

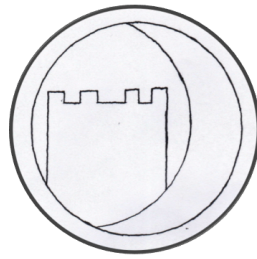


Wayfarers Highway



Peter Petrack

WAYFARERS HIGHWAY



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THE OTHER PATIENT

The moment Eloise Corwin awoke from her restless sleep, she knew she was in a room full of people who hated each other. Angry whispers filled the stuffy air above her head. Yawning loudly, she made it clear that she'd awakened. Those around her fell into an uneasy silence. One woman asked how she felt.

"Better now." Eloise lied. Her frail constitution, well known in those parts, had become the subject of much talk. Eloise hated it. She'd spent a great deal of time in her town's infirmary, but she'd never felt weak. As heiress to the wealthiest farm in the southwestern town of Littlefield, Eloise kept up a strong appearance. "How is everything going in town?" She was trapped in that room most of the time, with no news worth mentioning.

"Very nicely, Miss Corwin." One young man spoke. He looked at his feet like he thought his glance might be too much for her. "But . . ." He stammered. "Mr. Corwin thinks that it might be for the best if you wait some days yet, before you get to talking."

"My father needs to tell me what's going on," she said. "I can't help him, but I have the right to know how he is."

She said no more. There was no point getting upset. Half of the crowd wore the bland pale blue coveralls of her father's farm, most of them sweat stained, mud splattered, beaten, and threadbare. Few of them would

want to openly disobey her father. The other half of the crowd dressed nicely. They worked in town. Their clothes were more varied, naturally, everything from dress shirts to a blouse, all of it cleaner, all of it clearly never worn on a farm.

And yet, almost none of it was new, almost none of it was truly clean. Sweat soaked everyone in the room, somewhere. Every square inch of Littlefield was beaten by the heat, the desert sands, or the poverty. Nothing escaped all three.

“Maybe we should all be on our way,” one of the farmhands commented. Eloise hated to see them all leave without any news. They were scared, the townspeople. Strange stories had been reaching Littlefield for months, conspiracies about terrorism and dangerous travelers wandering the country not far away.

All of it was oddly similar to the superstitions of frontier towns: ghost stories and monsters, wanderers and urban legends. Littlefield had long been an isolated desert community, and many of the quarrels in town, surely including the argument that had awakened Eloise, were part of the same reoccurring issue regarding their place in the world at large. Many of the townsfolk wanted Littlefield to remain alone.

Eloise had long been kept in the dark, but she often heard unusual and half-formed rumors of dangers on the roads and chaos in the big cities far away on the east coast. Her father put little stock in tall tales, but was afraid too. He owned the town’s biggest farm, and

frightening bedtime stories did little but keep his workers up at night and tire them for the day.

Quickly, the crowd departed, except for a man she hadn't seen before. He sat on the far side of the room, in an antique pressed-back rocking chair. Eloise could guess his age no easier than his name, yet he held himself with the confidence of greater years. He wore a navy cotton blazer. It was wrinkled. Only that and his overlong, dark hair betrayed him for the traveler that he was.

"Don't you sweat?" she asked him. The man didn't respond. He seemed concerned only for the occupant of the neighboring bed, which the crowd had obscured. The other patient was a young man, likely just out of school, dressed in the coveralls of her father's business – a new pair. The uniform had none of the stains or marks of wear that most of the workers' attire possessed.

In odd contrast to this, the patient's face was filthy. He clearly hadn't washed himself for some time. Though probably fair-haired, it was difficult to tell, coated as he was in dirt and grease. The chest on the uniform hung open, revealing a painful looking mass of welts on his midriff. He slept, his brow furrowed with worry.

"It's strange for a boy to share a hospital room with a girl," Eloise said. Littlefield didn't have much in the way of medical facilities, but she wanted the silence broken. In all the time Eloise rested there, male patients had always been kept somewhere else. Then again, the town's only certified doctor – a man who had for

decades seemed elderly – had recently died. Now his aides were all that kept their ward operating.

After a time, the well-dressed man shrugged. “There was nowhere else for him to go.” Eloise had to strain her ears to hear his whisper over the hum of the dilapidated fans that ‘cooled’ the room. “If it’s any consolation,” the man continued, “he won’t be here long, only a day according to the man in charge. Your father, I suppose.”

Eloise got quiet. She knew her father would visit unless he expected her to sleep more. Not remotely tired, she stared around the room. The ‘Medicine Room’, as she called it, was a low-ceilinged chamber with a few locally made paintings covering the old and splintering wooden walls. The house had been built over a century before. That was long before the interstate made the old highway through Littlefield – ‘the Mother Road’ – obsolete. By that time, much of the old route was long forgotten or abandoned.

Littlefield had been isolated all those years. Eloise’s family had gone to great expense to keep the town alive when the youth population shrank. Offering rooms in their packed manor house and seeking outside labor had depleted the old savings.

Eloise stared at the paintings, depicting beautiful sunsets, beaches, and other places she’d never seen in life. Her bed sat near the room’s lone window, its tall headboard blocking any view of the outside. Maybe the fields were in as bad a shape as she suspected. Her father would not wish her to know.

“What happened to him?” Eloise pointed to the other patient; he and the well-dressed man were obviously either friends or family, but she suspected the former. They looked nothing alike.

Most of Littlefield had learned to distrust outsiders when the world forgot them. Eloise didn't share that suspicion. Travelers brought stories and news from outside. If the recent urban legends and conspiracies really had come true and were out in full force upon the roads, travelers might know something about them.

The suited man didn't respond, probably wanting to avoid conversation or trouble. “Are you deaf?” Eloise asked the man. They were using her sick room to care for somebody else. She decided she'd at least get a few conversations out of the deal.

“It's just a burn.” The young man groaned in the neighboring bed. His eyes stayed shut. “I had a machine accident, just after we got in town. We were trying to make some machine repairs with some local help and, well, I'm not sure what happened after that.” He chuckled. Looking pained, he turned to face her, revealing the nametag on the breast of his coveralls.

“You're not from around here, are you?” Eloise asked. It wasn't really a question. “Orson Gregory is not a local name.”

“How do you know my name?” asked the young man. She pointed to the temporary nametag sticker stuck to the front of his coveralls. “Oh.” The young man exchanged glances with his older friend.

“No, we're not from around here,” Orson admitted.

“We’re new in town. We were looking for work. We’re employees of your father’s now.”

“Outside labor never stays here long,” Eloise interrupted, “and no outsiders are allowed to work with the dangerous machines. Our mechanics would do it for you, not help you. Travelers aren’t trusted here. They haven’t been for years and years now.”

“Maybe they trusted us because we’d already been hired by your father,” Orson suggested. “He runs the show around here, right? There are lots of migrant workers who wound up here recently.” Orson shifted, again revealing his burn. It wove in circles, as though fire had done figure eights down his chest. “Where else could this have come from?”

“It’s not from the town’s farming gear,” Eloise said. “Before the old doctor died, I saw all the patients that came through. Plenty of burns, but none of ‘em were like that. How did you really get it?” Neither man responded immediately. Orson stared at his older friend.

“You’re a pushy one, aren’t you?” The well-dressed man straightened his jacket. “Perhaps he got an oil burn on an old injury that hadn’t properly healed.”

She hadn’t thought of that, but talking to the strangers was more interesting than anything she’d done in recent memory. “All of this is suspicious and I’m not sure why,” she said, “but be thankful the nurses took your story at face value.” She looked at Orson. “Tell me your story, your real one.”

“You don’t want to hear it,” Orson said. “It’s

boring.”

“It’s rather unsettling,” the well-dressed man said at the same time. Then he paused. He took a long look at his friend. “No, Orson, I think maybe you should tell her.”

“C’mon,” Orson shook his head. “If anyone should, it’s you.”

“Very well,” the older man sighed. “Our tale isn’t a happy one. It deals with many things that are powerful and dangerous in our time. Worst of all, it’s a story that hasn’t ended yet. And much of it is happening because Orson here ruined his entire life.” He turned back to his friend. “That should be enough to get you started.”

“Well,” Eloise said. “How did you ruin your life?”

Orson began to speak.

2

PRELUDE – BREAKDOWN

A burning smell. Smoke. My car broke down. Again.

I’d been driving a lot then, cruising through town in my rust heap. The car was junk, an ancient Oldsmobile Alero, living on borrowed time bought by my mechanics’ skill. But it was mine. It kept me free, able to drive around the town I wasn’t ready to leave.

I got out of my car. Coughing, I stepped away from the smoke. Farmland stretched out all around me, until it met the hilly ground that rose to the south. It sloped down to the north in the opposite direction. I saw the

farm, my family's old homestead, the one that would stop belonging to us that night, at midnight. I'd never lived there, but it held memories. My father long owned the farmland itself. Before my car broke down, I'd been visiting my cousin Clark, who still lived in the farmhouse.

I considered walking back to the house, but thought better of it. I called the shop.

Of course, a guy with a lousy car knows his mechanics pretty well. I definitely did. They were good guys, reliable, charged fairly. But my knowing them wasn't good that day. Somebody who went through what I did doesn't like seeing familiar faces. I was glad to hear a voice I didn't know answer the phone. They said they were sending a tow truck.

I looked out at the farm, trying – as I always did then – not to think. Away in the distance, I could see the shape of trees, lining the opposite edge of the farmland. Beyond that waited the town of Alabaster.

Home.

It had always been pretty big and important by the standard of the other tiny New England villages around it. And by that, I mean that most of Alabaster thinks we're an important town. Three hundred years ago or so, back when the European colonial folks settled the area, they named the river, Alabaster, because they first saw it in the winter, when the waters were frozen over. Alabaster was the first town named in the county. We got the river's name and the town's people never forgot that.

'Nobody ever heard of Riverglen', they'd say. Which isn't totally true. Riverglen – Alabaster's sister town – is a good bit bigger than us. The people of Alabaster have always ignored that talk.

It was late spring then, early June, so all the smells of oncoming summer filled the afternoon air. Without thinking, I turned south to face the breeze. Something caught my eye, a strange building, one I never wanted to see again. But would.

At the very edge of the farm sat an old structure, built during The War by the government or something. I didn't know for sure. I didn't care. It had been abandoned sixty odd years ago, but the Factory still stood, its work long over. It was wanted again. I hated it, always had. Even as a little kid, it gave me nightmares. Standing there, I saw its distant roof. It was a block of concrete peaked with an iron tower, and it was as jarring to see in the middle of the farms, as a skull would be in a bed of roses.

I found myself staring at the factory, unmoving. The sound of an approaching vehicle jarred me back to the present.

The tow truck parked in front of my car. The driver, an older woman named Bea, who I'd known a long time, stepped out into the road. Graying hair tied back, clothing grease-stained, usual stern look across her face, she walked toward me. I tensed.

"Hey, Bea." I forced a smile onto my face. "How are you?" She said nothing. "Here we are again."

"What happened?" She looked at me.

“I think a hose went.”

“Not that.” She said. “You. People have been saying that you’ve been expelled . . . and worse things, about some fight between you and Mr. Cyprus.” Damien Cyprus was the CEO of an east coast regional company with headquarters just outside Alabaster, and he was well loved in town.

“None of it’s true,” I said. To my surprise, she didn’t argue. Instead, she stepped forward and hugged me tightly.

“Of course it isn’t,” she said. “But Cyprus wants that place,” she pointed to the factory, “and he’s proven he’ll go far to get what he wants.”

“But he could have the factory,” I said. “We’d gladly sell it. My great-grandfather leased that land to the government in the War and it became ours again decades ago. We’ve never needed it. It was Cyprus trying to buy all the farms around here too, as well as the factory, that caused this. Even my dad didn’t want to sell our farm, and you know how he loves Cyprus. The other landowners followed his lead. Nobody wanted to sell.”

“I remember.” Bea nodded. “And I remember something you don’t. Cyprus isn’t one of us. He isn’t some local businessman. We don’t really know him. He’s loved for the investments he’s made in town, but besides managing other businesses, what does his company do?”

“No idea.” I said, “but he does invest, in half of town. You know how popular he is.”

“Yes, he spends a lot,” she agreed, “and these people are going home with full wallets, to families with full stomachs.”

“I can’t blame them for needing money.” I shrugged.

“They love him for his riches,” Bea nodded, “true enough, but I think that’s all Cyprus wants from those investments, love, a good reputation.” She looked back at my car. “This can wait a minute, if you can. What happened with you and him?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“I believe lots of things I don’t talk about very often,” she said. “I’ve got a hunch that you might help me confirm. I promise you I won’t treat you like the rest of town’s been doing.”

“Uh, alright,” I said, unsure where to begin. “I met with Cyprus for a class. I had a project – write about a local issue.

“I picked the whole business with Cyprus wanting to buy the farms. Somehow he got wind of it and invited me to lunch.”

“And you went?”

“I did,” I looked out at the fields again, half-expecting to see distant figures watching. “We talked. He offered to record our conversation, so I could use it for my project. I agreed. He did most of the talking, said some weird stuff about how the world’s changing and business has to follow it. I was polite of course, but didn’t get too much from that.”

“Then he brought up Alabaster. We talked about

little stuff in town, and he asked me about my plans after school. Cyprus asked if I knew his son. I don't. Uno's a few years older than me. I know his reputation of course, but hell, I don't even know the guy's real name. Not that I told him that." I shook my head. "Cyprus was probably trying to make small talk."

"Go on," she said.

"This is the part where everything stopped making sense." I swallowed hard, "and it never started again." It took me time to find the words.

"Cyprus started gagging and thrashing around, having a seizure. We'd both finished eating so I thought it must be an allergy. He fell back and landed on the floor."

"I was terrified, and I commented on him dying there and me still with him, but I didn't want to just leave him, even to get help. And then . . ."

I trailed off.

"And then he sat back up again and laughed at me." I balled my hands into fists. "He explained he hadn't fainted and that his 'editing team' would doctor the recording to make it seem like I attacked him."

"Why would you attack him?" Bea asked.

"Because I didn't want the farm sold, and neither did my father," I said. "Why didn't matter much. They had the police collect me, threatened to prosecute, and within the week my father caved and agreed to sell. The other landowners followed him. It was Cyprus' word against mine."

"What's worse, the school did expel me. They said I

was representing them because I was there for a project.”

“Cyprus never released any recording,” she said.

“No,” I said. “He didn’t press charges either. He didn’t have to. He’d persuaded them to sell the farms. I was collateral damage, as he put it.”

“Couldn’t you argue your expulsion?” Bea asked. “You had what, all of two weeks before graduation?”

“I tried,” I answered. “But they wouldn’t budge. Even though I only had three classes this last semester, they say I have to go through some Earn Your Diploma program, EYD, retake those courses at another school. There’s a community college, RCC – the one in Riverglen – it participates.”

She paused and looked at me for a long time. She made a face. “Well,” Bea said, “we’d best get your car fixed up if you’ll be driving there.”

“I’m not commuting from Alabaster,” I said. “I found a little boarding house that caters to students. My dad wants me to move out of the house, after all that. He thinks the responsibility will be good for me.”

“Orson, I’m so sorry,” she placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t be,” I said. “I was bitter, furious, after all of it. No one believes me. I hated everyone, but I don’t have the energy for it now. Plus, everyone thinks I’m some violent lunatic. They don’t see me anymore, not without picturing Cyprus in danger. It’ll be good to get away from that, get my own space.” I shook my head. “It’s the life I used to have, weeks ago; that’s what I don’t want to

leave behind, but I already lost it.” I gestured to the farms. “Besides, I don’t want to see what Cyprus has planned.”

“I don’t think anyone will see much difference here,” Bea said. “I don’t think he plans on really using that factory.”

“You said you had a hunch,” I reminded her.

“I do,” she said. “And I had the hardest time deciding if I’d tell you or not, but you have the right to know.” For the first time, she lowered her voice.

“I think Cyprus is looking for something,” she explained.

“I think he has been for a long time.”

“What?” I interrupted. “What does he want?”

“Keep your voice down.” She shushed. “There are very few places around here where this is safe to discuss, if anywhere.”

“Fine,” I said, even though I really doubted anybody was hiding between the cornrows. “What does he want?” I asked again.

“I don’t truly know,” she admitted, “though I’d bet it’s something from The War. That was the last time Alabaster really helped the rest of the country. Consider this, Cyprus spends a lot of time and money in Alabaster. Why? I know some things about business, and he’s not getting a significant return here, regardless what everybody thinks. And it’s not charity. He wants something. Think Orson, what would the townsfolk’s trust get him?”

“No one would be suspicious of him,” I reasoned.

“He could do whatever he wanted. But why do all this now? He’s had their trust for years.”

“Maybe he’s only recently figured out where it is, whatever he’s looking for,” Bea suggested. “How many buildings does he own in town? He doesn’t use all of the ones he’s bought. I know that. Most of the facilities he owns in town are War-era. That might be a coincidence or it might not be. Most of his investments, especially those big warehouses he owns, on Elm Drive, the ones that sit empty, he sure as hell lost money on them. Maybe he thought something was hidden in any number of these places and was wrong. Or,” a thought struck her, “maybe he’s doing this for his new boss.”

“New boss?”

“Cyprus Corp was just bought by Nation’s Trust,” Bea announced. “Tobias Nation, the entrepreneur. His company.”

“The World’s Fair guy?” I asked.

“Orson, he’s a national figure,” Bea said. “One of the richest men in the country. He’s the face of the World’s Fair, yes, but he’s famous for his company’s inventions. They contract for the military.”

“Oh,” I said. “I only know him from the TV ads for that tech fair.” Bea rolled her eyes. “If he owns Cyprus Corp, do you think Nation’s behind all this?”

“I doubt it,” Bea said. “Tobias Nation works globally. Cyprus is relatively small. But it is possible this deal forced Cyprus’ hand. Maybe whatever he wants from the factory is important to the deal, some old military machine. It’d explain why he needs the farms

too. The factory is partially underground. It might be something that has to be dug up. And owning the farms will give watchful eyes no legal reason to be there.”

“So it’s not something small,” I looked around the fields again. I saw a distant tractor on one of the farms, but no one paying us any attention. “Not something that anyone could get to?”

“Orson,” Bea said. “I didn’t tell you this so you’d go off all young and dumb and get hurt. These are strange times we live in. Alabaster used to be a way station. If you know where and when to listen, you can still hear a lot of news from faraway places here, real news mind you, not the garbage you hear on TV. Point is, I’ve heard strange things from people passing through.”

“Like what?”

She whispered, “They’ve been saying, ‘The Blitzkrieg is beginning’.”

“What’s that got to do with anything, with me?” I asked. “The Blitzkrieg was some old military tactic from the War, wasn’t it?”

“That’s from the War too,” she gestured in the direction of the factory. Sighing deeply, she took a long moment to compose herself. “Come on, lad, let’s get your car to the shop.”

“If it’s alright,” I said. “When I broke down, I was actually on my way to visit my cousin, the one who lives in the old farmhouse.”

“That’s fine.” She didn’t believe me, I knew even then. “Promise me now though, if I don’t see you again before you leave town, you’ll take care of yourself. I

don't trust Cyprus. Promise me you won't go into that factory."

3

PRELUDE – ON THE FARM

It didn't take long to walk there. The old farm wasn't large. Once a substantial property, it was much smaller after the land had been leased for the factory. Those fields hadn't given a harvest since before I was born. The money wasn't there anymore. Acres of weeds, and other wild growth I didn't recognize, had since invaded it. I had to lift my feet high to avoid the overgrown plant stuff that kept tangling itself around my feet.

The factory loomed ahead. It stood at the point where the ground sank lower, down from the heights of the mountains to the south. Some of the factory was actually underground, built into the hillside. Away to the north, the Alabaster River wound its way past town. It was surrounded by trees – but I could still catch sight of the Old District beside it, made by the colonial settlers who'd lived there, long ago.

I walked casually. The property belonged to my family, if only for a few more hours. But I paused, after a while. There could be watching eyes, if no one more sinister than nosy neighbors. I thought about returning after nightfall, before midnight, but I knew I'd seem much more like a thief in the night that way. I didn't

trust Cyprus either. Who knows what else he might do?

I'd never bothered getting very close to the factory. Its gravel parking lot was a nest of even more weeds and scurrying pests. The factory's stone walls were stained with grime. The years had taken their toll. All the windows were broken, like jagged teeth in some monster's mouth. The only door I saw was nastily rusted. Even the metal of the small tower, at the factory's top, looked tarnished.

I stared at it and wondered what anyone could possibly want from the place. Then I walked inside.

The rusted door opened with a screech and then crashed closed behind me. The machinery and metal shards all throughout the room rang with the noise, echoing above my head.

I stood still, looking slowly around the place. There wasn't much else to see, a couple conveyor belts with bits of metal still on the assembly line. Other pieces of trash lay on and around them.

I didn't move until the ringing stopped and the dust settled. There was a lot of dust, covering everything, and it was impossible to move without awakening thick clouds of the stuff. I was soon covered in it.

There was nothing on the factory floor but broken metal. There was also a large balcony, watching over it all. The bosses probably stood there and looked down on their workers' labors. There were stairways on both sides of the factory, leading to the balcony. I climbed one. It was rusted through in places. Twice I had to climb over missing steps. I almost turned around, afraid

the creaking metal might collapse, but I reached the top.

The factory's offices were up there too, some feet back from the balcony. I stared out at the old machinery until I was about ready to give up. There was nothing out there Cyprus could want. He must have been wrong yet again. Taking a last look at that mess, I started back toward the steps.

Screech. I heard the factory's door open.

Then I froze, heart instantly pounding. I'd be caught. Anyone coming in would be able to see me, standing up above everything else. No one knew I was there. If anything happened to me then, no one would even know.

I looked out over the factory . . .

I could see the door wasn't open and there had been no crash from it closing. Finally, when a door did close and I felt the shockwave up the wall, I realized there must be two doors into the factory, one on either side. Luckily, whoever had shown up decided to take the door right below my balcony.

Two points of light from the new arrivals' flashlights landed on one of the machines.

"Dammit!" Someone yelled. "What's with those doors? I jump every time."

"Would you keep it down?" A second voice said to the first. "We shouldn't announce that we're here. It's not midnight yet. The Gregorys still own this place."

For the first time, I paid close attention to the offices behind me. They had long windows, but I couldn't see inside because of heavy blinds across their

length. I considered trying to hide there. Truthfully, I had no reason to be afraid or keep myself hidden. But after what I'd already been through, I didn't want them to know I was there.

But I didn't move, not at first. Somehow I doubted these people were on Cyprus's official payroll and I bet they were involved with the plans he had going on.

"There's nobody here," the first said. "We're to keep an eye on things, nothing else. If he expected anyone to come looking, it wasn't someone who could get him in any trouble, probably just the same local yokel teenagers who broke the windows."

"You've got a point," The second said. "It'd be easier for us to guard this place, day in and day out, if we knew why he wanted it." I felt disappointed. These were just hired goons, even if they did know Cyprus was after more than he let on.

"I think he wants it for somebody," the second commented. They were still standing below the balcony. 'You're safe to listen', I assured myself.

"No way a guy like Cyprus takes orders from anybody," the first man argued. "He's rich and calling the shots."

"Maybe you should really listen. Cyprus has been worried lately."

"So what? It ain't easy being rich. Dealing with people gunning for you all the time, like that Gregory kid."

"Cyprus is frazzled," the second voice interrupted, "because he's only got so long to find this thing. If it was

just for himself, he'd be mad sure, but he wouldn't be desperate. He's spent years on this project. Maybe whoever is behind it has finally decided to cut their losses, reckons Cyprus isn't gonna get the job done. The consequences might be even worse than that."

"You're crazy." The first voice commented. "Who'd he be working for?"

"Cyprus is rich and powerful, sure, but he's not the richest or the most powerful person in the world. This town is cheap, but money adds up. Cyprus doesn't have endless cash." This second man coughed, probably on the dust. "I keep hearing about somebody called Blitzkrieg." That word again, mentioned a second time in as many hours.

"What kind of name is that?" The first man laughed.

"It's not a real name, you moron." Cough. "It's an assumed name, a cover." He coughed again, and again. He stamped his feet and made way more noise than his partner ever had. The illumination from his flashlight landed somewhere on the ceiling.

Something dark flew past my head. With the windows broken, this old building was open to all kinds of animals and creatures, seeking shelter. To my credit, I didn't yell from shock at the bat, but I did jump back as I ducked away from it. The metal of the balcony clanged when I took a step on it. Both men stopped talking.

"What was that?" The first asked.

"We just scared a bat," the second responded. "Don't worry about it."

"We should check it out," the first decided. I held

my breath, trying to stave off panic and started, inch by inch, to creep my way back toward the offices. What if the door was locked? It could be. I prayed it wasn't.

"Fine." The second agreed. "But I guarantee there's nothing there." I was almost to the door. I heard them walking. Their footfalls reached the stairs. I stretched out my hand for the doorknob, wishing, begging for the door to open.

They were on the steps. The metal echoed. In a few seconds they'd see me. It had been so stupid for me to go there. Why couldn't I have listened to Bea? The men could've seen me – I saw their vague shapes in the gloom – but they didn't stop bickering and looking at each other. There came a yell from one of them. His foot must have broken through one of the weaker steps.

The office doorknob turned. I slipped inside like a shadow and had it shut behind me without a sound.

"You were right." The first conceded. I wasn't brave or crazy enough to look at them through the blinds. I could still faintly see their flashlights shining through them. "There's nothing up here. Ugh, how long did he say we'd have to guard this place?" I leaned against the wall in relief. I'd made it.

It took the other guy a long time to respond. "Hey," he began, totally ignoring his partner. "Look at the floor there."

"What about it?"

"The dust . . . Are those footprints? None of us have been up here, have we?"

My heart stopped. I hadn't thought of the dust on

the floor. There was nowhere left to run. Nowhere at all. I couldn't lock the door. The entire locking mechanism seemed to have been taken out of the knob. I looked up at the ceiling, remembering the metal overlook situated on the factory's roof. There had to be a way to get up there, but it wasn't from that room, unless it was hidden.

Thankfully, they started to argue again. I had to hide, and they'd bought me time, not much though. I looked around.

"Those aren't footprints. That's nothing. You can't see a thing in the dust on this metal."

"No, those are footprints. Fresh footprints."

"We know animals live in here." I had to fight less to hear them. Their voices got closer and closer. "One of them probably made it."

The office was small. The walls were a faded red. Everything there was covered in dust too. It obviously hadn't been disturbed for a very long time. There was a desk, no chair.

The desk was open front and back. It offered nowhere to hide, but there were also a few tables and a lone filing cabinet. I crept over to them, well aware that I was making more footprints in the process.

"You ever see a rat in sneakers?" The second responded. "What are you afraid of? We'll just check out the office."

The filing cabinet was weird. The drawers were open and empty, but covered in little signs and symbols I didn't bother trying to read. Still, it stood a few feet out

into the room and up against one of the tables, in such a way that I thought I'd be able to sandwich myself behind it.

"I ain't the one goin' on about any spy movie bull like you are." The first man yelled.

"We're secretly guarding a factory for a businessman who doesn't even own the place yet." The second argued. "How much more like spies could we get? Are you holding out for pointless tech? Is that what happened up here, you dropped your shoe-phone?"

They both began to shout. For a second, I thought they actually started to fight. The lights on the blinds didn't move, though. I still took advantage of the noise and tried to shove my way behind the cabinet. Maybe a child would've fit, but I definitely couldn't. Worse yet, it wouldn't move even the little bit needed to make enough room.

"Those prints could have been left from one of our own guys," the first man argued.

"We were assigned to check out the first floor only," the second said. "Besides, these prints are way too fresh. We're the first patrol today and we just came up here."

Just then, there was another noise outside. Maybe they woke more bats. I don't know, but after whatever it was, they were talking quiet enough that I couldn't hear them at all. Desperate, I tried to shove the cabinet again, this time putting all my weight behind it. It still didn't budge, not even a little. The thing was attached to the floor somehow. I grabbed at the back of the cabinet

futilely.

My hand met a little bump. I didn't consciously press it, didn't really understand that it was a button, but I was so desperate trying to move the cabinet that I'd pushed it before I could even consider doing anything else. I panicked there, waiting for the office door to open, knowing I'd be found.

Suddenly, the cabinet began to slide forward, along with a large block of the floor, revealing a spiral staircase beneath it. I staggered back, nearly having fallen down those stairs. Still frantic, I moved back to the hole. The stairs must have been built inside one of the building's support beams, or even into the hillside.

They obviously didn't lead to the ground floor.

Any other time and in any other circumstances I probably would've chickened out. Then, I didn't stop to think. I just ran right down the steps, until I realized that the floor was still open above me.

As much as the thought of getting closed down there was an awful one, I couldn't let those men follow me, wherever I was going. I felt my way along the walls as I descended, terrified once again – until I felt another bump, maybe another button. I hit it.

The cabinet slid back into place. I was left in darkness.