



# THE FIRST DAY

“As last days go, mine sucked.”

**L**ia Kahn is dead.  
I am Lia Kahn.

Therefore—because this is a logic problem even a dim-witted child could solve—I am dead.

Except here’s the thing: I’m not.

“Don’t panic.”

It was my father’s voice.

It was—and it wasn’t. It sounded wrong. Muffled and tinny, but somehow, at the same time, too clear and too precise.

There was no pain.

But I knew—before I knew anything else—I knew there should have been.

Something pried open my eyes. The world was a kaleidoscope, shapes and colors spinning without pattern, without sense until, without warning, my eyes closed again, and there

was nothing. No pain, no sensation, no sense of whether I was lying down or standing up. It wasn't that I couldn't move my legs. It wasn't even that I couldn't feel my legs. It was that, with my eyes closed, I couldn't have said whether I had legs or not.

Or arms.

Or anything.

I think, therefore I am, I thought with a wave of giddiness. I would have giggled, but I couldn't feel my mouth.

I panicked.

Paralyzed.

There had been a car, I remembered that. And a noise, like a scream but not quite; not animal and not human.

And fire. Something on fire. The smell of something burning. I remembered that.

I didn't want to remember that.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't open my own eyes.

They don't know I'm awake in here. In my mind I heard the pounding heartbeat that I could no longer feel, felt imaginary lungs constricting in terror, tasted the salt of invisible tears. They can't.

To my father; to my mother, who I imagined huddled outside the room, crying, unable to come inside; to the doctors, who my father would surely have had shipped in from all over the world; to Zoie, who should have been in the car, who should have been the one—

To all of them I would appear unconscious. Unaware.

I could imagine time slipping by, the doctor's voice rising over my mother's sobs. Still no response. Still no movement, no sound, no flicker of her eyes. Still no sign of life.

My eyes were opened again, for longer this time. The colors swam together, resolving into blurry shapes, a world underwater. At the upper fringe of my vision I caught something bulbous and fleshy, fingers prying my lids apart. And hovering over me, a dim, fuzzy figure, speaking with my father's voice.

"I don't know if you can hear me yet." His tone was steady, his words stiff. "But I assure you everything will be all right. Try to be patient."

My father pulled his hand away from my face, and my eyelids met again, shutting me behind a screen of black. He stayed. I knew, because I could hear his breathing—just not my own.

As last days go, mine sucked.

The last day I would have chosen—the last day I deserved—would have involved more chocolate. Significantly more. Dark. Milk. White. Bittersweet. Olive infused. Caramel filled. Truffle. Ganache. There would have been cheese, too, the soft, runny kind that stinks up a room as it dribbles down your throat. I would have lay in bed all day, eating the food I can no longer eat, listening to the music I no longer care to hear, feeling. The scratchy cotton of the sheets. The pillowcase,

at first cool to the touch, warmth slowly blooming against my cheek. Stale air hissing out of the vent, sweeping my bangs across my forehead. And Walker—because if I had known, I would have made him come over, I would have said screw my parents, forget my sister, just be here, with me, today—I would have felt the downy hair on his arms and the scratchy bristles sprouting on his chin, which, despite my instructions, he was still too lazy to shave more than once a week. I would have felt his fingertips on my skin, a ticklish graze so light that, for all that it promised and refused to deliver, it almost hurt. I would have tasted peppermint on his lips and known it meant he'd elected gum over toothpaste that morning. I would have made him dig his stubby nails into my skin, not only because I didn't want him to let go, but because along with one last real pleasure, I would have wanted one last pain.

This can't be happening.

Not to me.

I lay there. I tried to be patient, as my father had asked. I waited to wake up.

Yeah, I know: total cliché. This must be a dream. You tell yourself that, and maybe you even pinch yourself, even though you know it's cheesy, that the mere act proves it's not a dream. In a dream you never question reality. In a dream people vanish, buildings appear, scenes shift, you fly. You fall. It all makes perfect sense. You only reject weirdness when you're awake.

So I waited to wake up.

Big shock: I didn't.

Stage one, denial. Check.

I learned the five stages of grief when my grandfather died. Not that I passed through them. Not that I grieved, not really, not for some guy I'd only met twice, who my father seemed to loathe and my mother, the dead man's only daughter, claimed to barely remember. She cried anyway, and my father put up with it—for a few days, at least. We all did. He brought her flowers. I didn't roll my eyes, not even when she knocked over her glass at dinner for the third time in a row, with that same annoying aren't-I-clumsy giggle. And Zo pumped the network and dug up the five stages of grief.

Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance.

Since I was dead—or worse than dead, buried alive in a body that might as well be a coffin except it denied me the pleasure of suffocation—I figured I should be allowed to grieve.

No, not grieve. That wasn't the right word.

Rage.

I hated everyone, everything. The car for crashing. My body for burning, for breaking. Zo for sending me in her place. For living, breathing, partying somewhere beyond the darkness, in a body that worked. I hated Walker for forgetting me, like I knew he would, for the girls he would date and the girls he would screw and the girl he would curl up with in his bed, his arms closing around her, his lips whispering promises about

how she was the only one. I hated the doctors who marched in and out, prying my eyes open, blinding me with their pen-size lights, squinting, staring, waiting for some kind of reaction I couldn't give them, all while I was screaming in my head I'm awake I'm alive Hear me Help me and then the lids would shut me into the black again.

My father stayed by my side, the only one to speak to me, an unending monotonic litany: Be patient, Lia. Try to wake up, Lia. Try to move, Lia. It will be okay, Lia. Work at it, Lia. You'll be okay. I wanted to believe him, because I had always believed him. I wanted to believe that he would fix this like he'd fixed everything else. I wanted to believe him, but I couldn't, so I hated him most of all.

Next came bargaining. There was no one to plead with, but I pleaded anyway. First, to wake up—to open my eyes, sit up, swing my legs out of bed, walk away, and forget the whole thing. But that obviously wasn't happening. So I compromised: Just let me open my eyes, let me be able to speak, let me be able to move and feel. Let this not be permanent. Let me get better.

And then, later, still no change, still no hope: Let me open my eyes. Let me speak. Let me escape.

That was before the pain.

Like the doctors, it didn't bother to sneak up on me. It exploded, a starburst of light in the black. I lived in the pain. It was my whole being, it was timeless, it was forever—and then it was gone.

That was the beginning.

Intense pleasure, as spreading warmth building to an almost intolerable fire. Biting cold. Searing heat. Misery. A bubbling happiness that wanted only to laugh. Fear—no, terror. Sensations sweeping over me from out of nowhere, disappearing just as fast as they came, with no reason, no pattern, no warning. And—never staying away too long before returning for a visit—the pain.

I never slept. I could feel the time pass, could tell from the things the doctors muttered to one another that days were slipping by, but I never lost consciousness. I lost control when the waves came, I lost reason and lost myself in the bottomless sensations, but I never got swept away, much as I wanted to. And in the moments in between, when the dark waters were still and I was myself again, I went back to bargaining.

Let me sleep.

Let me die.

“I’ll do it—but you owe me,” I had told Zo. Before.

She’d ignored me, twisting her hair into a loose bun and clipping it just above her neck. Her hair was blond, like mine, except mine was shiny and full and bounced around my shoulders when I laughed, and hers was tangled and limp and, no matter what she did, looked like it hadn’t been washed. I always told her she was just as pretty as me, but we both knew the truth.

“Try again. You owe me,” she finally said, pulling on a faded brown sweatshirt that made her look like a potato. I didn’t mention it. Our parents had selected for girls, selected for blond hair and blue eyes, paid the extra credit to ensure decently low body-mass indexes and decently high IQs, but there was no easily screened-out gene for sloth—no amount of cash that would have guaranteed a Zo who didn’t piss all over every genetic advantage she’d received. “Or do you want me to tell Dad where you really were this weekend? I’m sure he’d love to know that when you said ‘cramming for exams’ you really meant ‘cramming your face into Walker’s’—”

“I said I’d do it, Zoie.” She hated the name. I snatched the key card out of her hand. “So, do I get to know where you’ll be while I’m changing diapers and wiping snot on your behalf?”

“No.”

Neither of us had to work. Given the size of our parents’ credit account, neither of us would ever have to work. Except for the fact that our father was a big believer in productivity.

Arbeit macht frei, he used to tell us when we were kids. It’s German, like my great-great-grandparents. Work will set you free.

I was twelve the day I repeated that to one of my teachers. She slapped me. And then she told me where the slogan came from. The Nazis preached it to their prisoners. Right before working them to death.

“Ancient history,” my father said when I gave him the bad

news. "Statute of limitations on grudges expires after a hundred years." He had the teacher fired.

I wasn't required to get a job because I was an athlete. A winner, my father said every time I brought home another track trophy. A worker. He never came to the meets, but the first-place trophies lined a bookshelf in his office. The second-place ones stayed in my room. Everything else went in the trash.

Zo didn't play a sport. She didn't, as far as I could tell, do anything but hang around parking lots with her loser friends and get zoned on dozers, some new kind that puffed out these foul clouds of smoke when you sucked, so you could feel like a retro from the bad old days before the nicotine ban. "Explain to me why it's cool to look like Grandma," I asked her once.

"I don't do things because they're cool," Zo snapped back. "That's you."

Just for the record, I didn't do things because they were cool.

Things were cool because I did them.

So every day, I ran ten miles at the track while Zo worked her dad-ordained shift at the day-care center, wiping drippy noses and changing shitty diapers, except on the days she suckered me into doing it for her.

"Fine," I told Zo. "But I swear to you, this is the last time."

It was.

The coordinates were already programmed into the car. Our

father would check that night to make sure it had gone where it was supposed to, but he'd have no way of knowing which sister had gone along for the ride. TotLand, I keyed in, then flung myself into the backseat. Walker couldn't wait to be eighteen so he could drive manually, but I didn't get the point. Better to curl up and let the seat mold itself to my body, listen to a mag, link in with Walker to remind him about that night's party, cruise the network to make sure none of my friends had stuck up pics of something I shouldn't have missed (an impossibility since, by general agreement, if I'd missed it, it was worth missing).

But that day I unplugged. No chats, no links, no vids, no music, no nothing. Silence. I closed my eyes.

There was this feeling that I only got when I was running, a couple miles in, after the tidal wave of exhaustion swept past and the world narrowed to the slap of my feet on the pavement and the air whistling through my lungs and the buzzing in my ears—not a feeling, actually, but an absence of feeling, an absence of self. Like I didn't exist anymore. At least not as Lia Kahn; that I was nothing but a blur of arms and legs, grunts, pounding blood, tearing muscle, wind, all body, no mind. Lying there that day with my eyes closed should have been nothing like that, but somehow it was. Somehow I was: Empty. Free of worry, free of thought. Lost in the black behind my lids.

Like a part of me knew it was going to happen.

Like when everything flipped upside down and the scream of metal on metal exploded the silence and the world churned

around me, ground oversky over ground oversky, and then, with a thunderous crack and a crunching of glass and steel, a twisted roof crushing me into a gutted floor, ground, I wasn't surprised.

I tell people I don't remember what happened after that. I tell them I hit my head and it all went dark. They believe me. They want to believe me.

They don't want to hear how I lay trapped, skin gnashed by metal teeth; legs numb, absent, like the universe ended at my waist; arms torn from sockets, twisted, white hot with pain. They don't want to hear how one eye was blinded behind a film of blood but the other saw clearly: black smoke, a slice of blue through a shattered window, freckled skin spattered with red, the white gleam of bone. An orange flicker.

They don't want to hear what it felt like when I started to burn.

I wish I could say my life had flashed before my eyes while I was trapped in that bed. It might have made things more interesting. I tried to force it. I thought if I could remember everything that had ever happened to me, moment by moment, then maybe it would be almost like being alive again. I could at least kill some hours, maybe even days, reliving Lia Kahn's greatest hits. But it was useless. I would start with the earliest moment I could remember—say, screaming at the pinprick pain of my first morning med-check, convinced by toddler rationality that the tiny silver point would suck out all my blood, while my

mothersmoothedbackmyhairandbeggedmetostopcrying, promisingmeacookie,alollipop,apuppy,anythingtoshutme upbeforemyfatherarrived.Iwouldrememberthetearswet onmyface,myfather’sdisgustclearonhis—andthenIwould thinkabouthowthedailymed-checksandDNA-personalized medicineweresupposedtomakeusallhealthyandsafeand live nearly forever, and how nearly wasn’t close enough when yourcar’snavsystemcrappedoutandrammedyouintoatruck oratreeandflippedyouoverandchewedyouup.Iwould remembermymother’shandacrossmyforehead,andwonder whyIneverheardhervoiceinmyroom.

Days passed.

I made lists. People I knew. People I hated. Words starting with the letter Q. I tried to make a list of all the ViMs I’d ever owned, from the pink My First Virtual Machine with its over-size buttons and baby-proofed screen to my current favorite, a neon blue nanoViM that you could adhere to your shirt, your wrist, even, if you felt like flashing vids as you sashayed down the hall, your ass. Not that I’d tried that . . . more than once. But things got hazy midway through the list— There’d been too many ViMs to remember them all, since if you had enough credit, which I did, you could wire almost anything to function as a virtual computer that would link into the network.

I sang songs to myself. I practiced the lines I’d been forced to memorize for English class, because, according to my clueless teacher, “the theater may be dead, but Shakespeare is immortal.”

"To die,—to sleep;—  
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wish't."

Whatever that meant. Walker had done a passage from Romeo and Juliet with Bliss Tanzen playing Juliet, and I wondered if Bliss would be the one—or if you counted her D-cups, the three—to replace me.

I listened to the doctors, wishing they would betray some detail of their personal lives or at least say something other than "delta waves down," "alpha frequency boosted," "rhythm confirmed as normal variant," or any of the other phrases that floated back and forth between them. I tried to move my arms and legs; I tried to feel them. I could tell, when they opened my eyes, that I was lying on my back. It meant there must be a bed beneath me, some kind of sheets. So I tried to imagine my fingers resting on scratchy cotton. But the more time passed, the harder it was to even imagine I had fingers. For all I knew, I didn't.

I stopped trying.

I stopped thinking. I drifted through the days in a gray mist, awake but not awake, unmoving but uncaring.

So when it finally happened, it wasn't because of me. I wasn't trying. I didn't even know what I was doing. It just . . . happened. Eyes closed, eyes closed, eyes closed—

Eyes open.

There was a shout, maybe a doctor, maybe my father, I couldn't tell, because I was staring at a gray ceiling, but I'd done it, I'd opened my eyes, somehow, and they stayed open.

Something else moved. An arm.

My arm. And, for a moment, I forgot everything in the pure blast of relief: my arm. Intact. I couldn't feel it, wasn't trying to move it, but I saw it. Saw it jerk upward, across my field of vision, then back down to the bed again, hard, with a thump. Then the other arm. Up. Down. Thump. And my legs—They must have been my legs. I couldn't feel them, couldn't see them, but I could hear them against the mattress, a drumbeat of thump, thump, thump. My neck arched backward and the ceiling spun away, and I was flying and then a thud, loud, like a body crashing against a floor. Crack, crack, crack as my head slapped the tile, slapped it again, again, all noise and no pain, and then feet pounded toward me and all I wanted was the motionlessness of the dark again, but now I couldn't close my eyes, and two hands, pudgy and white and uncaloused, grabbed my face and held it still, and then for the first time since I'd woken up, everything stopped.

To sleep: perchance to dream.