

Then

The night was meant for shooting stars. Before the shadow rose, or the sirens moaned, the sky was cut by a meteor shower: ice on fire, streaks of light that tore the air. Maybe meteors would crash into the mountains, Rory thought. Or into Ransom River Elementary School. Or into the Chevron gas station downtown. That, she thought, would cause a supermassive fireball. That made sneaking out at one in the morning worth the risk.

Or it should have.

In her bedroom, in the dark, she tied her Converse All Stars. Outside the window, the sky boomed at her, looming and endless and pounded white with stars.

The house was school-night quiet. She turned her ear to the closed door but heard nothing—no TV, no talk or laughter from her mom and dad’s room. Pepper was in his dog bed in the kitchen. Everybody was asleep.

Beyond the window a voice whispered, “Rory.”

Seth pressed his hands to the screen. His eyes swam with starlight.

“Getting my stuff,” she whispered back.

She shoved binoculars into her backpack and slung it across her shoulders. The Power Rangers felt like a shield, even though the bright plastic might shine under the streaking light of a meteor. As if a falling star could read *R. Mackenzie* written in black marker across the pack and aim for

her. But maybe. Like her dad said sometimes, *Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.*

Seth stretched on his toes to look in her window. "Hurry up."

She stuck the flashlight in her sweatshirt pocket. She slid the screen open, boosted herself onto the sill, and jumped out.

The air was chilly. She crouched beside Seth on the grass. In the night he seemed nothing but blond hair and a crazy smile. Beyond the lawn and avocado tree and her mom's tomatoes, beyond the cinder block back wall, the countryside seemed to murmur at them.

Ransom River, most of it, was the other way, out her front door. The city, population one hundred seventy-two thousand according to the poster in her fourth-grade classroom, had fallen asleep. Streetlights kept watch, like a giant skein of Christmas lights. Farther away, over the mountains, Los Angeles was a smudgy yellow glow in the sky. Like the postthermonuclear scene in *Terminator: Judgment Day*, which her parents didn't know she had secretly watched at Seth's.

She hunkered like a commando and pointed north, at black hills that swallowed the stars. "We can see best from the Pinnacles."

Seth snickered. "This isn't a jail break."

"My parents will *kill* me if they catch me sneaking out."

Mom would look worried and disappointed. Dad would get the black-cloud face and call her sternly to attention on the carpet, saying, *Aurora Mackenzie, this is preposterous.* And she would flush and stutter, *Sorry*, and hide in her room.

Not tonight. They ran across the cool grass. At the back wall Seth jumped, grabbed the top and pulled himself up. Rory was a step behind.

And from the dirt road on the other side of the wall, headlights caught him and outlined him in the night.

He froze. The headlights belonged to a heavy vehicle, maybe a hundred yards away, bouncing slowly toward them.

It looked like a delivery van bumping in their direction along the dirt path.

Seth hesitated only a moment. In a hard whisper, he said, "Come on. We can make it before they get here."

Rory grabbed his leg. "Wait."

There was no reason to run in front of a big old van at one in the morning. Except Seth Colder wanted to do it. It was a dare. The van rattled toward them. Seth glanced down at her, and the look on his face seemed like a promise. This was an adventure. Rory boosted herself up.

The van's headlights popped to brights. They lit Seth up like a paranormal creature.

Rory jumped back down and yanked on his leg so hard, he fell to the ground. They bungled to a heap on the grass. On the far side of the wall, the van ground to a stop. Its door creaked open.

"Crap," Seth said.

Rory huddled to her feet against the wall. "We can't get in trouble for being in my own backyard. It's my house. It's Mackenzie property."

"What if it isn't the UPS guy?"

The engine gargled. Gingerly Rory stood on tiptoe to see over. Her veins turned to cold water. The van was stopped a few yards away on the dirt road. In front of it a figure stood silhouetted, feet planted wide. Just standing there. Looking.

She crouched back down. "What does he want?"

"What does Freddy Krueger want?"

Her skin seemed to zing, like she'd touched an electric socket with wet fingers. "Tree house."

She'd never seen Freddy Krueger, but Seth had three big brothers and snuck along whenever they did things. Freddy Krueger had knives for fingers and killed teenagers. She ran low along the wall to the avocado tree. Its leaves were dark and slick in the starlight. She dashed underneath it with Seth hard at her side. Outside the wall, the van rumbled.

"Who is he?" Seth said.

"Don't want to know."

She shimmied up the tree trunk. Seth squirreled up behind her. They clambered into the tree house and crouched on the creaking planks and peered out through the leaves. The headlights of the van caught the upper reaches of the tree.

“Think he can see us?” she whispered.

Seth shook his head.

The figure stood silhouetted in the headlights. He moved like a lump, splitting the beams. He turned in a slow circle and paused, facing the tree.

“Oh,” Rory said.

“We didn’t do anything,” Seth said.

“Like Freddy Krueger cares?”

They held still, hands curled over the edge of the open tree house window. And Rory saw more lights, in the farther distance.

At first, she thought a shooting star had blazed to the ground. Far, far along the county road that pushed into the foothills, near the freeway to Los Angeles, hot white lights burned the night. But it wasn’t a flaming meteor crater. It was big road spotlights, like construction crews used when they fixed highways in the dark.

And those lights were surrounded by flashing red and blue.

“Seth,” she said.

He looked. After a moment, he shrugged. “Don’t know.”

But she did. Police and fire trucks. Maybe ambulances. They were parked under big spotlights out near the highway. Like there’d been a huge wreck.

“This is freaky,” she said.

Seth turned back to the Freddy guy on the dirt road. “He’s looking for something. Or someplace.”

She leaned close to him. His Ninja Turtles T-shirt hung loose on his skinny shoulders. The figure in the road seemed to be backing up, toward the van.

Then, from beneath the tree, came a bad, bad sound. *Yap.*

She spun and leaned down through the trap door. “Pepper, *shh.*”

Below her the little dog put his paws on the trunk of the tree. His tail wagged in the moonlight. He barked again.

“Pepper, no,” Rory said.

Seth yanked on her sweatshirt. “Be quiet.”

She pulled back into the tree house. The man in the headlights stopped. And walked toward them again. They ducked.

The man’s breathing was hard, like that of a mummy wheezing through its wrappings. His footsteps were slow and uneven. They heard him stumble and grunt.

“Fuck,” he said.

Rory’s ears went hot. Seth had stopped moving.

The man groaned. He was right there, just beyond the wall. “Fuck it all.”

With a click, the beam of a flashlight veered and shone through the tree house window.

“He knows we’re here,” Rory said.

Pepper kept barking. The flashlight paused. They heard Freddy hawk and spit on the dirt, something wet and nasty.

And they heard a siren float on the air. Far away, maybe out by the hot white lights and red police alarms near the freeway.

“Is he after us?” she said. “Why would he be after us?”

“You’re the genius. You tell me.”

She hit him in the arm. “Don’t be stupid.”

He looked at her. “Don’t worry. I got ya.”

“What does that mean?”

He looked hurt. “You know. I’ll protect you.”

She was bigger than he was. Right. She wanted to hit him again, just to stop being afraid. She wanted him not to move away from her even an inch.

Freddy’s footsteps faded. They heard grunts and a groan and a thud.

“What’s he doing?” Seth said.

Rory peeked and saw the flashlight next door, swinging like a light saber. “He climbed into the neighbors’ backyard.”

The van sat on the dirt path, idling. Rory said, “This is too weird.”

Below the tree, Pepper began a low, sad moan. It was his sound when he was frightened. Through the leaves of the tree, Rory saw the flashlight dim. Freddy was sneaking between houses to the street out front. Hunting, she couldn't help thinking.

"What does he want?" she said. "To rob houses? Kill people?"

"How should I know?"

"Don't get mad."

But she knew why he sounded angry. 'Cause his dad was a cop, and he got it all the time. In the far distance, the siren wailed.

"What if he comes back?" she said.

"Lay low."

She thought of Pepper running loose. Did Freddy Krueger murder dogs? She stood up. "No. The house. Let's get in my room."

She swung through the trap door and slid down the tree trunk. A moment later Seth hit the ground beside her. She whistled for Pepper.

Freddy's swinging flashlight wavered across the wall of her house. He was looking for them.

"He's coming back. Hurry," she said.

She thought she heard the door to the garage creak open. She called Pepper again, but he bolted for the kitchen door. She heard his dog door swing as he pushed through it. She sprinted to her bedroom window with Seth beside her. She jumped and squirmed a knee onto the sill.

She stopped. Her room was dark, but a bright yellow stripe leaked under the door. The lights were on in the hall.

Footsteps hurried past the door. Her mom's voice. "What the hell?"

Farther away, maybe in the kitchen, came a crash, like a table had fallen over. Her dad called out, "Samantha, stay there."

Rory hung on the windowsill. A voice deep inside her head whispered, *Leave*.

She jumped back down onto the grass. “Let’s get out of here.”

She slid the window and screen closed. She and Seth ran across the lawn and herked themselves onto the top of the concrete wall. The old van idled on the dirt path, lights blazing. Seth leaped into their glare and landed and ran.

In the house, more lights turned on. Behind closed blinds, a shadow hurried across the living room. Rory jumped, awkwardly. She crash-landed in front of the van.

From the field, from the dark, Seth hissed, “Come on.”

Her breath clapped out of her. She put a hand against the van and wobbled to her feet. Back at the house, a man’s voice rose sharply. A meteor streaked overhead, pointing the way into the field and the wide night.

They ran for five minutes. They ran until Seth grabbed her sleeve and said, “You trying to get past the city-limits sign?”

She stuttered to a stop. She could barely breathe.

She knew they were in trouble. She knew it while they huddled beneath an oak tree, eyeing the night. She knew it an hour later when they went back to her house and she crept in her window. The neighborhood was dark and still. The van was gone. Her house was quiet. But things weren’t right.

She knew it. She just didn’t know what was wrong.

Not then.