

THE TERMINALS




A NOVEL

ROYCE SCOTT BUCKINGHAM

THE
T E R M I N A L S

Royce Scott Buckingham



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
St. Martin's Griffin  New York

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This novel is dedicated to my steadfast beta reader and thirteen-year-old son, Aspen Buckingham, who is very nearly the target audience for The Terminals. Thanks, bud, for all the advice.

Thank you also to my incredible wife, Cara, and to Aiden, my intuitive nine-year-old, who brainstormed concepts with us at the kitchen table.

Shout out to Kaylee, Katelyn, Captain Eric, Dr. Dave, and the many others who read portions of the book and subjected themselves to vigorous cross-examination during the writing process.

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Also by Royce Scott Buckingham

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PROLOGUE

With her enhancements, she was faster and stronger than them, but she was also outnumbered and had no weapon.

Siena broke cover and fled, hurdling rotten logs and dodging treacherous thickets. Even during the day it was dark beneath the lush, dripping tree canopy, which filtered out 80 percent of the sun, but her unnaturally wide pupils darted back and forth, spotting every root threatening to trip her up, every thorn waiting to tear her flesh. Her bare teenage feet danced around them, finding flat, spongy ground again and again.

She glanced about for a loose stick she could use as a club, her long auburn hair flying right and left. There was no time to stop and break off a dead limb—she could hear the faint thump and rustle of their tennis shoes less than twenty yards back.

She hit a thinner patch of forest and saw a hint of daylight above. Grabbing a low-hanging branch, she swung up into a tree and climbed for the sky. The ground was quickly obscured behind her, and for a moment, she thought she was clever. But she surprised a small orange monkey and sent it screeching through the limbs. They'd know exactly where she was now—thirty feet in the air directly above them.

Siena left the safety of the trunk and tiptoed out onto a thick branch. It bent under her weight as it thinned, but her balance was exquisite, not merely as good as a ballerina's, but better. It wouldn't hold for long, though. Running away meant no more TS-8. Her extraordinary abilities would fade to normal, like those of her pursuers, who had only just begun the enhancement process. But it was the price she was willing to pay for even a slim chance to live.

A dart whispered up from below and struck the thin branch inches from her foot, injecting the tree with an inky fluid she knew all too well. They were coming up, and they would almost certainly strike her with the next throw. The thin branch dipped like a precarious diving board. She pushed down with her legs, and when the limber branch rebounded upward, she jumped.

Vertical orientation was crucial when canopy jumping—the way the monkeys did it. She flew toward the next tree. Its limbs overlapped those of the tree she'd left, but they were too thin at the tips to support her. She needed to break through to the thicker inner branches. It was a great distance to cover without a run, perhaps twenty-five feet, impossible for an unenhanced person. But she was enhanced. She crashed through the thinner branches. They drew long red lines down her forehead and cheeks as they bent against her face. The scratches might have horrified a normal girl her age—a girl going to formals or having her sorority photo taken—but Siena ignored them, bursting through the canopy toward the thicker wood near the trunk. She tilted her head to dodge the point of a branch that might have stabbed her right eye, and stayed focused, reaching for two different limbs. Her palms slapped wood, closed around it, and then she bobbed, suspended, as the branches groaned against her weight thirty feet above the earth.

There was no time to celebrate the jump. She was still darting distance from her former tree. She yanked herself atop the limbs and climbed, bursting through the canopy's upper leaves into the light.

When she looked back, she saw two dark shapes rising in the tree behind her, silhouetted against the light. The evening sun hung low in the sky behind them. She turned and tiptoed along another branch away from it, hurrying east, and when she reached its springy end she jumped again.

She flew through the tops of the trees, learning more with each leap, rapidly becoming adept. She was beating them. But helicopter blades thumped in the distance. Her heart sank. Her head state wouldn't matter. As soon as the pilot spotted her, the chopper would come for her too, and it would be faster, much faster. Siena frowned—it wasn't any safer atop the canopy than on the ground.

The ocean came into view ahead, a wrinkled blue blanket thrown over the world beyond the lush carpet of forest. She made for it, climbing to a height that allowed her to see up and down the coast. The rocks of the fifty-foot seaside cliffs jutted beyond the tree line to the north. She skittered out on a branch and jumped down toward them, landing and jumping again, using her descent to add speed. A quick look back confirmed that the others were still following. They'd gone to the ground and were running. She had to lose them, she thought, or take them out. She preferred the second option, but her odds against multiple armed opponents were fifty-fifty at best. She could hear the helicopter approaching now. The pilot had seen her, or they'd radioed to the chopper. Now she was being tracked from the air.

There were more than two behind her on the ground. The pair in the tree were merely the vanguard. Her mind clicked through her advantages. Speed, strength, dexterity. Too few against too many. Knowledge of the forest was an important one, however. She'd been here for nearly a year. The new recruits hadn't. She hopped from branch to branch, fought down through leaves to the ground, and was running again. The helicopter wouldn't be able to see her. The other kids would have to chase her down.

Siena heard twigs snapping behind her. They were clumsy, but closing in. Her feet were bloody. If she'd had shoes, she might have simply outrun them. Instead, she made for the cliff. There was a place she knew, a secret spot she'd found during training.

She could hear panting now. The two were close, one very close. She saw a familiar tree, and she recognized a patch of white-speckled shrubbery. And when the cliff edge suddenly appeared beyond her, she was ready.

Her momentum carried her over, but she kept her legs beneath her and spun 180 degrees, hands darting out to grab foliage and arrest her descent just as she drew even with a small cave in the cliffside. She swung, and her momentum threw her inside, where she skidded hard across the cave's floor into the solid rock wall. It hurt, but she didn't cry out. Instead, she bit her lip and waited, breathless.

Footsteps rapidly approached above, followed by a cry of surprise.

The boy who plummeted past Siena looked about nineteen, like her. Like boys she used to date in her other life, her life *before*. He clutched a dart in his fist as though it were a lifeline. It wasn't. She saw a sudden, horrible realization in his eyes as they met hers for a split second on the way by, and then he continued down, his limbs flailing in the air. He abandoned the dart and grabbed at the cliffside foliage, but his hands slid past or yanked it loose without gaining purchase. He tried to get his feet beneath him, but his orientation remained horizontal. Falling sideways, his head slammed against a rock outcropping with the hollow cracking sound of a coconut bursting on pavement. Siena didn't watch him fall the rest of the way. She didn't need to. It was already over.

The others would come and see, she realized. If they searched the area they would find her. She quickly removed her backpack and threw it down after the crumpled pile of male flesh on the beach that had been a teen boy only moments earlier.

The next set of footsteps arrived above her as the waves began to wash her pack of supplies and the

boy's body out to sea. They were heavier, booted footsteps, according to her sharp ears. Adult footsteps. They stopped, and there was silence for a time, and then a radio crackled to life. The man's voice that belonged to the footsteps reported the scene below.

"This is personal trainer," said the voice. "Siena's term has finally expired. And I regret to report that Peter has graduated early...."

Siena hugged her knees in her hideaway as the ocean finished its indifferent cleanup work, leaving the beach empty.

"Looks like we're gonna need another kid."

CAM'S PLAYLIST

1. HELLO MISTER GRIMM 

by The Fallen Angels

2. ROADKILL

by Suicide Squirrel

3. SOUL ON A STICK

by Dog Breath

*"Hello, I've got some news for you.
It's not all good, but it's all true."*

God just screwed me over, Cameron Cody thought.

Cam lay in the adjustable hospital bed wearing earbuds with his music playing low and slow, like the tragic theme song of a nineteen-year-old who was supposed to be the Western Washington University soccer team's starting right wing this year. "Wingman," they called him.

He rolled over and glanced at his heart-rate monitor. It beeped steadily. *Still alive,* he thought. *For now.*

He felt wrong in the bed, like he wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be heading out to parties on Garden Street in a few weeks, getting a tux for homecoming a month later, and making the dean's list by the end of the quarter. More important, he was supposed to be renting the ultimate party house with Kristi Banks and five other friends this term. *Kristi friggin' Banks.* Heck, he was just supposed to get a girlfriend at all. He was supposed to finish college, interview for jobs, and then make his own way in the world.

He was not supposed to be dying.

The stamped metal label on the molded plastic rail beside him read DURA-CARE PNEUMATIC BED. He'd named his bed Numo. Numo boasted 124 different positions—more than the kama sutra—all of which Cam had tried in the first hour via the touch screen controls. He found Numo disturbingly comfortable.

No wonder people come here to expire, he thought. *They make it easy. They give a guy a few months to live, this killer bed, all you can eat, Covert Ops with a wireless controller, some medication to take the edge off, then bingo! Next contestant, please.*

Corridor 3C outside his door, on the other hand, felt sterile. The blank white walls made it seem freakishly wide, and it echoed like a canyon. It smelled like bleach every morning too. When he left his room, he felt like he was entering a whitewashed institutional version of the afterlife. Corridor 3C was the hospital's "death wing," a name the staff used when they didn't think patients were listening.

The noise outside of his door was his mom and dad crying. They also thought he couldn't hear them. But he could. It was embarrassing. Like his buttless gown. With flowers on it.

Cam groaned. *Somebody please tell me I don't have to die in this.*

The sad thing was, when he thought about it, he was already dead. Get good grades? To prepare for what? Improve his dribbling? It's not like he'd be perky come playoff time. And women? He'd spent his younger years being everyone's nonthreatening, nice-guy buddy, and helping his more aggressive friends get the girls. And now that he'd finally put on twenty pounds and figured out how to wear his wispy blond hair so he didn't look like a bowl-cut dork—the secret was spray gel—some freaky disease nobody had ever heard of was going to kill him.

But there's Kristi, he thought. She was perhaps the one upside to the whole dying deal. When he first told her, she'd felt sorry for him, and she'd lain on the couch and hugged him for the entire last show. Now maybe they'd kiss. A lot.

Just then there was a polite, almost apologetic knock on his door. *Kristi*. Right on time. He pulled the covers up over his drafty flowered gown.

"Yo!" Cam answered. It was too loud, he decided, and obnoxious. "I mean, come in, please," he tried instead.

The door opened, and Kristi Banks peeked her blond head in. "Is this a good time?" she asked.

Unless you want to come back when I'm dead, Cam thought.

Kristi slid inside, but clung to the door. She wore a snug Western T-shirt and jeans with heels. Her fluffy, golden hair cascaded over her shoulders and flowed around her curves like a happy river winding through the hills. Cam couldn't help but stare. He heard a rapid beeping and quickly threw a blanket over his tattletale heart-rate monitor.

"Sure," Cam replied. "Thanks for coming."

"Becky said I should," Kristi explained. "I mean, I wanted to, but I wasn't sure if it was okay."

"It's A-okay."

She hesitated, cringing at the sight of all the medical apparatus. Tubes and wires were strung around him like Christmas lights.

"I know I look like a marionette," Cam said. "But I'm not contagious."

Kristi managed a weak smile. "Of course not." She walked to the edge of the bed, where she did *not* kiss him a lot, or even a little. She was so close that Cam could smell the artificially scented apple shampoo she used on her amazing hair.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Strangely fine. Even my regular doctor thought I was healthy. Then this specialist did a CAT scan and found a tumor in my head. But honestly, I feel like riding out to the Whatcom Falls Park and going for a swim in my underwear. Can you drive?"

"You're not too sick?"

"Well, I *am* going to die, if that's what you mean. But my symptoms won't get bad for a while. I'm just here for more testing today with the tumor doc. I should be up and around tomorrow."

Kristi nodded carefully. "Will you be up and around the entire term?"

It seemed an odd question. Then Cam realized what she was getting at. Kristi stood waiting, tapping her long, fake fingernails on Numo's metal rail. Cam felt the skinny nice guy awaken inside him. He tried to fight it, but couldn't.

"If you need to find another roommate, I understand," he said finally.

Kristi looked mildly surprised, but didn't argue. "Really? Because Ben Richards needs a place."

Cam saw her eyes dance when she mentioned Ben's name. He winced. "It's totally okay," Cam added, "seriously."

"You're so nice." She almost hugged him, but wires hung between them. She just patted his shoulder instead. There were a few more uncomfortable questions from her, a few more awkward

jokes from him, but still no kisses.

~~“Well, I should go and let you rest,” Kristi said. She patted him on the elbow this time, another completely uninteresting location. Then she edged toward the door, fingering her pink cell phone in her pants.~~

“I’ve been lying in bed all morning. I’m not tired.”

“But you probably need some time to think.”

Cam thought Kristi probably needed some time to think about who she could call that wouldn’t be dying in a hospital bed on homecoming night. Ben Richards, perhaps.

“I’m glad I came,” she said.

Cam forced a smile. “Me too.”

She ducked out, and Cam could hear her fingernails clicking on her phone as she fled down corridor 3C.

The door had hardly closed shut when Cam’s sister shoved it back open. Trish was five years older than him, too old to be his friend and too young to have a mothering instinct. The result was that she found him annoying. She hadn’t gone to college—not the type. She lived on the freeway side of town in one of two hundred apartments that looked exactly the same, and she sold clothes at the Ready-to-Wear store by the mall.

Trish stood beside Cam’s bed in approximately the same spot Kristi had.

“Sorry if I was ever bitchy to you,” she said.

She was not specific—the apology seemed designed to cover all the mean things she’d ever done or said to him in one fell swoop. Despite its brevity, it was clear to Cam she’d been working on her speech. It was just the right mix of noncommittal regret and profane defiance to let him know that their parents had put her up to it. She said it quickly, and then waited for him to accept it.

“Okay, thanks,” Cam said, though it didn’t seem fair to let her off the hook so easily for a lifetime of resenting him. He knew, however, that she’d immediately complain to their parents if he didn’t, and he wasn’t about to spend an hour of his dwindling life “working out” the issue, with their folks playing emotional referee.

At least she’s efficient at cutting through the mandatory touchy-feely stuff, Cam thought.

Having delivered her speech, Trish stood chewing her gum loudly. She blew a small bubble, which popped and left a pink spot on her lip. The spot bounced up and down as she talked.

“Things have sucked since we found out,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” Cam agreed.

“Mom and Dad have been a total mess. They break down crying every time I need to talk to them about something important.”

“That’s really inconvenient.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault you got sick.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to.”

“You’re funny. I’m gonna miss you.”

“I’m not going to die for, like, another twelve months.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll miss you after that, I mean.”

There was no hug or even a pat on the shoulder. Cam didn’t take offense. They hadn’t had physical contact with one another since she’d hit puberty and instituted the “no touching” rule, not even when passing the butter at dinner. Cam’s skinny nice-guy persona was still lurking, urging him not to make a big deal out of it. Trish seemed to be waiting for him to say he would miss her too, but he didn’t think he would when he died, and he hated to lie.

“Thanks for coming to see me,” he said.

“No problem.” She smiled as softly as was possible for her. “I was on my way to work anyway.”

* * *

The visitors kept coming.

Some guys from the soccer team dropped by with his jersey. Number nineteen. His age. It was neatly folded in a display box, where it would remain for all eternity, unless he broke the glass to get at it due to some sort of soccer emergency. The nickname “Wingman” was scrawled across the purple velvet backing in bright silver. Cam pretended to like it.

His mom’s aunt and her husband arrived next. They were very old and had somehow known him “since before he was born,” though Cam wasn’t sure how that worked. They talked about other people they knew who were dying from various diseases and touched his face with dry, wrinkly hands like a couple of grim reapers. Cam had grown tired of explaining that he felt fine, for now, and they seemed disappointed that his condition wasn’t more painful or interesting, so he began to make up strange sensations. He told them that he sometimes felt like spiders were burrowing through his hair and mentioned with a straight face that he’d had green stool samples lately. He stopped only when his great-aunt told the nurse and she rushed in to see what was wrong with him.

Finally, Mason walked through the door. Mason was his age, but lived in the twenty-four-hour quiet dorms and played HeroQuest online instead of soccer. And the odds that Mason would go to the homecoming dance were very low. But Mason had lived three houses down from Cam since elementary school, knocked on the door every Saturday to see if Cam could come out and play, and had been in Boy Scouts with him when they were eleven. Mason had even skipped the end-of-the-year elementary school trip to the water park in fifth grade to play Risk and Stratego with Cam when he had his tonsils out. Now that they were in college, they didn’t hang out so much, but Mason didn’t give Cam grief about his sports friends, and he still knocked on the door once in a while on Saturdays.

“Nice gown,” Mason said.

Cam laughed for the first time all day. “You like it? I think they have your size, if you’re jealous.”

Mason laughed too. He gave Cam a mind reader’s salute, holding two fingers to each temple and humming. Then he grew quiet, studying the heart-rate monitor and the chart hanging from the bed. “You get a second opinion?”

“This guy’s a specialist. It’s all he does.”

“So what’s your strategy now?”

“What do you mean?” Cam said. “I do treatment, obviously.”

“I heard treatment can’t save you.”

“True. It’s very unlikely.”

“Hoping for something unlikely isn’t necessarily the obvious thing to do.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“Sympathy hookup?”

“Tried it. Didn’t work.”

“Kristi?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. I admire the attempt.” Mason tapped his narrow chin. “You know, you’ve always been ‘doer,’ Cam. I remember when we were in high school and you volunteered our crappy little band to play the end-of-the-year party just to scare us into practicing more.”

“Yeah. You were so mad.”

“It made us good, though,” Mason said. “Best thing I was ever forced to do against my will.”
Cam watched his friend’s face, but there was no sarcasm.

“It seems weird to think of a doer like you lying here in a bed not doing anything,” Mason continued.

“Feels weird too.”

“So ... *do* something.”

Just then, Dr. Singh walked in. The specialist. The tumor doc.

“I hope you’re not giving my favorite patient advice contrary to mine,” the grinning doctor said.

Mason gave Cam another salute. “I shall return as soon as I have a plan to vanquish the evil doctor who has condemned you to death.” He winked at Dr. Singh, and then exited with a flourish.

Dr. Singh stepped to the edge of the bed. He was Indian. India Indian, not Native American. He hadn’t told Cam he was dying at first. In fact, the perpetually chipper doc had come in smiling to talk about the results of the first set of tests. *Smiling!* He had the air of an expert and the credibility of a specialist. He flew in just for Cam’s case, knew the disease like the back of his hand, and the local doctors gave him a wide berth.

“You are a remarkable specimen,” he’d said in his thick accent. He apparently traveled all over the United States to find cases like Cam’s. Confident guy. Friendly too. But “remarkable,” in Cam’s case wasn’t good, and the smiles didn’t keep the traveling doc from eventually delivering the news. Death. A year or less. Ninety-some percent sure, which easily rounded up to one hundred in Cam’s mind.

“I’d like to run some more tests,” Dr. Singh said. “We’re hoping that...”

Cam pretended to listen, but he’d already seen the vague image of the killer tumor in his head at the exact spot where the books said a kidney bean-shaped shadow meant you were doomed. It looked more like a pear to Cam, but he was pretty sure any silhouette of a food item in your primary somatosensory cortex was bad news. The rest of it didn’t matter—the name of the disease, how it worked, why it chose his life to mess up. Didn’t know. Didn’t care. Didn’t listen. All he knew was that he sure as heck wasn’t going to see the world now.

CAM'S PLAYLIST

2. ROADKILL

by Suicide Squirrel

3. SOUL ON A STICK

by Dog Breath

4. WELCOME TO THE ZOO

by The Way Chunky Monkeys

*"Gotta have fleet feet to
play in the street."*

The sun abandoned Cam, escaping over the western horizon, but he didn't fall asleep. Instead, he wandered through a half-waking dream in which he could feel something coming, but couldn't quite see or stop it. He moved slowly, like he was running through sand, and a strange guy was sitting next to ...

Cam's eyes popped open. A strange guy dressed in a tan jumpsuit and leather gloves was sitting next to his bed. He was obviously not a doctor or nurse, and visiting hours had ended two playlists ago. He appeared to be around thirty and reasonably fit—neither fat nor skinny. His ears were a irritated red color, and his hair was sticking up. *Like he's been wearing a headset*, Cam thought. The man loomed over Cam's bed, as though inspecting him.

Cam sat up suddenly. "Whoa! Dude! What the hell?"

"How are you feeling, Cam?" the man asked, unfazed.

"Are you a doc?"

"Do I look like a doc?"

"No. So who are you?"

"I'm someone with an opportunity for you."

"Maybe you didn't get the memo," Cam said, settling back into his pillow, "but I'm sorta fresh on opportunities."

The man grinned. "Oh, but I *did* get the memo. And your medical chart. And your transcripts, your standardized test scores, your application for volunteer service opportunities. I've been a busy guy for the last few days. I even have your soccer stats—no goals last year, but six assists. You're a team player. Your report cards say you also listen carefully and follow directions well."

Cam was fully awake now, all of the cobwebs of sleep suddenly gone. He cocked an eyebrow. "Impressive. So you're a counselor?"

The man nodded. "In a sense, but I'm more than that."

Cam didn't want to be counseled, but he didn't want to be rude either. He let the man keep talking.

"The way I see it, you can spend the last year of your life slowly deteriorating and coming here once a week for uncomfortable, futile treatments until you climb into this comfy adjustable bed or

last time like a cat crawling under a porch to die—”

“Wow,” Cam interrupted. “Not here to paint a cheery picture, are ya?” He eyed the man suspiciously. “But it sounds like there’s an ‘or’ coming.”

“Perceptive.” The man grinned. “Or you can join our organization and help save your fellow man.”

Cam shook his head. “I thought so. Sorry, I’m not interested in joining some religious cult just because I’m dying.”

“Ah, but the special young men and women we recruit travel to exotic locations, drive insane fast cars, and jump out of planes. Does that sound a bit more interesting?”

Cam couldn’t help but perk up. “A bit. Yeah.”

“What do you want from the last year of your life, Cam?”

“I dunno. Soccer, girls, maybe all that cool stuff you mentioned?”

His visitor chuckled. “Besides all of that.”

“What else is there?”

“Anything else. Name it.”

“Money, maybe? Or at least the stuff it buys.”

“Okay.”

“Awesome food? Great workouts?”

“Sure. But those are just *things*. What do you want to do and be?”

“Well, as long as we’re dreaming big, I guess I’d like to be a leading man. You know, win the fight and get the girl, cheesy stuff like that.”

“You want to be a hero?”

“I guess you could put it that way.”

The man nodded. “Ahh. Well, that’s the interesting part, because we recruit an elite group of youth. You and nine others just like you. All with glioblastomas. All terminal. All with superior talents. We train you and send you on clandestine operations—secret missions, if you will. It’s ferociously dangerous. But then, nothing’s more dangerous than what you’re facing here, right? When Cam didn’t answer, the man continued. “I’m not promising you your life back, Cam. You’ll still die. But we give you the chance to be special, and to live your last year to the fullest.”

Cam felt his pulse quicken. He glanced at his heart-rate monitor. Elevated. Over one hundred. Higher even than Kristi Banks had sent it. “What is this?” he said. “The Make-a-Wish Foundation for sick kids?”

“If that simplistic description helps you process what I’m telling you, sure. It’s a commitment to do something meaningful with your time here on earth, and the length of that commitment is—”

“Let me guess. One year.”

“Right. Or until you die, whichever comes first.”

“This sounds crazy.” Cam puzzled over the man. He was strangely honest. Blunt even. No sugarcoating. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Your family got a letter yesterday that said if you die they might be eligible to receive two hundred and fifty thousand dollars through a credit card insurance policy you didn’t know you had correct?”

Cam nodded, wondering how the man knew what they received in the mail.

“We sent that. Your credit card company doesn’t have such a policy. If you decline to join, the letter becomes junk mail. But if you sign on, the money will arrive within two to three weeks.”

Cam’s eyebrows rose again. *So much for my poker face.* The money sounded like the sales pitch part, but he had to admit it was a pretty good offer. His parents would be able to retire, or maybe he

his evil sister get a house and a real life.

~~“So you just send my folks a quarter-million-dollar check for my shortened life?”~~

“We prefer ‘condensed’ life.”

Cam didn’t know if he should believe the guy, but the whole thing seemed too outrageous *not* to be true. It was a lot to consider. *I’ll need time*, he thought.

The man was nodding, gauging his reaction. “Take some time,” he said, as though reading Cam’s mind. “Think it over. I’ll be back at five in the morning before visiting hours. You’ll have one chance to join.”

“I have to talk to my friends and family.”

The man shook his head. “No, you don’t. In fact, if you tell anyone, I won’t return.”

“But I have questions.”

“And we are the answer. Good night.” With that, he rose and walked out.

Cam struggled to untangle himself from the monitors and bedding. Moments later, he was in a cavernous corridor 3C. The nurse was just returning from her break.

“Where’d he go?”

“Where did who go?” she said.

The hallway was empty. The man had disappeared like a whisper.

“Right...” Cam walked back to his room, lay down, and stared at the ceiling. *Time for some thinkin’ music*, he decided. He hit **PLAY** and pushed his earbuds deep into his head.

* * *

Cam drifted in and out, glancing at the clock. Soon it was 4:55, and still no visitor. *Dude’s not coming back*, he thought. It was all part of a stupid dream, he decided. A figment of his emotional distress. Cam refused to beat himself up for having weird dreams, though. He’d just found out he was dying and that had to mess with a guy’s head. In fact, he figured bad dreams were pretty standard in this wing of the building.

Then he heard the knocking. It came from the window. Not the door, the *window*. It might not have seemed so incredibly odd, except that the window was forty feet in the air.

The clock read 4:59 A.M.

Cam abandoned the comfort of Numo, scrambling onto a chair so he could see outside. There was a face in the glass. Bigger than life. Four floors high. Upside down. It was the man in the jumpsuit. He pointed at his watch. Cam opened the window.

“Decision time,” the man said. “Yes or no?”

Cam had been thinking all night, but hadn’t decided. His mind was going in too many directions. Now his recruiter was here, dangling four stories up like Spider-Man, which he had to admit was kind of cool. And the organization he represented wanted Cameron Cody. Kristi didn’t want him. His soccer team wouldn’t be working him into their future plans. No potential employers would invite him to a second interview if he was going to be too dead to work by the time he graduated. In fact, nobody else was going to be picking him for much of anything anymore.

Cam nodded, and the man nodded back. And that was it.

His recruiter rotated right side up, produced a miniature blowtorch from one of the many pockets of his jumpsuit, and went to work removing the safety screen. He chattered as he cut through a rivet, producing an acrid, burning smell.

“You’re coming out this way. I’ll tie you on. Don’t look down if you’re queasy.”

He slid the screen loose and pulled Cam through. Cam clung to him like a panicked monkey who

the man strapped him to his own body with a nylon rope. Then he nonchalantly welded the screen back into place.

“We’ll fake your death,” he was saying. “You were rushed off in the middle of the night for emergency treatment. Medics heli-ported you across the country. You expired on the way. Quite sad. I saw that your parents signed a form donating your body to science. Very progressive of them. We’ll use that. Your remains will have to be shipped out for preservation and dissection, and no one will try to see them. I’m sorry you won’t get to say good-bye. We can arrange for your family to find a note among your belongings, which you wrote to them before you ‘died.’ What would you like it to say?”

Cam imagined his mother finding his empty bed. She would have wanted to say good-bye. His dad might have understood. It was not the best way to go and not what they deserved, but it was better than the dying-cat-under-the-porch option.

“You were great parents,” Cam said at length.

His recruiter nodded. “That’s nice, Cam. Best one I’ve ever heard. Sheesh, I wish I’d told my own mom and dad that. Anything else?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Then we’re off.”

Cam looked down. He was not crazy about heights. “Why go out the window?” he asked, still holding tight despite being roped on.

The recruiter gave him a serious look. “Because it’s more fun.” Then he laughed. “Besides, we can’t drag you through a building full of witnesses and cameras. I already risked being seen last night. Don’t want them to record me near you at the time of your departure.” He began to ratchet them up the rope using a hand crank.

Moments later, they were running across the helipad on the hospital roof, the tail of Cam’s hospital gown fluttering open in the morning breeze, making him glad there were no witnesses.

“Are we getting on that medical helicopter?”

“Yes, but not really. We just painted it that way.”

Then they were boarding and strapping in, Cam wedging himself into one of the rear seats and securing the safety belt. The man put on his headset and quickly, but carefully, ran through a checklist. The blades started thumping, accelerating along with Cam’s heart. Soon the sound overwhelmed his ears, like a song by the thrash metal band Demonkeeper. It was scary, but exhilarating too. The chopper lurched, Cam felt weightless for a moment, and then they were airborne and all he could think of was, *Holy crap, what did I just do?*

As they climbed, his town stretched out below him. First the hospital where he was born, then his neighborhood, his high school, and the sprawling campus of the university. His entire life. For a moment he wondered if he’d already died and if this was his trip to the grand eternity. But he reached up and felt his earbuds still draped around his neck. They were real enough.

His recruiter advised him to get some sleep. It was going to be a long trip. Cam tried to take one last look back, but there was no rear-facing window. He turned his attention ahead. The sun was rising and he was flying straight into it.

CAM'S PLAYLIST

3. SOUL ON A STICK

by Dog Breath

4. WELCOME TO THE ZOO

by The Way Chunky Monkeys

5. SMELLS LIKE MONDAY

by Cheez Whiz

"You all scream like I scream."

Cam was shaken awake, both by his recruiter's hand and the sudden shuddering of the helicopter as it caught a gust of wind. They'd flown straight through the day, stopping occasionally for fuel. He awakened during one stop in what looked like a desert village, and then had slept hard again, still exhausted from having tossed and turned the entire previous night.

The chopper bucked again, and Cam leaned to the window to look out. They were flying high over lush trees and thick brush. A jungle. He could see big water ahead, vast and blue. An ocean. Judging from the sun behind them, the waters he was seeing were to the east. There were no jungles in the continental United States, so it was clear that they'd left the country.

"Can I ask you a question?" Cam said to his recruiter.

"Sure, anything."

"Is this South America?"

"Can't tell you that," the man said as the helicopter dipped and jumped in the rising wind. "Ask me anything else."

"Got any Dramamine?"

"I like you, Cam," he said, smiling.

"You got a name?"

"Pilot," the man said. This time he didn't smile. Cam didn't push it. They began slowing down. Cam watched their speed steadily decrease from 120 miles per hour until they were nearly hovering.

"Are we almost there?"

"Yep." Pilot pointed out the window.

Below them, the jungle was a rolling carpet of deep green, but the vast canopy of trees was interrupted by a single, perfectly round blue dot. The dot seemed small from their height, but Cam guessed that it would be more than a hundred feet across at ground level.

"That's your target."

"Target for what?"

Pilot handed Cam a pamphlet. "Memorize this."

"Why?"

"Because your life depends on it."

Cam opened the pamphlet. It said:

How to Deploy Your Parachute

Pull the drogue out of the pouch at the bottom of your pack and let go of it. The pilot chute will catch the air and inflate, pulling out the deployment bag. There will be a popping sound.

The parachute lines are stowed in a zigzag pattern in the deployment bag. As the pilot chute inflates, the lines unfold and stretch out. The wind inflates the main canopy.

You do not want the canopy to open instantly. If it does, you will decelerate from 120 mph to 10 mph instantly. This will injure you and can rip your lines or the canopy.

When the parachute is out and open, look up to make sure nothing is tangled. If there is a problem, pull the reserve chute using the two handles on your shoulders.

Once you begin to glide, grab the two toggles and steer the parachute to the target.

“Wow. That’s cool,” Cam said. “So that’s the training area where I’m going to learn to skydive?”

“You just learned.” Pilot handed Cam a heavy pack with sturdy straps. “There’s a diagram that shows you how to fasten the buckles and where the handles are.”

The diagram was simple. Just the basics. Easy to memorize. His recruiter had done his homework—Cam paid attention and followed directions well. He’d never been a back-of-the-class, spit-wa shooting, note-passing goof-off.

Cam looked up. He had a sinking feeling, but didn’t have to say so. His expression spoke for him.

The recruiter nodded. “Yep. This is the ‘jump out of planes’ part.”

“It’s a helicopter.”

“Detail-oriented. Good. We like that. Now listen up.” Pilot pointed to the chute in Cam’s lap. “Buckles across the chest. Primary rip cord on the right, secondary on the shoulders. Count to ten and yank. Pull the left tether to fly left, right to fly right. Head for the center of the big blue circle. When you can make out blades of grass, release the primary chute and drop into the drink without it. You don’t want to have the parachute land on you in the water. It can drown you if you get tangled in it. Got all that?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Pilot released the latch on Cam’s door, and it jerked open. The wind from the vast open sky and the blast of air from the chopper blades whipped Cam’s straight blond hair back and forth across his face. A week ago his mom had told him he needed a haircut. *She was right*, he thought.

Cam began to put on the chute, checking each step against the diagram. It went on easily, and too quickly for his liking. They were hovering now, but the helicopter still shucked and jived in the wind.

“Any questions?” Pilot asked.

“About a million.”

“About the jump procedures.”

Cam took a deep breath. He’d paid attention. He’d followed directions. He was *detail-oriented*. He had no questions about the procedures. He shook his head.

“All right, we’re here,” Pilot said. “Hop out.”

Cam grabbed the doorjamb as though he were confident and ready. All he needed to do was scoot over one foot and he’d be on his way. But he found that it was a long twelve inches between his seat and the yawning door.

Pilot frowned at his hesitation. "This is your stop. I'm going to land somewhere you can't go."

Cam grimaced. "Out? Seriously?"

"Out."

Cam scooted over. Then he was flying.

The helicopter was instantly too far above for him to hear it anymore. The air rushing past filled his ears. He'd told himself he wouldn't scream, but he did, long and loud, like a wailing siren.

Then he realized he was clutching the rip cord and counting to ten. He was already on six. The ground hurried toward him, getting bigger as though he were zooming in on it through a camera lens. It seemed to approach faster as it grew closer. *The blue dot is a lake*, he decided. Perfectly round. *Now wait, it's a sinkhole*. He'd read about sinkholes. Collapsed underground caverns of limestone and quartzite that filled with water.

"... nine, ten." He pulled.

There was a nasty *pop*. Cam remembered that this was a good thing. The main canopy deployed and his body jerked as the straps bit into it, and the world suddenly slowed down. He was drifting. It was strangely quiet. He could hear the distant thumping of the chopper blades now, but they were fading away. Again came the feeling that he'd crossed over into some strange afterlife. *In a way, he thought, I have*.

He looked up. No tangled lines. He groped for the toggles. *Pull left to go left*, he remembered. *Right to go right. Drop into the water when you see the grass*. Simple enough. Falling from a great height had a way of focusing one's thoughts, he decided.

The sinkhole waited below and ahead of him. Apart from a large clearing a few miles to the southwest, it was the only open area in the forest. He was gliding in the right direction, sort of. Steering was more difficult than Pilot had made it sound. Cam yanked too hard left, then overcorrected to the right. *Oh no!* he thought. *I'm going to miss it*. He pulled steadily back to the left, and a lucky gust of wind helped, and soon he glided out over the blue pool.

The sides of the sinkhole were sheer solid stone. It looked to Cam like giant aliens had punched a perfect circle in the bedrock with a hundred-foot-wide drill. The water waited, dead calm twenty feet below ground level. There seemed no way to climb the smooth walls. Cam couldn't help imagining himself in a jar where cruel boys killed insects, their legs scrabbling against the slick sides in vain until they gave up. *I can't drop*, Cam thought. *I'll tread water until I drown*. Suddenly, he could see the grass rimming the hole. It occurred to him that perhaps his recruiter had brought him here to die, and he hesitated. Then he saw a dangling rope ladder across the pit. But now it was too late to drop—his momentum would hurl him into the rock wall. *How do I pull up?* he thought madly. *There was nothing in the instructions about that!*

Cam hit the trees that lined the top of the sinkhole at full speed. Branches beat and raked his body as he crashed through them, and leaves obscured his vision so that he couldn't tell if he was going to smash his head open against a trunk. Finally, he was yanked to a jarring stop. Lots of scratches. No trunk. He dangled, swinging back and forth.

"Okay," he mumbled, "that sucked."

He hadn't broken any bones that he could tell, but he'd been well punished for doubting his guide. He'd bruise badly for sure, and he was bleeding in several places. Cam looked up. The chute was fouled among the branches above him.

Cam groaned and pulled himself atop a big limb, where he released the lines with a *click*. One stray cord was still hopelessly tangled around his leg. He pulled himself to a sitting position to get his bearings.

He was high in a massive, gnarled tree, perhaps twenty feet off the ground. He glanced about. The tree had huge seedpods and gray-brown bark on its spindly trunk. *A kapok?* He remembered the strange kapok tree's distinctively large seedpods. He'd read about them in a copy of *Extreme Nature* magazine in his dentist's office. They grew in the Amazon jungle and Africa, and their silky floss was used to wrap poison darts for blowguns. He surely wasn't in Africa. *So this has to be South America*, he decided. *But where in South America? The middle of nowhere*, Cam thought, *that's where.*

The first order of business was to get down. Once on solid ground, he could start by investigating the rope ladder that was obviously intended for people who dropped into the water properly, which he hadn't.

But before he could try to untangle himself there was a rustling in the brush. A man with a machete stepped through the forest understory at the base of the tree.

The man was hard-looking and sun-browned, well equipped with a canteen, a loop of rope, and a bowie knife on his belt. *Militant? Smuggler?* Cam hoped not.

As Cam sat there hoping, the man looked up and frowned, seeming to reconstruct in his mind what must have happened. Then he came up, climbing hand-over-hand with the dexterity of a gymnast. He was strong. His cantaloupe-thick upper arms bulged as though his muscles had muscles. When he reached Cam's branch, he drew the machete again. Cam cringed as it rose, prepared for the worst, then it fell on the line tangled around his leg, cutting his cord.

The man tucked the machete away. "So, did you scream on the way down?"

Cam didn't answer.

"It's okay." The man laughed. "You all do."

"Who are you?" Cam asked.

"Me? I'm your personal trainer...."

CAM'S PLAYLIST

4. WELCOME TO THE ZOO

by The Way Chunky Monkeys

5. SMELLS LIKE MONDAY

by Cheez Whiz

6. THE OATH

by Slinky

"You fling poo. That's whatcha do."

"Leave the chute, Cam," his personal trainer said when they reached the bottom of the tree. "It has served its purpose and graduated, and we have to get moving."

Cam nodded, stretching his legs to make sure he hadn't cracked bones or torn muscles. He seemed to be more or less intact.

"So, what did you learn from that, Cam?"

"Follow the directions?"

"Bingo. First lesson. Follow directions."

"Is it all right if I call you something normal, like Bob or Frank, or are you all named after your jobs?"

"Right to business, eh? I'm Ward. But no last name, in case you were about to ask."

Ward faced him, but didn't extend a hand to shake. Instead, he pulled a tube of ointment from one of his many pockets and quickly smeared it on Cam's arms where he'd been slashed by the branches and on a gash in Cam's face he didn't realize he had. Then Ward strapped bandages across the wounds.

"There. You look better already. Come on."

With that, Ward glided into the jungle understory like a panther. Cam had no choice but to plunge in after him. He struggled to keep up. Pilot had given Cam baggy gray sweatpants, a T-shirt with a picture of a howler monkey that said **WHATEVER**, and light canvas boots that seemed to be one-size-fits-all.

If I die now, Cam thought, at least I won't be found in that ridiculous gown. In fact, I probably won't be found at all.

They circled the rim of the sinkhole, and Cam glanced down into the crystalline stillness of the lake each time they stepped close to the edge. Sunk in the earth and with the cover of trees all around, no wind disturbed it. There were no ripples. The surface could have been a sheet of glass. Cam kicked a rock over the edge. It hit with a violent splash. The water opened up for an instant, then closed over the stone and calmed as though the rock had never existed.

Ward watched him out of the corner of his eye. "Only about half of you hit the water, in case that's what you were thinking about."

“I was thinking that this lake is kinda creepy.”

“And kinda beautiful, eh?”

“I suppose. Anyone die in there?”

“Not yet.”

They reached the area above the rope ladder and turned into the trees, where the heavy heat of the forest bathed them in a warm layer of instant sweat. Ward seemed to glisten, while Cam simply dripped like a melting candle. When he wiped his face with his shirt, he found the cotton fabric already saturated. Curious yellow flies buzzed around him in a cloud, like insect groupies excited by his arrival. They discovered every exposed patch of skin, and each bite left a pinpoint of blood where they'd worshiped him. They seemed to ignore Ward. Perhaps the familiarity of his flavor bored them. Cam thought. He, on the other hand, was tasty new cuisine.

Cam was pleasantly surprised that Ward spouted information like a happy tour guide as they trudged through the dim understory of the forest. Pilot had told him almost zilch. Ward confirmed Cam's suspicion that he'd landed in a kapok tree, explained why the flies liked him so much—Cam's U.S. diet probably included a lot of sugar and salt, which made his sweat smell especially tasty to them—and he pointed out various flora and fauna as they passed or trod upon it. Cam heard monkey chattering in the distance, and birds called to each other in full, rich voices unmuted by fear of humans, telling him that he was the stranger here.

“What's the most exotic place you've ever been, Cam?”

“The Tiki Room. Frontierland. Space Mountain. A lot like this place, only with paved paths and hot dog stands.”

Ward laughed loudly.

They walked for miles, or at least it felt like miles—the terrain was difficult, and as much time was spent crawling over downed trees and wriggling through thick brush as walking. The beauty of the jungle was wearing off. Cam was hungry, tired, and could feel a blister starting on his left heel.

“When do we get where we're going, anyway?”

“Now,” Ward said as he hacked a path through a wall of thorny bushes with his machete.

Beyond the bushes, the world opened up. Light streamed in, and Cam found himself peering over vast open water. The ocean. They stood atop a high cliff.

“Down there,” Ward said, pointing to the beach below.

Cam could see faint dots in the distance spaced at intervals too regular to be natural. Some sort of man-made structures.

“How do we get down?”

“We climb.” Ward pulled off his pack and began to unload rope and harnesses. “There's no path to the beach. It's safer that way.”

Cam wondered what was safer about climbing down a cliff to get to their destination, and then realized that Ward must mean the destination was safer from *others* trying to get to it.

Ward secured the rope to a sturdy tree, strapped himself in, and motioned for Cam to follow his lead. Cam stepped into the harness, fiddled with its straps and buckles, and then looked up at Ward.

“Is this good?”

“Good enough. Let the rope out gradually as you descend.” With that, Ward stepped backward over the edge of the cliff.

Cam was a good athlete, and he could already bench-press fifty pounds more than the year before. But halfway down his teeth were gritted, his fingers were cramping, and his biceps burned. He clung to mouse-sized handholds, not trusting the rope, and the toes of his unsized boots were jammed in

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