

The Last Thing I Remember

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Extract

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Chapter One

The Torture Room

Suddenly I woke up, strapped to a chair.

‘What . . . ?’ I whispered.

Dazed, I looked around me. I was in a room with a concrete floor and cinderblock walls. A single bare lightbulb hung glaring from a wire above me. Against the wall across from me there was a set of white metal drawers. A tray was attached to it. There were instruments on the tray – awful instruments – blades and pincers and something that looked like a miniature version of those acetylene torches welders use. The instruments lay on a white cloth. The cloth was stained with blood.

The sight of the blood jolted me into full consciousness. I tried to move my arms and legs. I couldn’t. That’s when I saw the straps. One on each wrist, holding me to the chair’s metal arms. One on each ankle, holding me to its metal legs. And there was blood here too. More blood. On the floor at my feet. On my white shirt, on my black slacks, on my arms.

And there were bruises on my arms, dark purple bruises. And there were oozing burn marks on the backs of my hands.

I hurt. I kind of just realised it all at once. My whole body ached and stung inside and out. My shirt was soaking wet. My skin felt clammy with sweat. My mouth tasted like dirt. I smelled like garbage.

Have you ever had a nightmare, a really bad one, where you wake up and you can feel your heart hammering against the bed and you can't catch your breath? Then, as you start to understand that the nightmare wasn't real, that it was all a dream, your heart slows down again and your breathing gets deeper and you relax and think, *Whew, that sure seemed real.*

Well, this was exactly the opposite. I opened my eyes expecting to see my bedroom at home, my black-belt certificate, my trophies, my poster of *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead, I was in what should have been a nightmare, but wasn't. It was real. And with every second, my heart beat harder. My breath came shorter. Panic flared up in me like a living flame.

Where was I? Where was my room? Where were my parents? What was happening to me? How did I get here?

Terrified, I racked my brain, trying to think, trying to figure it out, asking myself in the depths of my confusion and fear: what was the last thing I remembered . . . ?

Chapter Two

An Ordinary Day

An ordinary day. That's it. An ordinary September day. That's all there was before the insanity began.

That night – that last night – I was in my room, working on my homework as usual. I had a history paper due. ‘What is the Best Form of Government?’ A classic Mr Sherman assignment. Mr Sherman liked to pretend he was some kind of radical. He wanted us to question our assumptions, and think outside the box. It never seemed to occur to him that sometimes the simple, most obvious answer might be the right one. ‘What is the Best Form of Government?’ I wanted to call my paper ‘Constitutional Democracy, You Doofus, What Do You Think?’ But somehow I figured that might not be the best way to get a good grade.

So as ten o'clock rolled around, I was sitting at my computer, working on my arguments. About how people had the right to be free and choose their own leaders. About how leaders who thought they should be in charge no matter

what, who thought they had all the answers or some super-duper system that was going to make things fair and perfect for everyone – people like kings and dictators and Communists – always wound up messing their countries up in the end, telling everyone what to say and do and murdering the people who didn't fit in with the way they wanted to run things.

It was hard work – and it didn't help that, at the same time I was polishing my deathless prose, I had Josh Lerner – GalaxyMaster, as he calls himself online – on the Instant Messenger. GalaxyMaster was watching an ancient episode of *Star Trek* on YouTube and sending me a message every time something cool or stupid happened. Which was, like, every two seconds. And which I could see for myself anyway because I had the same episode running on the upper right-hand corner of my computer, even though I'd turned the sound down low so I could listen to George Strait piping out of my iPod dock.

GalaxyMaster: look at that rock! soooooo paper-machier!

BBeltl: i know josh. im watching it.

GalaxyMaster: Ooooo its so heavy. i cant lift it. roflmayo!

BBeltl: josh I can c it.

GalaxyMaster: that klingon mask is so fake!

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GalaxyMaster could be kind of a dork sometimes. Plus he was making it tough for me to hold up my end of the conversation with Rick Donnelly, who was on my headset. I'd called him to tell him about the argument I'd had that evening with Alex Hauser, but then we'd gotten to talking about the history paper. Rick had Sherman for history too, and he was totally aware of Sherman's high level of doofy-osity. But Rick was the kind of guy who was always trying to play the angles, always trying to figure out what the teacher wanted to hear. His paper made the argument that Communism was theoretically the best form of government, but it just hadn't been done right yet.

'That's nuts,' I told him. 'They ought to have a sign outside those countries like at McDonald's or something: "Communism: Over 100 Million Murdered".'

'Hey,' said Rick. 'All I know is that with Sherman, radicalism is where the A's are. Follow the grades, my son. Follow the grades.'

I laughed and shook my head and went on writing about the joys of liberty.

So that, basically, was me – just before ten on an ordinary Wednesday night in September. Writing my paper and IM'ing with Josh and talking with Rick and watching YouTube and listening to tunes on my iPod dock – and starting to fade out after a long, long day.

Then the clock in the living room downstairs chimed the hour. I could hear it through the floor. And about a

nanosecond later, my mother – with a predictability that sometimes made me wonder if she was really some kind of automated device – called from the bottom of the stairs:

‘Charlie. Ten o’clock. Time to get ready for bed.’

I sighed. To my shame, I had the earliest school-night bedtime of any just-turned-seventeen-year-old I knew and, except in dire circumstances, it was non-negotiable.

‘Hey, I gotta shut down,’ I said to Rick.

‘You’re such a wuss.’

‘You’re a Commie.’

‘If it’ll get me into college.’

‘See you in the a.m.’ I clicked off and typed into my IM:

BBeltl: g2g.

GalaxyMaster: wuss.

BBeltl:nerd.

GalaxyMaster: cya.

BBeltl: bye!

Then I saved my paper into Sherman’s online homework file and shut down the computer.

Ten minutes later, I was lying in bed, paging through the latest issue of *Black Belt* magazine.

Five minutes after that, I laid the magazine on my bedside table. I reached up for the switch of the reading lamp set in the wall above me. My eyes went around the room one last time, from the computer to the tournament trophies on my

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shelves to the black-belt certificate framed on my wall to the movie poster of *The Lord of the Rings*. Finally, I looked at the back of my hand. There was a number written on it in black marker. That made me smile to myself.

Then I snapped the light off. I said a quick good-night prayer.

In sixty seconds, I was sound asleep.