greeting directed at our entire group. That done, he briefly froze as if unsure what to do, then snapped out of it and grabbed a piece of luggage closest to him. It was mine, the label with my name facing up. I wondered if that was a coincidence or whether Tommy decided to carry my stuff on purpose. I picked up my gigantic backpack and trudged along with my friends as we followed Tommy outside.

You don't really know heat until you come to a place like Dubai. The air was so humid it was like being in a sauna with your clothes on. Every inhale burned and tickled my throat. I tried breathing through my mouth to see if that was any better, but it made it worse. The second we stepped outside, Tommy produced a baseball cap from his pocket and put it on. Watching him, I felt irresponsible for packing all my headgear in my checked luggage and not in my carry-on, where it'd be easily accessible. During our short walk to the airport parking lot, the top of my head got so hot I was surely headed for heatstroke. Luke mimicked Tommy and put a cap on, pulling the brim as low as he could to shade his pale, freckled face. Lori unfurled the tasteful silky gauze scarf she had wrapped around her neck and spread it over her head in a casual but stylish way. Only Minh, Rowen, and I remained at the sun's mercy until we reached Tommy's monstrous four-wheel drive.

Tommy and Rowen secured some of our luggage to the top of the car, while the rest of our stuff was pushed into the spacious trunk. At last, I climbed inside the blissfully cool car, grateful for air-conditioning.

“Well, this is Dubai, kids,” Tommy said, eyeing our oddball group in the rearview mirror. “I hope you’re ready for the experience of your lives.”

“Yeah, that didn’t come off cheesy at all.” Minh snorted, and I caught a glimpse of Tommy grinning at her. I promptly looked out the window, focusing on the view instead of wondering whether Minh’s exchange with Tommy counted as mutual flirting.

As we drove farther and farther away from the airport, the city of Dubai rose from the desert. A mirage of modernity, complete with skyscrapers glistening in the sunlight. The excitement that was pummeling blood against my ears dwindled when we didn’t enter the limits of the city proper, instead veering left and setting course for Tell Abrar, where Dad and the endless sea of dust awaited us. That was *the* reason we were here—the dig site. I could always check out Dubai with my friends on one of the weekends.

My eyes were glued to the car window, busy taking in the desert’s Mars-like scenery, alternating with modest houses and gas stations. A deafening roar of engines preceded a small group of motorcyclists speeding past us. The riders were wrapped in leather and the spirit

of adventure, and I recalled a period of my childhood spent obsessing over Lawrence of Arabia. I imagined T. E. Lawrence himself standing on a dune somewhere, lungs filling with the clean hot air of the limitless desert. Or perhaps he was surrounded by the bedouin in the hinterland or riding his motorcycle through the ocean of sand, leaving it forever haunted by his dagger-wielding, white-clad ghost.

I exchanged an excited look with Minh and then with Lori, their eyes equally bright. The three of us had trouble suppressing our burbling anticipation. This was it. We'd made it.

After about an hour on the road, we arrived. Here at Tell Abrar the sand-swept landscape unfolded as far as the eye could see.

Tainting my excitement with unfounded worry, Tommy's post on *Dig It* came back to me all of a sudden. Being here, away from modernity and surrounded by sand on all sides, the unforgiving sun over my head, it was easy to surrender to the idea of meteors crashing into the sands, their fiery spirits lingering to haunt the land to this day. I was about to ask Tommy about his strange blog post, but he finished parking our car and it was time to get out and get going.

Let the adventure begin.

WELCOME TO THE DIG

By the time we arrived at Dad's dig site, the light was beginning to fade. With darkness encroaching came a slight temperature drop. Whenever Dad talked about his fieldwork experiences, he never failed to mention how unforgiving the desert could be: *The desert, it'll treat you like an equal if you are prepared, if you are strong enough, but it'll devour you whole if you display any sign of weakness.*

After showing us to our assigned tents, where we dropped our luggage, Tommy took us by the supplies marquee. There, a perky Swedish graduate student named Ada, her eyelashes and brows almost as pale as her skin, issued us camp-appropriate attire: unisex khakis, steel-toe shoes, and long-sleeved shirts. Also baseball caps, the

same kind Tommy was wearing, designed especially for this dig campaign. The excavation project was primarily sponsored by two philanthropic research-funding bodies and six universities, including Australia's Dunstan University and some of Dubai's local institutions.

I eyed the cap I was given. It didn't look much different from a V8 Supercars merchandise item, with sponsor logos covering almost the entirety of the fabric. Ada informed us we were to wear our dig uniforms and caps throughout our stay, as the sun and the heat were unforgiving. Dehydration and heatstroke were a daily threat.

After saying our goodbyes to Ada, Tommy ushered us on a mini tour. Even as the sunlight vanished completely, the camp was still bustling with activity. Most of the people we ran into were of the blond and blue-eyed variety. This was strange because a bunch of universities located in the region were among the dig's key sponsors, so I'd expected the largest chunk of student volunteers to be local.

All the dig site's nightly illumination, weak and eerie by this point, came from small generator-run lamps fastened to the tents. Two main paths—one winding between the sleeping tents, stretching all the way to the medical center, and another leading to the portable bio-toilets and eco-showers and, farther on, the cafeteria—crossed at the camp's center. Each residential tent slept five, but since it was still the dig's early days, I was to

room with Lori and Minh, without anyone else joining us. The situation was different for the boys: Rowen and Luke were sharing sleeping quarters with three students from University College London. The Londoners were here to collect data for their master's theses, and it sounded like they'd have little time to socialize.

By the time Tommy was showing us the cafeteria, I was only half listening. Whether it was the postflight fatigue, the lingering heat, or both, there was something off about the dig site. It was well populated but also subdued, like something lying in wait, its tail coiling. Once more I wanted to question Tommy about that blog post he wrote chronicling Tell Abrar's alleged paranormal lore, but this wasn't a good moment—with Minh hanging on Tommy's every word and Luke sticking too close to me for comfort.

As if he had access to my thoughts, Luke interrupted Tommy's reciting of our meal schedule. "So I've read that blog post you wrote about this place, and I have questions. Like what some meteor crashing into the desert almost a century ago has got to do with this site and people disappearing into thin air?"

Tommy looked at Luke as if he were speaking in tongues. Then Tommy's eyes shifted to me. He wasn't getting any help here; I wanted to know about his blog post too.

"It was just a way of generating some external interest

for the dig,” Tommy offered, the words coming off practiced. “Unusual local history tends to attract investors.”

This rationale made sense, but Tommy wasn’t answering the real question. And as it turned out, he wasn’t planning to. Luke’s mention of the blog post made Tommy cut the tour short; he left us to our own devices. His abrupt dismissal left an annoying aftertaste, obvious from everyone’s faces.

Then Rowen said conspiratorially, “Should we celebrate our safe arrival?” His professionally whitened teeth all but shone in the dark.

“What did you have in mind?” Lori’s voice dropped low as a group of camp residents shuffled along the sandy pathway not far from us.

“We could get keys to one of those jeeps and drive ourselves to the city. It won’t take more than an hour. I’ve heard about this rooftop bar . . .”

Lori looked excited, but Minh was having none of it. “The most ridiculous part of this plan is that you’re actually being serious.” Minh glared at Rowen, her dark hazel eyes drilling into him. “You’re gonna get us all in trouble on our first night here. We’ll probably get arrested for being underage and trying to get into a bar.”

“You’re no fun.” Rowen shook his head, his eyes not meeting hers. “Maybe you should stay here then, Minh. But the rest of us, we’re going to do *something*, right?” He looked between us for approval, but Minh’s grim

prediction dampened everyone's mood. Even Lori didn't seem that enthused anymore.

Not finding support for his plan, Rowen was shaking his head as he addressed all of us. "You're all so boring." He looked at Lori. "Do you want to ditch them?"

Lori nodded, eager once more, and, without another word, the two of them rounded the medical tent and the night swallowed them.

"I'm calling it a night," Minh announced. She slid her hands into her pockets and found my eyes in the semidarkness before taking her first tentative steps toward the tents. She hesitated. I knew she was expecting me to follow her. When I didn't, she looked at me again, eyes heavy with a silent question. After a pause, visually deflated, she wished me and Luke good night and strolled in the general direction of our tent.

I wasn't sure why I chose to stay. It wasn't that I wanted to hang out with Luke all that much. But I also couldn't imagine getting into bed right away—too much travel adrenaline. Besides, spending some quality one-on-one time with Minh could lead to us discussing this whole Rowen-Lori situation, and I just didn't want to open what surely promised to be a can of worms. And besides, where exactly did my loyalty lie? I was friends with Minh, yes, but I was also friends with Rowen and Lori.

"Wanna go for a walk?" Luke motioned at the

darkened path that stretched away from the main cluster of tents. When I met his eyes, he smiled. I smiled back; we shared a moment of understanding. We were too excited to be here to just go to sleep. And I was relaxed around him. If Luke had ever been into me, he would surely have made his move by now.

“Sure,” I said. “As long as we don’t go *that* way.” I indicated the path recently taken by Lori and Rowen. That made Luke laugh, and we proceeded in the opposite direction.

I kept tripping because my eyes were being drawn up to the sky—cloudless and fragile, with bright stars and a gigantic moon that had a green undertone to its paleness. The moon’s every dark spot was defined with almost artistic precision.

When I tripped again, Luke wove his fingers around my wrist. Somehow that progressed into holding hands. I’d have taken this unexpected development as a friendly gesture if not for the uncharacteristic intent to the way Luke’s fingers gripped mine and the weird tension coming off him in waves. He’d never been tense around me before. We both must’ve been tired from our trip and, before that, from our final school exams. I gave Luke a puzzled look that got lost in the night, and we kept on walking like that, holding hands.

When we were far enough from the camp for the groups of tents to become amorphous blurs, we stopped

and, without conferring, sat on the ground. I let go of Luke's hand and looked up to watch the stars, wishing I had a nice little Dobsonian telescope on me right now. Some of the tension I sensed from Luke earlier seemed to be waning, and I was glad of it. With Lori apparently hooking up with Rowen, I didn't want to start anything with Luke and leave Minh out of the group and on her own. She was already broody. Besides, I never thought of Luke as anything more than a friend. He was a nice-enough guy, and he did break the nose of my bully that one time, but still.

"So . . . Would you like to make out? With me?" Luke asked.

I sharply inhaled and faced him. I couldn't see his freckles, but I could imagine his face was turning a shade redder under my shocked stare. Luke laughed and looked away, embarrassed. Before I could come up with a response to his blunt proposition, he went on.

"Before you laugh it off and then get all weird around me for the rest of our holiday, hear me out. I'm thinking . . . you're hot, I'm hot, and we're both unattached . . . Why not, you know, take advantage of it while we're out here and under lax adult supervision?"

His brutal honesty caught me off guard, to the point that I began considering his offer.

"You've clearly given this a lot of thought."

"I have. Here's my logic. Well, the rest of it, anyway.

We know each other really well. We're friends, and I know you don't blush and stumble around me like you do when Ortiz is around, so if we make out, you're not going to get hurt afterward. Because you don't care about me *that way*, you know."

Unbelievable. I snorted. "I'm glad you care about my feelings, Luke. But what about you? What makes you so sure you're not just going to fall head over heels in love with me after one kiss?"

"There's only one way to find out." Quick to act, he brought his face close to mine, and, despite knowing how bad—no, *terrible*—an idea this was, I didn't shy away. He smelled of soap and green-tea-scented shampoo. His lips and the cocky way he held himself combined with the sheer audacity of his hitting on me made me a little dizzy. My heart didn't exactly speed up when Luke brought his lips to mine, but when his body heat washed over me, striking against the night's gentle chill, I didn't feel revulsion either. In fact, I was mildly turned on. An alarmed thought crossed my mind as I recalled Dubai's strict indecent-exposure laws, but the desert promised solitude, and I relaxed.

Testing out the extent of this temporary lapse of judgment, I scooped closer to Luke, and our lips touched once more for a drawn-out moment. Then again, lasting longer this time. There was a certain consideration in these kisses but also a slow-burning sensation of rebellion.

Of wrongdoing. Encouraged by my willful participation, Luke took it to the next level, his mouth becoming more demanding as he wrapped his hands around me, pulling me tight to his chest. One of his hands snaked its way up to rest on the back of my neck, while another traveled dangerously low. His tongue met mine. My inhibitions melted away as I relaxed more and more with each breath we took when we briefly came up for air. I saw the night skies again when Luke's weight pushed me down on my back with gentle but unyielding force. He cradled my head. It occurred to me he was doing that so I didn't get sand in my hair. That was nice of him.

A subtle cough made me pull away from Luke. I craned my neck up to find Tommy towering over us. His face was unreadable, but his lips were so tight, he looked like he had no mouth. I would have laughed at that if not for his burning eyes.

"There's a curfew here." Tommy pushed his hands in his pockets and kept on staring at us.

"Why?" Luke's voice carried a challenge. "Are we in danger of disappearing like the people you wrote about in your blog post?"

After glaring at Luke like he was a nuisance of the lowest rank, Tommy shook his head. When he spoke again, Tommy pointedly made eye contact with me, ignoring Luke. "We're in the middle of nowhere. If you wander off into the wilderness, it might be a while before

you're found. And we can't afford to be rescuing every single fool who gets himself lost."

"And who made you the enforcer of the rules?" Luke stood up and stretched a hand my way without looking at me.

I snubbed his offer of help and got myself up, then found Luke's eyes and mouthed, "Stop this."

He grew silent, but his standoffish posture made clear he was bubbling with anger. This was not good. Despite my dubbing him a nice guy in my head, Luke was still an unknown, even after years of us being friends. I did know one thing about him for sure though—he was prone to sudden anger, even physical violence.

I saw his fingers twitching, as if wanting to curl into fists. Too much testosterone.

"Let's just go back to the tents." I grabbed Luke's hand. He was like a coiled spring, in urgent need to release pressure. I gripped his hand tighter and pulled, forcing him to walk with me in the direction of the camp. I avoided Tommy's eyes, but his glare was magnetic, and I kept being drawn to his face as he walked beside us.

When the three of us crossed back over the camp's unofficial border, Tommy stalked off into the dark, leaving us abruptly. Luke and I walked the rest of the way to the residential tents without exchanging a single word, but we were still holding hands, both of us too stubborn to let go. I finally decided to drop Luke's hand when we were close

to our assigned tents. Relieved about parting with him for the night, I faced Luke and noticed his frown.

“Can we just be civil?” I asked.

He nodded once before squeezing out through his teeth, “I can’t stand him.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic.”

“Can I at least kiss you good night?”

“Not sure if that’s such a great idea,” I started to say, eager to retreat into the safety of the tent, but Luke stepped into my space and landed a quick fluttering kiss on my lips. So much for consent.

“Happy now?” I took another step back, growing annoyed—with Luke for coming on to me, and with myself for not rejecting him. “Let’s *not* do this. We have a few fun weeks ahead. I wouldn’t want our time here to be defined by a failed make-out session and some wounded pride.”

“Eloquent as usual, Alif,” Luke murmured. He tried to shove his fingers into his pockets but ended up with his hands flat against his sides, looking indecisive. “Sleep well, *friend*,” he went on. “I look forward to seeing you in the morning.”

I watched Luke’s back as he departed, my mind growing even more uncomfortable at this possibly huge mistake I’d made in kissing him.

I pushed the tent’s door flap out of the way, complete darkness meeting me inside. My hands stretched out in front of me, I walked in, then put the tent’s curtain of a

door in its place. From our quick tour earlier, I remembered that my bed was to the right, so I took cautious steps in that direction and relaxed only when I lowered myself onto the mattress. I sat there for a few breaths, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The bed facing the tent's door was Lori's. It was empty. On the bed across from mine, Minh's long black hair was spread across a white pillow. I watched Minh's form shift dreamily under the blanket. She was fussing in her sleep.

As my eyes grew more accustomed to the dark, I could make out the movement of shadows on the tent's walls. Eyes tired, I watched the shadow play as thoughts of Mom crept up on me and wouldn't let go. Mom's college minor was philosophy, and when she was a grad student she had to teach Philosophy 101 to support herself financially. Whenever she reminisced about it, she joked that discussing philosophical concepts with freshmen was a special kind of hell. But I knew that she secretly *loved* teaching undergrads and that she missed it dearly ever since she became a full-time field archaeologist.

I *also* knew that Mom's favorite part of teaching Philosophy 101 was discussing the works of the greatest minds of the ancient world: Plato, Aristotle, Socrates . . . and also Hypatia, Theodora, Catherine of Alexandria, and many others. Mom did her honors thesis on women philosophers of the ancient world—those who were written

out of most histories but whose ideas and discoveries still rang true today. But Plato's allegory of the cave was Mom's favorite icebreaker with freshmen. Plato described our perception of reality using an allegory of people who were chained to the wall of a cave throughout their entire lives. They faced a wall, where they could see shadows created as various objects passed in front of a fire that raged behind them. The longer they stared at the shadows, the more they grew accustomed to them. And so, for them, there was nothing to life but shadows dancing on the wall. Mom relished in revealing the "punch line" to her students: Most people saw shadows their entire lives, just like those prisoners of the cave, and for them this was all there was. Just shadows. An incomplete reflection of reality, which was never the "real" thing.

I was supposed to call Mom the moment I landed in Dubai, but I deliberately didn't. I even ensured my phone was off so she couldn't call or message me.

Five years ago, after my parents split up, I lobbied for my right to stay in Melbourne with Dad, my decision intensifying the uneasy space that already existed between Mom and me. My parents' divorce wasn't even one of those extreme scenarios when lying or cheating has led to the collapse of a marriage, but I guess I always irrationally blamed Mom for it, even if I couldn't articulate why. Most girls I know are close to their mothers—take Lori, for instance, or Minh, whose mom was her

best friend and confidante growing up—and they tend to take their side in a divorce. It wasn't like that for me. Mom never being one for deep and meaningful talks didn't help. Her aptitude for lecturing about philosophical concepts or archaeological field methods for hours at a time didn't extend to talking about the things that should've mattered the most. Whenever I'd make an effort to understand Mom's side of things during and following the divorce, the metaphorical door got shut in my face, and Mom and I drifted even further apart.

Shortly following the divorce, Mom headed back to Birmingham, her girlhood hometown, where a job was waiting for her. I had a standing invitation to visit her in England whenever I felt like it. And I did go once in a while, but every time I'd visit, it'd take us a few days just to get reacquainted with each other, and even then we kept each other at arm's length. I think, back then, I was still harboring hopes that my parents' separation was just a phase they were going through. But then somewhere along the way I gave up on the idea. Besides, my life was in Melbourne, so the distance between Mom and me widened every year until, eventually, she became a semi-stranger in my life.

I missed the exact moment when I tired myself out. Tearing up after staring at the light and moving shadows for too long, I surrendered to the fatigue and closed my eyes, heavy sleep pulling me under.

A TROWEL, A PLUMB BOB, AND NOT A SINGLE SUN HAT IN SIGHT

Lori must've snuck back into the tent sometime after I fell asleep. But in the morning, she wouldn't admit she was out late, despite my teasing. Jet-lagged and parched, Lori, Minh, and I eventually dragged ourselves out of the tent and made a beeline for the bathrooms. We were hauling along our travel toiletries bags stuffed with toothbrushes, shampoo bottles, and sunblock tubes. Between the three of us it was quite an endeavor to get ready for the day ahead.

In the clear early-morning light I got to see more of the camp. It spread out farther into the desert than I'd imagined. The tight groups of tents surrounded the dig's three main subsites, which formed the camp's dug-up

heart. A lone excavator stood idly to the side. The area must have been too artifact-stuffed to use heavy machinery. Khaki-clad volunteers were already gathering by their stations, instruments at the ready, hands eager to get dirty.

As I kept looking around me, I recalled Mom's words that had burned themselves into my earliest childhood memories: *Archaeology is all about the past. Archaeologists look backward.* Whenever I remembered her saying that, child-me would imagine this middle-aged bearded white dude wearing knee-length shorts and a safari hat with eyes inexplicably at the back of his head (so he could look backward!). As I grew older, this picture changed into one of a woman—thanks to watching Mom work in the field in her beloved multipocket khaki pants, gray singlet, and baseball cap. Not even once in her entire life had she ever worn a sun hat, and her dreamy but eagle-sharp eyes were trained on the horizon ahead or at the ground at her feet, not backward.

Just like my parents, everyone on this dig lived and breathed archaeology. I envied their unilateral focus in life. I had yet to find mine, but I hoped I was getting closer each day. As a child of not one but two archaeologists, it was always assumed I'd follow in my parents' footsteps, but deep down I wasn't so sure. I loved many aspects of the discipline, like the fascinating discoveries and all the theory testing preceding those, but I was also

realistic. It was a tough field to break into. Maybe being out here, on an active dig, would help me gain the focus I needed in life.

Back in our tent, I unfolded my dig-issued khakis and white long-sleeved shirt, both wrinkled and half a size too big. With a sigh, I put the khakis on, hoping the folds would stretch out on their own. I personalized my attire by donning a London Grammar tee instead of the generic dig shirt. I might end up with sunburns on my arms, but at least I'd look stylish. There were no mirrors in the tent though, so no matter how much I stared down at my body in hopes of getting some idea of how the ensemble really looked, I was left hanging.

Another mandatory item of clothing I couldn't bring myself to wear was the baseball cap. The mere thought of it sitting tight on my head all day and the sweaty-itchy mess it'd create made me shudder. I knew I was being childish, but still, defiantly, I stuffed the cap into my pants' back pocket. It didn't come to me as a surprise that Lori was equally rebellious in her clothing choices: She had just enough conformity in her bones to wear the khakis, but that didn't extend as far as the headgear. Only Minh wore the whole outfit, cap and all. Before leaving the tent, the three of us, Australian to the core, slathered our faces and necks with SPF 50 sunblock. We were all scarred for life by those brutal skin-cancer-awareness ads

the government used to run, so sunblock was our daily staple no matter what.

As we were getting ready, I kept watching Minh's interactions with Lori, expecting to see some hostility or at least weirdness between them, but all seemed civil and friendly. Maybe my observation of Minh giving Rowen and Lori the stink eye yesterday was just my being tired and misreading the situation. Or maybe it was just Rowen who Minh was upset with? I guess, after my own strange adventures with Luke yesterday, followed by the awkward moment with Tommy, I wasn't the best judge of human intentions. As a side note, in the unforgiving light of a new day I was ready to die of embarrassment just thinking about what had happened between me and Luke and Tommy.

We swung by the boys' tent to find Luke and Rowen practically asleep on their feet. It reeked of alcohol inside their tent. The drinks must've been supplied by their older roommates. We spared the boys the ridicule, and soon the five of us were headed for the volunteer information booth to meet Tommy.

I eyed Tommy from afar and put on a bored expression as we approached him. My pride was going to be my undoing. Tommy didn't look too excited about his assigned role of babysitting us either. Still, with enviable patience, he answered all our questions and even had the decency not to mention anything about my misfortunes

last night, despite Luke staring daggers at him. Tommy told us that ever since he and my father made their way to the site ten days ago, groups of volunteers had been arriving to the camp every day. Most of these volunteers were students, here to partake in the dig for a university credit or to gather data for their graduate research projects. Aside from Rufus, son of Dr. Archer Palombo, my father's second-in-command, I was the only other camp brat. And tourists like my friends were even a bigger rarity out here. But tourist or not, everyone had to pull their share.

After watching a safety instruction video, we followed Tommy to the cafeteria for breakfast. Our group was a late arrival, with most people already leaving. Stomachs rumbling, we took our seats, and I realized, much to my surprise, that Tommy was going to eat breakfast with us. At our table. That was totally cool. I was cool with that. Totally.

Nearby, there was another late-arriving group of student volunteers, big and loud and, based on the volume and velocity of their chatter, superhyped on the dig's atmosphere of discovery. Looking at them made me happy, even hopeful, for the future of humanity. They were so different, with accents from all over the place and complexions ranging from lighter to darker tones. But they were all here, united by a common goal, ready to spend their days covered in dust from head to toe and

diligently brushing dirt from rocks. Education was not a given, and I knew how privileged we all were to even be here, but still it warmed my heart that this was possible for so many people.

My unexpected state of balance with the world made my raisin-laden porridge taste better than it was. I washed it down with tar-like black tea. But my brief moment of contentment was already fading. My jet lag was back and getting worse, and, judging from their frowning mouths, my friends weren't any better off. Our group, even Tommy, was growing more and more quiet, subdued. Despite the caffeine in my tea, my eyelids were being pulled down with the weight of my eyelashes. I rubbed at my eyes, hoping to invigorate them. I wore no makeup today—it was all going to melt away in this heat anyway—but being in close proximity to Tommy I kept thinking about how stubby my lashes must've looked, especially compared to his ridiculously long and curly ones. He met my eyes but quickly looked away.

Lori and Rowen were holding hands under the table, and I kept catching Luke's attention as his inquiring eyes roamed all over my face. I did my best to ignore his looks while also treating him the way I always have—as a friend who is also a guy. Minh was acting slightly cold with me, probably still pissed at me for blowing her off last night, but, as I'd noticed earlier, she was nice and perfectly sweet with Lori. And, as usual, aside from

one fleeting look, Tommy was indifferent toward me. Everything was rather normal.

I still hadn't seen Dad, and he hadn't called me either. When I swallowed my vanity and asked Tommy about my father's whereabouts, he said in a reverent tone that Dad had been in and out of the camp negotiating with the local bedouin community leaders in hopes of hiring a local workforce for the dig. Apparently a big chunk of volunteers from local universities pulled out from the excavation due to "safety concerns," leaving it understaffed. Dad was expected to return sometime midday today. That was all I could get out of Tommy. He avoided my questions around the "safety concerns." It was as if he'd exhausted his ration of words for the morning. Yet he still stuck around our table to eat his porridge, ignoring the calls of his fellow Dunstan students for him to join them as they headed out of the cafeteria.

"What's the plan for today?" Rowen's question snapped Tommy out of his quiet.

"You've gotten the full overview of the camp, so now you can decide what you want to do for the rest of your stay." Tommy's sharp eyes were on me when he said that. *Unsettling*. Why was he always so serious, so intense? I tried to recall the last time I'd seen Tommy smile and couldn't.

Tommy continued. "In terms of options—there's the dig itself, but you'd have to be prepped on what to do, and how not to damage the samples, and also how

to label them properly. So, I'm afraid, your choice is between kitchen duty and post-dig labeling."

"You can't be serious," Luke scoffed. "Do you think I came here to wash dirty pots and catalog old bones?"

Tommy's face grew stone-cold, or *more* stone-cold, to be precise, since he wasn't a ray of sunshine to begin with. I wished Luke would just stop with his macho posturing or whatever this was. Alarmed, I watched a little crease form on Tommy's forehead. When his eyes slid over my face again, I mentally flinched. He must've been super unhappy with me for bringing my friends here.

To Luke Tommy said, "Sure, I'm going to let you join the excavation crew. Do you know how to use the tools to get stuff out of the ground without breaking it? Can you tell a trowel from a plumb bob? And are you aware of the procedures we must follow in case we do come across human remains, or, as you call them, 'old bones'? Or does your entire knowledge of archaeology come from watching Indiana Jones movies?"

Stunned into belligerent silence by Tommy's outburst, Luke seethed for the rest of breakfast. I couldn't be seen publicly taking Tommy's side over my friend's, but secretly Tommy's putting Luke in his place pleased me.

By the time I finished with my porridge, I made my decision about my work assignment. I wanted to be on labeling duty. Minh and Luke joined me, and Lori and Rowen, surprisingly, chose to help out in the kitchen.

We all tagged along while Tommy took Lori and

Rowen deeper into the cafeteria tent, around the serving counter, and into the fiery heart of the field kitchen. There, he introduced my friends to Riley Hassan, the camp's head cook. Born in Hobart to Lebanese Australian parents, Riley first met my father when young Riley was an apprentice chef straight out of cooking school. Years later, when Dad had the first project of his own to manage, he sought out Riley and invited him to join the dig. Ever since, the two of them frequently worked together. On rare occasions when Riley was not available, it was a real struggle to find a good replacement.

Riley and I greeted each other like old friends before he and Tommy led Lori and Rowen away to get them started, leaving me, Minh, and Luke to our own devices. I wanted to chat with Riley some more but didn't get a chance, though he winked at me and said something embarrassing about me growing up so fast. This was the thing about being a camp brat: Everyone still saw me as some little rascal running around in her shorty shorts. Luke snorted at Riley's words, and despite my amazing self-control, I reddened in the face.

Tommy had told us to wait for his return, but I was familiar with the camp's layout by now and had a solid idea where the labeling tent was. I told my friends I was going, and, having nothing better to do, Minh and Luke followed me out into the suffocating heat.