

AMELIA'S BLOG

by

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ABSTRACT

JENNIFER LISETTE SANTIAGO. *Amelia's Blog*. (Under the direction of
PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

Amelia once deeply appreciated the online community that had formed around the blog of the charismatic writer called Rei Locke. When Amelia learned that Rei Locke had been lying about her life and inventing her accomplishments all along, she felt betrayed and published a rant and explanation of the discovery on her own blog. Because of this, the online community with cult-like devotion turned on her and Lenore, the woman who had helped her reveal the lies. Faced with death threats that soon grow into attacks, the two women unite to find a way to survive the attacks, end the danger, and return their lives to normal. Pursuing these goals and the truth of Rei Locke's identity leads them on a journey across the United States as they develop a deep friendship and discover all they are capable of.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The process of writing the chapters that are now my thesis has been at least twice as challenging and rewarding as I expected. While I had written novels before, I had focused almost entirely on short stories since starting college, assured that the skills would transfer. While they did, it often took time for me to understand how to apply the skills in the new format. Though I still have a lot to learn, I believe I have taken many steps forward. I also have what I hope will be the start of an engaging novel.

The novel is about Amelia, a woman who was deeply involved in the online community following a charismatic writer called Rei Locke. After another writer successfully convinces her that Rei Locke had been lying all along about her life and accomplishments, Amelia recklessly publishes a rant and explanation of the discovery. She had underestimated the devotion of Rei Locke's cult-like following, and she soon finds herself facing death threats, attacks, and even attempts to kill her. Her rant also ensured that Lenore, the woman who convinced Amelia of Rei Locke's lies, would face attacks as well. The two join together to survive, not sure that they can trust anyone else. In trying to solve their problems, they travel to the United States and develop a deep friendship.

Before even coming up with the idea, I had a few goals and criteria for my novel. I knew that I wanted to work on literary fiction. I wanted to focus on Latina women. I wanted my characters to be larger than life, and I wanted to focus on intellectual heroes. I

hadn't envisioned the heroines as detectives, but they were supposed to be in something like a game of chess with the antagonist of the story. These remained my criteria in choosing from the list of story ideas I had brainstormed, though they did not necessarily remain part of the thesis itself.

It isn't too hard to remember why I wanted to focus on these things, and I do not think this is the last time I'll explore these topics. My freshman composition class covered the topic of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Early in the semester, we happily shouted out the names of stories, old and modern, that fit this format. However, when the professor asked for examples that feature women, the class was stumped. Even the professor could not think of one. When we expanded the definition of the hero's journey for the sake of including some women on our list, we found that there were still few fictional adventures about women and fewer that did not share the spotlight with a male hero. While I do not doubt that many more stories today feature women in heroic roles, I still doubt that there is complete balance in the library. I still think there are many places where women need to be written in so future readers with my tastes will find more female characters taking the fictional adventures they would like to read about. I do not think the story I created is particularly notable for the roles of women, but I still feel that it is a step in the direction I want to pursue, at least for a while. I am happy that the story features women on both sides (protagonists and antagonists), that the protagonists have women as role models and allies, and that the story explores an aspect of their lives not tied to romance. These ideas were important to me, and I think that as I finish it, I will continue trying to put my characters into the roles I would like to have read more often.

The topic I chose was inspired by an article about a man who created a false identity on the internet and had numerous supporters for it; I also drew from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories as I started imagining the characters and their relationship. The initial idea was for a story about two girls who fall under attack from an obsessive online group and end up on the run as they try to find the truth and return to their normal lives. This concept has remained. Early in developing the story, I imagined it being told one of the characters from the near future. The original plan was to focus on developing my skills in characterization, and I think that remained throughout, though there were many other issues to work on as well. While these basic elements remained consistent, much of the way this seed of an idea developed changed dramatically.

The story changed for many reasons as I progressed, even as the idea stayed the same. Initially, I thought the lies presented by the antagonist would be the grounds for an exploration of technology and other issues. A lot has changed in the world since I first started writing this. With time, I have realized that the understanding of, and importance placed on, what is true has changed quickly and dramatically in our society. This has become a significant influence on how I think about what the antagonist is doing. These political changes also have helped me as I try to think about the cult-like following that the antagonist creates, since I now must consider why they follow her and whether they would care that she is lying. The climate has made it easier to write characters like Odett as more rounded and realistic, as the previously unimaginable is becoming more realistic to me. While the story may be shifting to a more political statement than I intended, I think that including this commentary, even as it is still mild, is slowly turning it into a stronger and more realistic narrative. Current events also are helping me better represent

the world the characters are navigating and how such events might shape their mindset, as much of the story takes place in the time leading up to the election. This has influenced my descriptions of setting and will potentially impact their reactions with people around. Doing this has made me more aware of how the writers of works I read for this project and in other classes are engaging with the politics and culture of their time, such as Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*. I suspect that I will increasingly look to those and other works for inspiration on how I can use the potential commentary to strengthen the story.

Some of my struggles with the subject, and perhaps craft, surprised me. One is that my main characters were initially almost entirely reactive and often extremely slow in deciding what to do and realizing what was happening. The effect was the opposite of the adventurous, intellectual heroines I had envisioned. Every draft seems to have pulled them closer to that original vision, but these struggles have helped me to better understand the process of developing characters and to improve my ability to present characters that will be received by readers with the character traits I intended for those characters to have.

The way I thought about the craft elements of this story also evolved. The initial plan had included a more traditional story with the fragments of blogs placed inside it. It included more writing from characters like Lenore and Rei Locke. This ultimately changed as the story became Amelia's blog. Filtering everything through her point of view automatically changed the way I had to think about voice and characterization, but it has been a good exercise that I think has helped me learn about both. Trying to consistently write in her style and consider how the whole story contributes to her

personality and voice has made me more aware of voice and style in narration in general. I started looking to stories where the narrator had a voice that stood out to me, such as Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. These became models for how I could explore voice and the intrusion of commentary that refers to the narrator's present. Amelia has slowly gotten more moments of inserting her present-day self into the text, reminding readers of the dangers she is still facing, and explaining her perspective. I have also had to consider how Amelia would write and why she would tell her story. This has become an important part of the story itself and the craft challenge, as I did not envision Amelia writing in the more lyrical style that came naturally to me. I have enjoyed, however, placing small hints about her changing, even as a writer, by including some of her work written during the events of the story and making them distinctly different from the main narration.

My first attempt at writing this story had the first five chapters scrapped. This was definitely a big lesson, but I still struggled a lot with pacing even after that happened. It wasn't until late in the process that I started to feel like the story moved along well. In reflecting, I blame a lot of my struggles on the difficulty in understanding how to transfer my skills from writing short works to writing long ones as well as my very flawed understanding of "Literary Fiction," which I seemed to think meant it must move slower. I now see that, without realizing it, my misunderstanding of the genre had led to difficulties with a few short stories before. In working on this, and realizing that many of the stories I read were literary fiction, I understood the cause of my mistakes and was able to adjust and make the writing process a bit easier. The biggest improvement throughout the drafts has been bringing more conflicts and obstacles toward the

beginning of the story while quickly introducing high stakes for the protagonists. I think I have gotten better at developing the chapters and subplots, and I hope to continue improving.

Outside of this story, another issue I had struggled with for a long time was making characters more distinct from each other. While I do not think that I was making the characters all like myself, I found that even with changing their goals, motivations, and some of their quirks, many of my main characters seemed extraordinarily similar—something other students had also pointed out. Reading craft textbooks like Alice LaPlante's *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story*, Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, and Julie Checkoway's *Creating Fiction: Instruction and Insights from Teachers of Associated Writing Programs* helped me break away from that by helping me develop more complex backstories, use foils more effectively, explore the impact of place on character, and create differing motivations so both Amelia and Lenore seemed distinct from each other and my previous characters. From the beginning, the two have dramatically different ways of thinking about their situation as Amelia refuses to feel the appropriate concern and Lenore tends to overreact. They have different opinions about writing and annoy each other even when they are not discussing their current situation. Amelia is much more outgoing, while Lenore is more reserved. Both are dealing with internal struggles that are very different. Amelia feels the pressure to fix her mistakes, upset about the way that they have affected her and afraid her mistakes may ultimately cause others to get hurt, but she is also struggling not to be defined by what she perceives as her weaknesses and her constant mistakes. Lenore is overwhelmed by the situation; she never left her city before and has never experienced so much attention.

Both are incredibly lonely and hope to become friends though they do not know how to reach out and achieve that goal. During our discussions, Professor Chancellor called my attention to the possibility of conveying their gestures and body language, and I have been exploring ways of making them more developed and distinct characters through descriptions of those as well. I have learned that presenting the two characters together has made it easier to show how they are unique. In learning how to present these traits and make the characters' individuality more apparent, I believe that I succeeded in learning more about characterization and in creating characters that are different from those I wrote in the past. I suspect I would like to continue developing them, and I hope that as I continue to write their arcs and backstory, they will prove even more distinct.

Reflecting on the stories I read for this project and in other classes both helped present dilemmas and added intriguing changes. Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* came to mind as I was working on the second draft and his style in some parts may have been part of the reason I thought of adding comments at the end, though I am still working on how they will be a growing contribution to the plot. Choosing comments seemed natural to the format of the story while still allowing me to experiment a little; the comments also are one of the only elements that would not be filtered through Amelia's memory and perspective, so I think that this will be an interesting addition to the story, even as it appeared in a latter draft. I had not thought about this as I was reading O'Brien's work, but it has continued to be a resource for me to draw from and may eventually help as I work on how to make comments part of the story.

One thing I wanted to do from the start was develop the women as bilingual, or at least living in a household that spoke two languages. This is something that had intrigued

me for a long time. Though I am not quite bilingual, I have always heard both English and Spanish at home, but I had made few, if any, attempts at recreating that in my stories. Over time, representing this has become a craft challenge I am even more intrigued by for how difficult I find it—nothing seems to feel right for me. Even though it is natural in my life, code switching in my writing has often seemed forced or like it distracts from the story I am trying to tell. However, when I was trying to improve the pacing of these chapters, I also felt like the imagery was slowing it down and ultimately had to write more in order to create a more vivid story. Code switching may ultimately become an important part of immersing the readers instead of a distraction, but I still need to figure out how I want to approach it in Amelia's narration and conversations. Some stories, such as Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, have helped me to think about how to bring Spanish into English writing, but it seems like this is a part of voice that will take time to master, though I am happy with the small attempts I have made in this story so far.

I know that my work on even these chapters is not done, but it has improved my overall skills in characterization and pacing, among many other craft elements. It has also allowed me to explore the world I live in and my potential contributions to the world of fiction. My hope for the rest of the novel is that it will show Amelia and Lenore developing a deep friendship as they overcome enormous obstacles and terrifying situations. They will encounter many other people who support Rei Locke and face the problems they had even before the story's inciting incident. Rei Locke (Reina) will hopefully become a frightening antagonist for her ruthlessness, determination, resources, and intelligence, but also one that can gain a little bit of empathy for her fear and

reasoning. Early on, I pictured the women chasing and fleeing from her across the United States as I explored the country from their perspective, and that has remained an important part of the plan for this novel. I hope to explore many of the themes in more depth and to continue developing my craft skills as the two timelines merge, the comments and general format of the story become more significant, and the characters change as a result of their experiences. I hope that after finishing the story and with continued improvements to my skill and to the story itself, this will become a published novel. When I started thinking about what to write, I thought a lot about what I had written in the past. I like writing stories that are fairly different from each other, even as I also enjoy exploring similar themes and topics. I, therefore, also hope that this novel will push me toward new and different projects with the skills to develop them into interesting and meaningful work.

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CHAPTER 1: HELLO WORLD

Blog Post By: Amelia 11

15 November 2016

1,258,349 people want me dead. To be fair, that's from an online poll, so the margin of error must be enormous; no one should trust anything on the Internet. About 8 months ago, there were three people, with a margin of error at around two. I'm not really writing this to become everyone's best friend, but if I could get that down to like 100,000 people wanting me dead, with the rest being kind of ambivalent like they used to be, that would be nice.

I want to tell my story as fast as possible because I don't know how much time I have. I don't even know if I have enough time to type up this first post, but I also don't want what you've heard on the news to be all you know about me. So, let's begin with an About Me. I don't trust you to click on the About Me page.

To start: I'm 24, born and raised in North Carolina. I have black hair, black eyes, and a healthy tan. I'm 5' 9". I paint my nails bright colors, and I wear practical clothing or super girly clothing and sometimes both at once. Weekends were usually fun--hiking, camping, kayaking, white water rafting, skydiving, spelunking, and basically whatever else I could save up for. I have one sister. She does not let me borrow her clothes, or anything else. She does impose advice. I love her dearly.

Now you know me. I assume the earliest events have been impossible to avoid with the news dissecting, re-dissecting, and arguing over it all, at least the gist of it. However, a summary wouldn't hurt, and it's always given some sort of spin, so here it is from my own mouth--well, fingers--

I decided to write a comment on a lonely blog (run by cacoethes scribendi). I'm an idiot. I was not intimidated by the name "cacoethes scribendi." I'm an idiot. I received a 50 page "thank you" loaded with insults of my work and then turning to my favorite blog and calling everything my internet friend (Rei Locke) said to be a lie. I defended my internet friend. Loyalty isn't dead (Also, I'm an idiot.). Cacoethes scribendi replied and picked apart every word of Rei Locke's blog. Decades of responses, taken apart with a fine-tooth comb to show all the contradictions and impossibilities. I contacted Rei Locke in public comments. Rei Locke wrote me back. Cacoethes scribendi picked apart the new reply. I believed cacoethes scribendi. Loyalty is dead.

For the most famous part: I used my own sorry blog to release cacoethes scribendi's previously-private message picking Rei Locke apart. Rei Locke had three million followers. Three million followers were not so fond of me.

For the less known part: it took three days for me to receive enough death threats to decide it might not be smart to stay at home, even if 99 percent were probably trolls. To be honest, at first it shocked me. How does a normal person get death threats? But after a while, as they got detailed, and as the numbers piled up, I stopped caring. Nothing even surprised me anymore. Still, one day, with a quick mention of going on a road trip, I packed up a backpack and left. I didn't know if I was overreacting or underreacting. I had

no plan, no one I was willing to stay with, and barely any money. It took two days of bored wandering before I contacted *cacoethes scribendi*.

On April 10th, I drove to a park about an hour and a half from Charlotte, North Carolina. I can't remember the time, but it was late. The sky had grown slightly redder, and with it, the leaves and the water. I was still about an hour early. I don't know what inspired me to show up so early. Impatience? Probably not caution.

I left the car with a spring in my step, only locking it out of the habit my parents had ingrained in me. You'd never have thought at that moment that people were undoubtedly typing up gruesome descriptions of ways I could die.

As expected by our plan, there were few people around at that time. While driving around, it also became clear that our little plan made us more likely to be noticed and that sneaking up on us would be easier in the dark. I didn't particularly care.

Humanity had left its mark, of course—posters from the primaries still hadn't been taken down and graffiti marked the dueling responses to HB2.

Though I didn't know the park well, *cacoethes scribendi*'s extensive descriptions left no question of where to step, even in the dimming light, so I danced past bushes and under trees where anyone could be hiding. I didn't think a thing about it, even knowing the possible dangers. Instead, I spent my time wondering if *cacoethes scribendi* had been there early in the day and taken notes or if she'd visited the park so many times that the place of every twig and broken branch was etched into her brain.

I slowed down when I saw the described bench and the woman seated on it. With my impatience, it's strange that I didn't speed up. A human. For human interaction.

Company. Socializing! Still, what would I say? A week alone had left me feeling rusty and out of practice. I knew she could have set a trap for me easier than anyone, but that only worried me because it would mean less chance at friendship.

I absorbed what I could see while quietly frozen as if the topics for conversation and proper manners would suddenly appear before me.

She was short. That was obvious even while she sat on the bench since she had a far easier time swinging her legs than I ever could have from the same seat. Her hair was short and curly, almost as dark as my own. Her clothes didn't seem to have a single stitch of bright color, though it probably seemed even more muted in the dying light.

She wore a long skirt that clearly showed all the twigs she'd passed along the way, making me think she might not be a frequent visitor. At the same time, she'd left them in so perhaps she just didn't care what got caught in her clothes.

Fitting to her pretentious username, she was writing in a palm-sized notebook while holding it two inches from her face.

I finally stopped spying and continued walking, stomping on a few twigs intentionally for the loud crunch. I wasn't not sure if she'd heard me already, but even this didn't seem to call her attention. I started to wonder if this really was *cacoethes scribendi*. Perhaps some random woman had just wanted to write peacefully in the park. With barely any light. Perhaps I shouldn't have assumed that *cacoethes scribendi* would arrive as early as I did.

I sat down on the other side of the bench, careful to keep a significant amount of distance between us. She just kept writing.

"Are you--" I should have looked up the pronunciation.

Well, she finally looked at me. “What is it you wanted?” She turned back to the scenery while she spoke.

“Hi. I’m Amelia,” I said because we hadn’t gotten to that part yet.

“I figured you’d have used your real name. Smart.”

I put my hand down, not sure if she’d even seen it.

The bushes rustled behind us. Cacoethes scribendi jumped to her feet and turned, stopping after one long stride as if she were about to start sprinting over the uneven clay and visible roots.

She must have heard when I approached.

I laughed—carefully with her, not at her, even though she was not laughing at all. “Probably just a squirrel. I can see the advantages of meeting late, but it does make things spookier when we’re already--”

“Why did you want to meet up? Why couldn’t we discuss this online?”

Because I hadn’t spoken to anyone outside of a drive-thru window in days, but I knew better than to say that.

“I figured we’re both in the same situation--”

“Whose fault is that?” she suddenly shouted before covering her mouth with both hands and looking around.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

She laughed, but it certainly wasn’t intended to be with me.

I leaned toward her just the tiniest bit. “I really am sorry,” I said. It was the absolute truth.

She didn’t respond at all.

After waiting a little while, I continued. “I figured that if we met up, we could stick together and--”

“And make a bigger target for them?” She set the notebook down open on her lap, and it caught my attention. There were some words that I recognized from English, and perhaps a few from Spanish. There were also some symbols that clearly weren’t from English or Spanish. It was also clear that it wasn’t just one, or even two, more languages crammed into that tiny page.

I was still attempting to read as I said, “Support each other.”

“Support each other in what? You aren’t even doing anything! You messed up and now what? You’re sorry? You live on the run? Are you waiting for this to be forgotten, because no one is forgetting--”

“I know! I know. I messed up.”

“I can’t believe you even fell for that scam.”

I thought, but did not say, that was a bit much. She’d had to write 50 pages to explain how it was all “clearly” a scam, so it wasn’t too much my fault that I hadn’t seen through it. The 3 million other people still caught up in it also supported me in this, even if they wanted me dead.

“I’m trying to fix it.”

“How? Have you actually tried doing anything intelligent to manage the problem?” She sounded afraid of my answer, and perhaps a little like she might throw up.

“All right. I’m trying not to do anything to make it worse.”

“Well done,” she said. She actually did look relieved, which I found slightly offensive but did not comment on.

I knew I had to use this idea. Apparently emotional support was not going to work here. “What’s your plan? How are you going to fix this?” I asked.

She hid her face in her hands.

I took a guess at what that meant. “So, two heads are better than one, aren’t they?” I asked.

She swallowed and glanced at me. At least it was clear that she was taking the time to think about what I was saying. “For what?”

“Fixing this,” I said.

She leaned further away from me with a complicated expression of confused disgust. “Why should I have to fix what you messed up? It’s a bigger target.”

I knew, but I saw it as a bigger target for the sake of *company*. I’d already picked up that she wouldn’t be moved by that argument, though.

“It’s a better chance at success. Teamwork. Yes?”

“You haven’t been doing anything at all,” she said, but I could tell she was thinking. She pulled at a strand of her hair, twisting it into rope. After a moment, she dropped her hand. “Why should I even trust you? You were in this cult to begin with.”

For a moment, I lost sight of my goal. “It’s—it’s not a cult,” I said. I paused to regather my thoughts from wherever my brain had been scattered at her extreme accusation. I stood up, unable to contain myself as I got back on track. “We got into this together. As far as I can tell, we’re the only people we can trust. Everyone else in the world might be another death threat hiding behind a username.” Fear and strategy. See? I could be strategic. I didn’t even feel bad about it in my current situation.

“I know,” she said. And quieter, “Why do you think I’m here?”

I felt flattered.

Then she stood up to leave. “This was a mistake. I’m getting death threats. Recklessness is not the way to go,” she said.

I sat down. “You come up with a plan to get us out of this mess, and I’ll help. Wholeheartedly,” I said. I had to think of another word for ‘thinking.’ “Strategy isn’t my strongest skill, but I am good at doing whatever needs to happen. Tell me what to do, and I’ll succeed. We can make a good team. I know we can, and I want out of this mess too.”

She was still making a show of untangling her skirt from where it was not tangled. I felt like that was a good sign, even as I knew my pause was only for effect—I still hadn’t won and still hadn’t won a response.

But I had no further arguments. I continued talking almost for the sake of doing so. “I am desperately lonely. I have no idea if you even like people, but I need to see some kind of future where I’m not stuck in hiding all by myself.”

When I paused again, still determined to keep speaking, she decided to speak up. “I’m not coming up with a plan this second. I’m not going to rush to fix everything like you did with that disaster of a blog.” One entry. The rest of my blog was great. “But the hotel I’m staying at has a couch that turns into a bed if you--”

“I’m there. I’m completely there. Right now. Where is there, exactly?”

She just started walking. I followed her car hoping she’d meant for me to do so.

Cacoethes scribendi has a real name. It is Lenore.

We weren’t staying anywhere fancy. There were dead roaches in the corner, but I wasn’t picky, and I certainly wasn’t bothered by bugs. The things that car had done to my

back over the past week did bother me. Beyond anything I could have deserved, the room had a shower. Lenore insisted that I take my time.

After I finished drying my hair, I was eager to get to work, if only to escape any potential awkwardness with the friend I knew was a stranger.

She was seated on the bed and writing in a tiny notebook. She held it close to her face; her pen barely moved as she wrote in tiny letters.

“What are you thinking up?” I asked. I knew she could only be focused on our current problem; it was all I could think about.

She completely ignored me.

I still wanted to be helpful, and seeing the TV reminded me of something from a few weeks earlier. “The local news has been doing lots of stuff on cyber-bullying, and I’m like 80 percent sure this counts. I mean, people are seriously upset over calling someone a liar. I mean, she is, but seriously, even if it was false.” I caught Lenore’s expression and shifted. “This seems pretty...international though, so I’m not sure local news will fix it. But it could get something started--”

She put down her notebook and gave me a look with big eyes and a tilted head. “Why do you think blabbing to more people will change the results? What if they are part of her cult?”

“Rei Locke doesn’t have a cult,” I said.

Lenore shook her head as if she couldn’t believe I was still defending her, but I wasn’t.

“I already tried explaining to people,” she said. She glared at the computer as if she could glare straight at the people that had ignored her. “It didn’t work for anyone but you.”

I laughed. “It’s not like we could have expected them to read fifty pages. Too long and all that.”

“People are stupid; we need other ideas,” Lenore said.

I could not match her brisk phrasing, so I went in the opposite direction, careful with my words. “What can we do beside reaching out to people? This is about--”

“We just need another way of convincing them.”

Part of me wondered if she was even listening. She was staring into space. I assumed that meant she was deep in thought, but she might as well have been on another planet.

“If people see the problems for themselves, perhaps the response will be different, and we’ll be less to blame.” She hummed to herself for a second. “But I already pointed out the mistakes. Provoke her into making bigger ones? Surely there’s something they can’t ignore. But--”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” I said.

She jumped from her seat, confirming that she had completely forgotten about my presence.

When she kept staring at me instead of speaking, I decided to prompt her back into her other world. “How can we do that?” I asked.

“Get them upset,” she said, slowly, as if I needed help following. Now I knew she wasn’t going to forget my presence again. “We’ll have to post it under your name.”

“Me?” I didn’t object, but I did find it a bit strange, especially since she appeared to be already typing it out.

“Your name and blog are more recognizable. As the traitor, you’re undoubtedly the bigger target. Rei Locke knows me and my blog—thanks—but I suspect my blog wouldn’t provoke as immediate and vibrant a reaction.”

“Sounds great. I’ll do it,” I said. I’m not sure if she cared.

She took about ten more minutes to finish typing, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she could manage 200 words per minute. I stepped next to her and leaned in to read as she wrote. It didn’t seem to bother her, but I wasn’t not sure if she noticed. As I read, I kept waiting for a moment to speak out about it, but she never paused. At the end, she leaned back and looked so proud of her work that I felt like I had to interrupt before she became attached to it.

“No one is going to believe I write like that.”

She looked at me, but this time I hadn’t startled her. She developed creases between her eyebrows, genuinely perplexed instead of angry.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because I’m not a poet or a professor?”

Lenore began revising immediately. “Because you’re brainless, you mean.”

It still took three different fights to make her tone it down enough, if it ever did reach “enough.” Ultimately, it felt like a compromise, and I felt like our friendship was coming along. If you have been on my past blog or if you’ve followed the news as it has backtracked over all this, you may recognize our final product:

Rei Locke,

We have been going through your posts again. There sure is a lot of material and a lot of mistakes. While it doesn't seem like many people have read my explanation of your lies in depth, I'm sure the eventual quantity of evidence will overwhelm them. If not, your name will really be enough for people to go out and look up who you truly are. This is your opportunity to admit this was a work of fiction. Seize the opportunity before things truly get out of hand. The longer this goes on, the more you are to blame, especially if any of your devoted fans act on the threats we've been receiving (and we know you've read them). If you do not start managing the situation, we will be forced to release the information we have about who you actually are. With this, we are not trying to hurt you. Our hope is that fans everywhere will realize we are not the enemy. Please act quickly, as we will not delay too long.

After she hit send, I began to feel the weight of our situation lift away from me.

Though I knew this might not even do anything, I felt more accomplished than I had in days, or perhaps years. I smiled at the new friend who was staring at the computer, paying no attention to me at all.

Still, I increasingly felt the wait draining me—even after only a few seconds had passed. I never enjoyed waiting on people to respond. I'd never bothered to think about their real lives and the idea that they might not be waiting at the computer for my every word. To me, it made no sense to wait more than a second for anyone to comment or respond. And even if it did make sense, I didn't know how.

I tried to pretend that I knew how, though. I distracted myself. Sort of. Usually this would be surfing the internet, but I didn't think Lenore would appreciate that. This time, I called my mom. As Lenore stared at the computer, I couldn't imagine that it would bother her. She was oblivious to the world.

"Mommy!" I said the second she picked up. "How are you?"

She allowed me to finish speaking, but she didn't respond to what I'd said. "¿A dónde fuiste?"

"I'm fine. I'm with a friend. We came up with a--" suddenly, I wished Lenore would pay attention to help me, "sudden vacation."

"A vacation from what? You have job applications para escribir." While she spoke, I could hear the tapping of what I assumed was a pen.

"I know. I know. The job market is terrible right now, but I haven't given up on those. I wanted--"

"¿Por supuesto que no! What else would you do? How do you give up on getting a job?" she asked.

"I'll fill them out while here. I'm with a friend. She--"

I knew what my mother would say before she said it, but of course she said it anyway. "Who is this one? The skinny one or the lazy one?"

I sat down on the couch that would be my bed. It was surprisingly comfortable, almost distractingly so. "I don't know who you're talking about--"

"Yes, you do. ¿Cuándo vendrás a casa? Where are you? What are you doing?"

"I'm fine. I don't quite know when I'll be back. It's not the sort of thing you plan, but you wouldn't disapprove."

My mother scoffed, but she sounded secretly pleased, and I hadn't needed to hear it in her voice to know that she would be. "That doesn't narrow down your plans much. Stay safe y ten cuidado."

I had no plans to tell her about the trouble I was in. "Of course, mamá. I'm always careful. You'll see on the next trip. I'll invite you."

"Consigue un trabajo so you can pay for el next viaje," she said.

I rubbed my forehead, mentally forced back into thinking through the various cover letters still huddled in a folder on my computer. I didn't know when I'd return; at the time, I thought it could easily be the following week. "I know. I'm working on it--"

"Como siempre. Let me talk con tú amiga."

"She's shy," I said. It must have sounded like a lie from the way I blurted it out, but I couldn't tell if it was. It seemed true enough.

"¿De verdad?"

"Claro que sí," I said.

"Fine, then call me cada día. No more of this weekly-ness," my mom said. She was trying and failing to sound stern.

"That's not a word, and I'll call you every time I get reception."

"No, you'll do it," my mother said. "I called mi mamá every day when I was in Alaska. Cada día. And that was before cell phones. And we weren't near roads."

"Got it. Look out for my daily telegram," I said.

She didn't even kindly get upset at me. She just ignored it all together. "Make an effort to talk to your friend."

"Sí. Sí," I said.

“Make sure to plan ahead at some point. At least anticipate what you’ll need.”

“Sí,” I said.

My mother simply wouldn’t take the hint that I was ready to end this part of the conversation. She could hear it. That didn’t mean she’d take it. “Keep your phone on you.”

“Sí.”

“Make sure someone knows where you are at all times.” Then, as if she’d just remembered that I hadn’t answered her, she said, “Where are you?”

“Sí, mamá. You’ve taught me well.”

“I know I have.”

I could feel Lenore looking at me, even though I wasn’t looking at her. “All right. Bye, Mommy.”

It sounded as though she could sense my finger hovering over the red button. “Y call a tu papá often también.”

“Love you!”

When I hung up, I finally felt the weight of silence and unfamiliarity with this new, strange friend. I knew there probably wouldn’t be a response yet. I knew I couldn’t take the computer from her without seeming rude or impatient, and I couldn’t think of which was worse. I couldn’t even think of how to break the uncomfortable silence, but I suspect she felt the same.

She blurted out, “What does the 11 stand for?”

I took a moment to figure out what she was talking about. “That Amelia one through ten were taken when I made my username.”

Lenore leaned away from the computer, physically distancing herself from my written username. “Brilliant.”

“Googling Latin doesn’t make you clever,” I said. I started to stretch, just thinking of how happy my back would be in the morning, for once. “Or do you actually know Latin?” I asked when I remembered her notebook. I was genuinely curious, instead of just trying to fill the silence.

I think she said “some,” but I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t ask her to repeat.

“How many languages do you know?” I asked.

“Depends on your definition of ‘know.’ English, Spanish, and French are easy. I’d probably fit most definitions of fluent.” As she continued, she spoke faster and faster. “German comes easily enough to me. I need a bit more practice in Mandarin, but I can manage most conversations. Russian is a work-in-progress.” I suspect she would have continued, but she seemed to remember that she was actually talking to me. “You speak Spanish, right?” She didn’t wait for me to respond. “You have a tiny bit of an accent on some words. Or at least I think you do. It would be so slight--”

“I understand it well enough. I don’t know if I can manage most conversations or whatever.”

She made a thinking noise.

Before she could say anything more, I tried to turn the conversation back to monologue. “Where did you learn all those languages?” I asked. “Why?”

She shrugged. For the moment, she seemed clearly, perhaps unusually aware of my attention. No monologue. “I bought a book when I was young and it wasn’t until I got home that I realized it was in French. I was too stubborn to return it.”

“So you learned the language.”

“So I learned the language,” she said, mimicking my smile. “German started in school. I had to pick a language I didn’t know. Well, I didn’t have to, but you know. And then I don’t know. I just liked it, I suppose. It’s easy enough to continue with the internet and all.”

I hummed and started setting up the couch. Imagining what it would be like to just learn some languages off the internet made me feel much more self-conscious about my Spanish, wondering if Lenore now thought I knew more than I actually did. I couldn’t have held that whole conversation in Spanish. That was why I’d mostly switch back to English. And I usually understood my mother because I knew what she’d say. The actual words were almost extra.

Usually, when I needed encouragement, I’d go to the internet. That was my use for the tool—not bettering my intellect with language after language—just getting an ego boost, some platitudes about being able to do anything, and some reassurances about a community that would help me to succeed in the world. Before, it had felt like so much more, but when I tried to compare it with real learning, I realized that it didn’t quite match up.

I didn’t even feel angry.

Not at Rei Locke, anyway.

I probably shouldn’t have, as it wasn’t her fault.

At least, I didn’t think so at the time.

It wasn't until I settled down to sleep that it occurred to me this woman was probably the one out of anyone most likely to actually want me dead. Even if she wouldn't want me dead for "lying" about Rei Locke, she could make a convincing argument that I'd ruined her life.

COMMENTS:

1/1--Nov 15

Anon.

get over yourself.

CHAPTER 2: ANTAGONISTS AND ALLIES

Blog Post By: Amelia11

20 November 2016

I'm still alive. I appreciate your thoughts and prayers and/or am sorry to disappoint. I hope everyone finds this easily. Or, you know, eventually. This isn't fake. This really is Amelia Garcia. Yes, that one.

I know many of you probably want me to get to the "exciting" stuff, but I think you need to understand me and Lenore first. Especially Lenore. She's hard to understand. So, I continue.

I slept like a log, but it was almost surprising to wake up in the morning. This odd surprise did, however, ensure that I woke up on the right side of the bed.

"Are you using my computer?" I said over my own yawn. I didn't even understand my own words, but I was still half asleep and didn't think of repeating them.

"We used your account. I have to be on your account to see our messages." She was wide awake, and I almost wondered how much sleep she could have gotten. Instead, I yawned again and stretched.

I felt like royalty. This felt like such an upgrade from my car that I struggled to believe such luxury existed, or that I could ever wake up and stand up to part with it, even as I'd been fine with sleeping in the car prior to the start of this ordeal.

"Did we get a reply?" I asked while I debated going back to sleep for '5' more minutes. "Are we safe now?"

I woke up a little just from asking that. It reminded me of our current situation. This was real, and I wasn't sure if I wanted Lenore to say yes or no. If it was a yes, Lenore would go away. I'd also have to leave the comfortable bed.

"We got a reply from someone," Lenore said, "but not Rei Locke."

I jumped out of bed, wide awake. "What did we get?"

O wow. Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii. I wasnt sure if you would be posting again! Im Odett West. (Yup, thats my real name. check). I was kind of hoping to met you sometime. What your saying is kinda fascinating. I cant say i understnd, but id love to hear more fromyour side. Can we meet up in person? Happen to be in Georgia ? I think this all is a big misundrstading, it might be helpful to have a third party hear? Id love to help you and rei locke. I just hope yall are alright and i cant wait to her from you.

I realized at the end that I was smiling. I wondered if that was weird or not. I wasn't smiling at anyone, but I was feeling optimistic. "Seems nice enough."

Lenore only made a humming noise. She had no smile.

I gave her the chance to speak, but when she took more than 5 seconds, I took it as permission to continue. “We should definitely write back.” I was pretty surprised that she hadn’t already. “How long have you been staring at this?”

“It could be a trap,” Lenore said. She looked up as if to prove that she wasn’t staring at the message but thinking hard.

“Or it could be that our plan is working, and we’re convincing people.” I couldn’t figure out how to politely snatch my computer from her.

“The plan was to provoke her, remember?” Lenore said.

“We could get someone else on our side. She’s got three million. We could use another ally.” I snatched the computer and wondered if a reassuring hug would be unwelcome.

Lenore looked back at the message, and I could trace her line of sight to Odett’s name. “This is not going to end with another ally,” Lenore said.

I decided against hugging. “What are we going to write?” I asked.

She didn’t help, staying so deep in thought the whole time that I wondered if she was even aware that I was typing. This time, a glare accompanied her thinking.

Dear Odett,

*Hi. Were soooooooooo happy to hear from you. You can imagine, we are a bit weary about meeting with anyone in person. And we do feel weve been a bit open, one tiny detail a side *which wed happily be honest with you about if we were to know a bit more*

about you and your interest. Weve been so open that were a bit confused on what more youd like to know, but wed be happy to answer all the questions. Stay in touch.*

Truely,

Youre friends

Before hitting send, I showed Lenore by waving the computer across her face. She either reads at super-human speeds or didn't bother to make it half way through the first sentence. "No."

"I shouldn't have asked," I said. Still, I felt my heart sink a little. It might have been for the lack of approval or for how pathetic it was that I internally needed approval for a little paragraph.

"Just no." Lenore leaned forward, ready to snatch the computer away if I glanced at the Enter key. "Don't do it. I'm warning you."

I felt like that had to be a bit of an overreaction, and I held my work a bit closer to me. "What's wrong? I'm not fixing the grammar."

"Or spelling? And you can't admit to everyone that we just lied."

I had pulled out another strand of hair in my stress, and I couldn't shake it off my hand. I was starting to worry about what this whole thing would do to me. The stress-lines were a guarantee, but I hadn't thought about baldness. I started to.

"Starting with a lie to Odett is not the best way of starting a friendship," I said. "If she wants to hear both sides, we need her on ours. She'll start off against us if she realizes that we don't actually know who Rei Locke is, and we implied that we do."

“But if you tell everyone--”

“What about PM?” I said. I had the chance for a new *friend* in all of this, and I was not going to waste it. It would be a long time before my friends outnumbered my enemies, but I was not going to let this chance go.

I’m still kind of looking forward to when that long time arrives, but I’m convinced it will. I hope I’m alive then.

“And if she tells everyone?” A dramatic shift in posture accompanied every word. First she shifted her legs under her, then straight out, then she leaned to the side and threw her hand up, then she braced herself with her hand.

“She won’t,” I said. I was moving very little, mostly just wringing my hands. “Why would she?”

“Why would people issue death threats for a little internet post? People are weird!” Lenore was now bursting with energy, but it all dissipated as I added a tiny message to apologize for the use of PM. I even fixed some grammar, but there was no reviving Lenore. She fell backward in dramatics, muttering something about death and my fault.

The response arrived a few minutes later, about long enough for Odett to have immediately read and typed.

Dear amelia and lenora,

Private message is fine! Im asuming the tiny detail is about not knowing the name? You aren very sutl LOL. Its kind of hard to say i have questions. Its more like what i believe is

difrent from what you say. I want to know why. I dont know why you wouldnt be willing to met in person. You say your open, but if your making acuzashons like this, you should own them. You know what i mean? It isnt really nice to hide behind a computer screen.

Love,

Odett

Dear Odett,

It isnt that we are hiding. we dont want giant targets on our back lol. I think thats super understandable. Anyway thats really only part of the issue. We arent anywhere near georgia right now. and cant get there right now. Hope you understand. I feel like the internet has served us so well in connecting so far. But if you really are uncomfortable with it, we can maybe skype?

Amelia

Dear Amelia and Lenora,

It's all cool. No need for skype. I'm just a few hours from Charlotte. I can meet you if it is more convenient. Is this map accurate?

Most sincerely,

Odett

I looked at the attached map. Lenore didn't bother.

"That's us," I said. I was talking for the sake of talking because I already knew that Lenore was about twenty steps ahead. "How could that be us? That's *this* hotel. Do you think she knows the room number?"

Lenore took the computer away from me and started reading the messages she'd been ignoring five minutes ago. "It wasn't in your message," she said, handing the computer back. "Have you talked to anyone? Perhaps she lives here and knows you." Of course, it had to be me. "Your phone. Check your phone."

It was hard to pay attention while she was pacing, but I tried. "For what?"

Lenore had her hands out as if she could shake me from a distance. "If you have one of those apps that is constantly checking in."

I could feel the blood drain from my face and pool at my feet. It isn't a pleasant feeling, but I wasn't thinking about that at the time.

Lenore was shaking her head, but she hadn't grown pale. "You can't possibly be that stupid."

I really could.

“How long have you been on the run for?” she asked. It wasn’t actually a question.

I answered anyway. “It’s not genuinely on the run if you stay within the same city.”

“Pack!” Lenore shouted as if she’d already told me ten times.

I started shoving stuff back in my backpack. It’s not like there was much, but I felt like every step took five hours. “Where can we even go?”

Anywhere. It didn’t matter.

COMMENTS:

1/3--Nov 21

Anon.

fake

2/3--Nov 21

dancer

this seems overreaction. are you sure. also i want to meet you, can i not meet you caus you seem paranoid

1 of 1 replies—Amelia11: We probably understood it to be a bit of an overreaction at the time, at least once the initial surprise of it had worn off. It wasn’t. I don’t know if it’s a trust-your-gut thing or if Lenore was just smart enough to know how these things go.

3/3--Nov 22

wining

The stupidity here is just incredible. Far too incredible to be believed. I
mean, did anyone think of going to the police?

CHAPTER 3: RUNNING FROM THE WORLD

Blog Post By: Amelia 11

25 November 2016

I'm going to skip to the evening. You don't need to know the details of what happened the rest of that day. It's enough to know there was driving and arguing, arguing and driving, and more of that. Oh, also, we took her car. I don't even know why we left mine. Perhaps it was because hers was closer? We just left. Fast.

I mean, that covers absolutely all of it. We aren't perfect. We make a lot of mistakes, and we freak out, but we're trying. I want you to acknowledge that we try, and that we only ever wanted to help others and to maintain our safety.

"I officially have no idea where we are," I said. As usual, Lenore didn't respond. To our left, there were woods. To our right, there were woods. Straight ahead, there was road, lined by woods. It was mostly evergreens, and I was shocked that I could be bored enough to figure that out. "Seeing as we had an enormous head start and we've been driving for hours, with no phones on, I think it is safe to say we lost her." Lenore still didn't respond, so I subtly (as subtly as one can be in controlling a one-ton machine) drifted toward the first exit I'd seen in ages. Of course, Lenore started to make noises of

protest. “We can take a bathroom break,” I said. “We can stretch for five seconds. We can eat something.”

I took the exit.

I was beyond annoyed at that point. I’d been so happy to finally have someone to talk to, to finally have some human interaction. Instead, it was like being stuck with extra luggage.

Except when she was being stubborn.

“This isn’t a good turn,” Lenore said. “This won’t lead you anywhere.”

I’d hated pulling up to the drive-thru by the fifth day alone. I’d effectively stopped eating by that point, but now I relished the moment. “It’s fast food. Do you want anything?”

“You don’t take this nearly seriously enough,” Lenore said, just loud enough to be heard as I leaned closer.

Readers, are you getting to know Lenore yet? Seriously. Wanting to eat means I don’t value my life. Lenore.

“Yes, anything else?” I asked.

Lenore slouched in her seat, taking effort and looking less comfortable in doing so. “You drive too fast.”

“Ok,” I said. “Do you want fries or something?”

See? We’re normal people. We eat fries. Lots of fast food, actually. Only fast food. If anyone wants to worry about our health, it will be a welcome change. Comment all you want below. In fact, if it helps stir up your anger, I once saw Lenore eat nothing but ice cream for a whole day—shake for breakfast, sundae for lunch, and some brownie

thing for dinner. There were snacks too. I was honestly impressed. I look forward to your advice Internet!

That day is a few weeks from what I'm talking about, though.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

Of course, she ate just about all my fries once we were actually on the road. Did she thank me? No.

It wasn't that big of a problem, however, as I effectively bought my own weight in burgers and nuggets. While she was trying to sneak a fry from me, slowly and carefully, I snuck out to the store and got a map.

I'd turned off all the location services and check-in apps on my phone, but Lenore still didn't trust them. Instead, I'd spent ten minutes insisting that she not smash them. Now, the phones had every possible feature turned off, they were turned off themselves, and they were hidden inside the trunk.

I stretched out the map across the steering wheel. That thing was never going to be folded back. I wasn't even sure if it was supposed to be. Ancient technology can be more difficult than modern.

"Ok. Where are we, and where are we going."

"What's that?" Lenore asked. One corner had poked her, and she ripped it slightly for the offence.

"Well, since you've ruled out all forms of GPS, internet, or anything at all that's actually helpful, we're going to use ancient technology." I seriously hoped I was holding it the right way. Ultimately, I felt like I should know how to use maps. It seemed like the

sort of thing I'd pride myself in. It also seemed like the sort of thing that would be self-explanatory. Except that it wasn't.

"I know what it is," Lenore said. She kept grabbing at her clothes, first the edge of her sleeve, then the bottom hem of her shirt, then two handfuls of jeans. I suspect she didn't realize she was doing it, but it was a cycle. "Don't plan, just drive. That's the plan."

"We're in Kentucky. Did you know that?" I'd seen the welcome sign, but that wasn't my point.

"Does it matter?" Still stretching and wrinkling her clothes.

I put on my best patience face. I understood. I really did! "Ok. Listen. I know you are scared. I am too. But let's look at the facts. Some people have said mean stuff on the internet; some have even threatened to kill us."

Lenore pointed a finger at me, but she was still looking at the fries. "It's your fault—fact."

"And yes, one person, one person figured out where we were."

Lenore took in a deep, sharp breath. "If you're--"

"But the most dangerous thing would be to overreact." I paused, waiting for the apparently necessary retort, but Lenore only responded with a death glare. I marked it down mentally as progress. "We're safe now. We're far away, and she can't track us."

"As far as you know."

"As far as we know. Look, I'm not ignoring the fact that people are threatening to kill us. That's bad. That's really bad. But people say stupid things online. The most they probably, honestly want is for us to lose our minds like this."

"You can't assume--"

“You can’t assume the worst!” I replied. “Or even the impossible. It was a little setback. Our plan might even be working. Your whole point was to see if Rei Locke would write us back. Did she?”

“It got the woman--”

“Which might be totally unrelated.” At the look I could only see because it was reflected in the window, I knew I had to edit. “Rei Locke might not have known anything about that. It might just have been Odett’s action, and Rei Locke typed up her own message seconds later. You don’t know.”

“We’ll check when we get to the hotel,” Lenore said. She was leaning her forehead against the window and apparently willing the car to move.

“Agreement!” I shoved the map to the back. “We’re on a roll! Where will the hotel be?”

“I don’t even know. Pick a city. Randomly,” Lenore said. She paused a moment, then nodded—approving her own words?

I was finally happy to have a task with clear directions. Something said without complete panic.

Before I could pick, she blurted out, “Not Wisconsin, though. I have a tio there. And my abuela is in Wyoming. Let’s stay away from Wyoming.”

I decided not to even ask, but I didn’t pick anywhere in Wisconsin or Wyoming. Most of my family lived in Florida, but I’d have been fine with visiting. I also couldn’t figure out how a relative ruled out entire states, but, again, no asking. Anyway, those seemed more than a little too far.

“St. Louis, Missouri. It’s a fair bit away, but not like we’ll be driving until we fall off the edge of the earth. We’re both happy then.”

“Happy is a strong word,” she said. She sounded done, but I waited. I knew she wouldn’t be able to resist. “And earth doesn’t have an edge.” I could barely hear her, but I’d known it would happen.

I started driving.

Reaching the not-edge-of-earth still took ages, and we were still on the road when it became dark. By the next exit, she’d wanted to drive. I let her. That was when she stopped being careful about grabbing the fries.

Back on the road, having appeased her into silence, I realized just how good it felt to have argued and stopped. I’d never argued with a friend. At least, not with the people I considered friends. The people I called friends. Mostly, we went on little trips together—hiking, rafting, skydiving—then separated. Sometimes we discussed the good memories and little else. I tried not to look at Lenore while thinking about these things. It was too different from this. With them, back then, I spent most of my time happy. At this moment, life was more than a little different, and Lenore and I certainly hadn’t met for similar interests. But this was happier. A different sort of happy.

I still don’t quite know what it was.

I was beginning to space out again when I heard the tire go. I grabbed hold of my seat as the ride grew bumpy and the car swerved to the side and then stopped so abruptly that I ended up on the edge of my seat with the seatbelt digging into my gut.

“You could have flipped us with that,” I said.

She was still gripping the steering wheel with both hands.

After a few seconds of waiting for a response from the statue, I said, “All right, I’ll take over then.”

I went to the trunk and tried looking for the spare, only to find the space empty. I then searched the rest of the car, inside and out, as if it could be hiding. The car was fairly spacious, but it was no van. We could probably fit another two people in comfortably, which ensured we were exceptionally comfortable, but there simply wasn’t space for the tire to hide from me.

I walked back to the front passenger seat, but I only stuck my head in. “You don’t have a spare.”

“I think that was the spare,” Lenore said.

“How long did you--” I was cut off as she shook her head at the air in front of her, clearly not wanting me to ask the question. It wasn’t like there was much of a point to the question anyway. The tire would stay flat no matter what she said. “Ok. Great.” We couldn’t have been too far from St. Louis, but I couldn’t even tell if there was a city nearby or not.

I straightened back up for a moment to look around, just so I could gather my thoughts. I couldn’t recognize the route she’d taken us on, and it seemed entirely empty of cars. The sun was beginning to set. I still remember this place, for some weird reason, with a picture-like quality. I remember that the trees there were still a light color, spring green and the sun was hitting them at an angle that really emphasized that, even as everything around seemed to be darkening, or perhaps because. I remember that the road had a lot of pot-holes, which are probably what doomed our dear tire. I remember the

way that the shifting breeze brought pollen into my face so thick that it felt grainy within a few moments.

I got back in my seat, closed the door, and turned on the lights. Lenore was still a statue.

“It’s a flat tire. We’ll be fine. Breathe some,” I said.

She did not follow my directions. “We’re out of gas.”

This time, I wasn’t rattled in the least. Being calm made things a lot easier, which I tried to store in my memory for later. I moved toward putting a hand on her shoulder, but quickly decided against that. “No, we’re not. We took care of it. You need to breathe.”

“I didn’t fill it all the way. I figured we’d stop again if we needed it, but there were just no exits. I mean, there were none!” I didn’t say anything because it was clear that she needed to keep talking. Her mouth almost seemed to be working on its own while she stared straight ahead. “We have to get help. There’s no way we can just sit here forever.”

“I’m assuming it is safe to turn on the phone?” I asked. She looked panicked again, and I figured the answer was no, but that couldn’t work. “What do you want us to do? Do you think we can walk for help?” I wasn’t sure if she could even hear me. After everything, this seemed to have been the straw. Or perhaps the straw had been ages ago, and I just hadn’t noticed. “Lenore, we turned off all the check-ins, all the location services, and anything else we could think of. It is just a phone, and we need help.”

Lenore looked at me, right in the eyes. She looked and sounded small. “Who would you call?”

“A tow-truck?” I don’t know why that came out as a question, but the way she asked her question made me a little less capable of making a statement.

“That’s like \$75, isn’t it?” she asked.

I tried not to sound deflated. She didn’t need to hear me sound deflated. But my problem-solving skills were getting used up quickly with this, and I was working to hold a sigh inside me. “You didn’t fill the tank because you ran out of money.”

“I booked the hotel already,” she said. “I thought we’d be fine.” Somewhere between the words and the moments after, she started crying.

I jumped back about ten steps and took a minute to realize I should walk back. “There. There. It’s all right. It’s fine. You did fine. Everything is fine.” I pat her on the back. She didn’t seem to notice. I stopped.

“This is not the way I wanted to die,” Lenore said.

“It’s fine. We just need to--” I searched for something better. I really did, but my brain didn’t cooperate. “Leave.”

Lenore might have laughed, or it might have been part of the crying. I have genuinely no idea. “People are hunting us for sport. Of course, we need to leave.”

“You’re overstating, but Ok.”

I started backing away. I needed air to think. I shouldn’t have picked somewhere so far. I had money, but I couldn’t exactly use it with the trees.

Lenore took some deep breaths and leaned back. “We’re going to die. It’s gonna happen,” she said. “Might as well accept it. Accepting isn’t bad if it’s going to happen no matter what.”

I had turned half-way before I realized she might not even be speaking to me, even if she was being loud. Part of me imagined she was trying to drown out her own thoughts, and I walked farther away so she wouldn't drown out mine.

If I couldn't convince her to stop crying, I might as well figure out a solution—then she'd have no reason to cry. And I definitely couldn't convince her to stop crying. I couldn't even remember ever seeing someone cry, except actors in movies. It was unpleasant.

In theory, I knew how to solve problems. I liked to believe that I did, anyway. I just didn't consider it my best skill. Even though I knew as a fact that I could set aside fears and self-doubt to focus, I also knew that wasn't the same as problem solving. I was unsettled, even horrified, that Lenore had given up. More than that, however, I was shaken by her inability or refusal to give me a plan. I knew one had to exist and that I could make us fine if I knew it, but I wasn't going to do much without one. All I knew of our current not-plan in this situation was to leave.

I watched the cars run by, very rare and very fast, made bolder by the darkness.

I still don't know what Lenore was doing at the time, but I eventually grew to know her well enough that I can guess.

With calming breaths, my focus began to sharpen. I had done this before, and I reminded myself of that over and over again. I started to picture each time I'd done something even remotely similar. I remembered the events; I remembered what I did; I remembered how they turned out. By now it should be clear that I have a sharp memory for detail, especially when the adrenaline is up.

Eventually, I saw lights headed our way, distant, looking like the descriptions people give as aliens near. I waited until they took the shape of headlights, lighting the world around me to near clarity and lighting the world behind them just enough for the silhouettes of the cars and faint traces of the people. I walked to the edge of the road, almost in front so they would have to swerve around me.

The first car, filled with a family of four, went around and kept going. They gave me enough distance so they wouldn't hurt me, or perhaps so that I wouldn't hurt them. I'm not very sure.

The second car stopped. It ended up right in the middle of the road, but there was no one around, so it seemed a bit pointless to pull over to the side. A bit.

The driver rolled down the window and I walked to lean in just slightly so we wouldn't have to shout.

"Battery?" he asked.

"Tire," I said. "And gas."

He looked at the car for a long while.

"Did you call someone?" His accent was so thick that I had to think through each word as if I were listening to my second language. It was English, though, and he was clearly a native speaker.

I dropped my shoulders and sighed with my whole body. "No good. Not until morning. And my friend and I are just so tired."

"I've got a tire," he said. "There's a gas station just up the road."

"Walking distance?"

"Nope."

“I’ll pay you 50 bucks for the ride and the spare?” I said. I couldn’t keep the question out of my voice, the pathetic awareness of the charity I was asking for.

He unlocked the door. “Don’t be a serial killer.”

“I don’t work overtime,” I replied.

It was a quiet quest, in a way. He didn’t say much at all, but he let me talk all I wanted to. He nodded when needed and smiled at every joke. I enjoyed the company of a more up-beat companion.

I got a couple of gas cans and dreamed of when I’d feel secure enough in my funds again to get some actual food.

He parked on the opposite side of the road from Lenore.

I grabbed the spare and leaned it against the car before grabbing the gas cans. I still didn’t speak to Lenore before grabbing my purse and pulling out the \$50, but he drove off as I was walking across the middle of the road. I tried to wave a ‘Thanks,’ but I’m not sure if he saw me.

(If you’re reading, Thanks.)

It took more than a couple of heartbeats for Lenore to open the door. It took a few more for her to actually step out, as if in slow motion. I gestured to the stuff, silently asking her to lend a hand.

“I thought you’d left,” she said.

I looked at the stuff, then back at her. “I was coming back.”

She kept staring at me. This was the most suspicion I’d seen on her face since we first met, perhaps not even then as she’d been so guarded at the time. “What were you doing?” she asked as if the evidence wasn’t right in front of her.

“Proving the world isn’t actually made of evil people? You gonna help?” I meant with the tire, but she smiled at me.

We left within two hours. We returned to the gas station, then kept going. It was well, well into the night, but at that point I was back to appreciating that we’d ended up in her car instead of in mine. I had good tires, but I had been sick of it. Somehow, in well over 10,000 miles, it had never seemed uncomfortable or constraining, but a few weeks going nowhere, and I was ready to rip every scrap of metal by hand. At least Lenore’s car kept things interesting.

Less than 30 minutes from our booked hotel, we saw a small car growing closer, all the lights on.

At first I could only see the silhouette of the woman we approached, as well as the piece of her face illuminated by her phone. She was waving the other hand wildly, trying to gain our attention. And she was standing in the middle of the road. It was probably a good thing that I was back to driving, as Lenore might just have hit the accelerator. Physically and morally, I didn’t see much of a choice, no matter how exhausted I was. I desperately hoped that the hotel would allow us to check out late, as it seemed that sleeping until noon would be the only way for me to get any sleep at all.

“Don’t you do it,” she warned me.

I turned to her, even as I was opening my door and stepping out. “It seriously is ok to use the phone now. Check if Rei Locke has written us anything.”

“People are trying to kill us,” Lenore said. I found it amusing, not insulting, that she thought I’d forget. Perhaps sometimes I did. “This is not the time to be a good Samaritan.”

I ignored her, grabbed a phone from the trunk (I’m not sure which one. I picked randomly.), and returned to hand it to her. “Just repaying the kindness of fate. What if we’d had to manage on our own back there.”

I closed the door but could still hear her shout, “Amelia!”

I was surprised that the woman had taken so long to approach, but half of her attention seemed to be on the phone. She didn’t start walking toward me until I was half way to her.

“Can we help?” I asked. I intended to give her a ride, but she immediately showed that she had other plans.

“My car won’t start. Do you think you could try to fix it?”

Lenore leaned out the window, and I’m surprised she was able to hear us. She shouted, “We don’t know anything about cars. Sorry!”

The woman, still holding her phone to her ear, focused only on me. She probably didn’t feel like shouting her response back. “Please, just try. I would love some help.” She was bouncing with her knees and seemed incapable of standing still. In the light from our two cars, I could tell that she was dressed for business. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she was wearing pearls.

She backed away from the car as I walked toward it. She focused on the conversation she was having on her phone, but she kept her voice low enough that I couldn't make out a single word. The longer her conversation went on, and the longer I tried pointlessly over and over to make her car work, the further she drifted toward the trees and away from us.

While the woman was facing away, really preoccupied with her call, Lenore hurried to me. I hadn't even seen her get out of the car. She held up the phone to show me a picture and a name.

"Get back in the car," I said. I was now speaking even quieter than the woman.

"I'm not going without you," Lenore said. She was less careful.

"Thanks," I said, continuing to whisper. "I didn't say to go. I said get in the car."

Lenore darted to the car and got into the driver's seat. I could see enough of her silhouette to know that she hesitated after that. She hesitated to put the key in the ignition and made a few stopped attempts at starting the car.

I stopped looking in her direction, almost able to feel her staring at me, and got out of Odett's car.

"What do you think it is?" Odett asked.

"I'm not sure." I wasn't sure how to put 'you know what it is' politely, so I decided to wait until a more opportune moment for reveal.

"Oh well. At least you tried. I appreciate that." She'd put the phone away, and for the first time, her attention was completely on me.

It was opportune enough. "How did you find us?" I asked.

It was hard to read her expressions. The light from the cars made us visible to each other, mostly, but all the shadows were strange and distorted. Still, I had no problem hearing her small, single laugh.

“It wasn’t easy,” she said. She sounded like she was talking about the weather, and like she’d forgotten she stopped us in the middle of the night with a lie. Or like she didn’t understand why that might bother some people—like Lenore, mostly Lenore. “I’ve been waiting a while. No idea how I passed you.”

“We had car trouble,” I said.

“Ah. Sorry,” Odett said. “I didn’t notice.” She put her hands in her skirt’s pockets, visibly making a conscious effort to seem friendly. “Stopped the wrong car once. That was embarrassing.”

I had been up for a ridiculous number of hours that I hadn’t even been able to keep track of. There aren’t many moments when I don’t feel like chatting, but they do exist. “Why would you do all this? What do you want?”

Odett shuffled around me to open her car door and sit down. I then had to move so I could stand in front of her again.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said, looking up. I could see her a bit better now, see that her make-up was nearly perfect but in an almost old-fashioned style.

After just a moment of hesitation when I could almost feel Lenore’s voice in my head, I shook her offered hand.

This was actually the first time I’d met someone from that online community, and I’d been keeping up with it for over seven years. She didn’t seem crazy, or, as Lenore loved to insist, brainless. I was a little confused, a little delighted, a little betrayed, and a

whole bunch of other things. To be honest, a lot has changed since then, and I probably impose a lot of my current emotions on my past self, but my feelings remain complicated.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to meet in person earlier, but I’m not exactly thrilled you tracked us down.” I felt like the sentiment would impress Lenore, if not the honesty. “I am impressed, though,” I said, though I didn’t think that would impress Lenore.

Odett shrugged. “Sometimes, when you have to do something, you just manage,” she said. “People tend to underestimate people like me. I’m smart enough for this stuff.”

“I’d consider this something you didn’t have to do,” I said. “What do you want?”

“I want a lot of things. The distinct lack of time travel capabilities eliminates some, so I think a very long, heart-felt apology would be a good start.”

A constant awareness of the panic Lenore must have been feeling surrounded me, even though I wasn’t looking at the car. “I’m not going to apologize for running from someone that ended up hunting us down,” I said. “That’s officially creepy, and I had every right to find it creepy.” I was exhausted and just ready to skip to the part where people started to make sense.

Odett laughed with charm and honesty. “Not to me. To *REI LOCKE*. She’s a good person, you know she’s a good person, and you have no right to attack her online.”

I should have expected that. I honestly did, actually, but that didn’t mean I had a response ready. “Me. Attack. Me.”

“I’m not thrilled with the threats either. People can get so passionate. But you did start it. And you can stop it. I’m sure of it. They’ll stop--”

I let my exhaustion and emotions take over. “You know she’s a liar. You know it--” I realized my mistake quickly.

Odett physically backed away, surprisingly graceful for heels on uneven grass. “I know no such thing. And you know you're lying!”

I stayed in place, telling myself to do so, and tried shifting the conversation back toward calm and logic. “If you'd just look at our proof--”

“I don't need to look at lies to know lies. Look at her.” She motioned to Lenore, who we really couldn't see anyway. “Do you really trust her? That's what the problem really is.”

I've gotten this same message so many different times from so many different people since then. I'm pretty surprised by how I handled it that first time. These days, I take a slightly different strategy in similar situations.

I sighed and shook my head, trying to be calm and kind though I felt like being dismissive. I probably was, just a little. I should have said something in defense of Lenore, but I was only frustrated beyond words. “I don't know if this is going anywhere.”

Odett took on a tinge of desperation and crowded me. “It will. You'll apologize. You'll admit that you were torn away by lies. You'll--”

“I really won't.” I glanced at the car, ready to move quickly so we could leave. Lenore was clearly ready to start driving, perhaps even inching forward. “Because I'm right, and someday you'll know it.”

Oh, to be young and full of confidence, but if I can actually manage to keep writing this blog, I hope you will all know someday too.

I dug in my pocket for the receipt from my earlier fast food. I motioned for a pen, and she gave me one. A fancy one. I didn't even know how to use a fountain pen, but I hoped I did it right.

Still keeping my distance, I held the paper out for her to take. I smudged a bit of the ink because I didn't know it would do that. "Look. Here is my number. I'm sorry you came all this way, but if you're ever willing to listen--"

Odett snatched the number away from me, clearly having hoped I was writing something else. She waved me off and went back to stand by the car. I set the pen down gently on the hood of the car, hoping she'd remember it before she started driving.

I walked toward Lenore. It was a little while before I could see her clearly—I had to be pretty close to the car. She had both hands on the steering wheel, and I was happy she would be driving the rest of the way. I was exhausted.

I watched her tense up, her brows drawing together in confusion and horror, and I started to run out of instinct.

I shut the door beside me as Lenore hit the pedal, and as the bullets started to fly.

COMMENTS:

1/25--Nov 28

Barb

first.

2/25--Nov 28

imright

that didn't happen. you dont have proof. your a loozer.

3/25--Nov 28

WildJo

cant believe you guys went through that and hope your ok. I see a lot on the news, but they don't really know how your doing now. Can you maybe reach out to someone?

4/25--Nov 28

238501

what does this even mean? is story or real lif?

CHAPTER 4: DECEIVING

Blog Post By: Amelia 11

1 December 2016

Well, the world is still spinning, and I'm still breathing. Sometimes that surprises me. Sometimes I know I worked hard enough for it. There's no question that I'm exhausted. There's no question that I'm ready for all of this to be done. Writing this has the odd effect of reminding me that there have been worse times, I think. Not that I've written about them yet, but still. It is a reminder. To those that are sending messages of support: thank you. Without further ado, I continue.

The sunrise looks twice as beautiful as ever when it reflects over St. Louis' "gateway to the west" immediately following a near-death experience intentionally created by another human being.

"Feel real yet?" I asked.

Lenore and I were watching such a beautiful sunrise from underneath a little tree planted by the city. After parking the car, we'd escaped it and collapsed by the first thing we could lean against. The view had been an accident, but it was a much-appreciated accident.

"Nope," Lenore replied. Her tone was simple and light.

I leaned back, still enjoying the feeling of bark on my back with a special sort of awareness and over-sensitivity. “Probably for the better.” It didn’t feel real to me either.

“I’m mostly thinking about how hungry I am,” I replied. I was also thinking about going into the gateway’s museum when it opened for the morning. I could sort of see the entrance, and it certainly wasn’t far. My legs didn’t feel like they would work, but I thought of it as perfectly fine crawling distance. It was an odd morning; I was allowed odd thoughts.

“You’re impossible,” Lenore said, but for this one time, I didn’t think she meant it.

“Food is a necessity for survival!” I said. I wasn’t actually looking at her, which felt odd considering how often I’d noticed and contemplated the behavior from her. It was too much effort to turn my head. “What am I supposed to think about? What are you-”

“Nothing. I’m numb,” she said, and she clearly meant it.

Could this be the rest of our lives? Would this be? I liked to think we’d find a solution, but I’d have thought we would have found one already. And who knows how long our lives would be. “Oh. All right. That’s so very much better.”

Even though the conversation felt pointless, and I was too tired to express much more than a bit of sarcasm, it felt necessary. Moving was beyond me, but if I didn’t speak, I’d start thinking about what happened, and I couldn’t quite handle that.

Lenore turned to me. Her eyes were huge, even though she must have been so sleep-deprived. “Has this sort of stuff ever happened to you?”

I paused to think about it, just as I hadn't wanted to do. My brain was working slower. Numbness, I suppose, or sleep deprivation. "Which part of it?"

Lenore turned away from me quickly. "What kind of company--"

"I've had close calls with death before. An avalanche here. A thunderstorm there. Some broken equipment on occasion." I smiled at the memories, then frowned hard.

"Never from another person. At least not intentionally."

"What could you possibly have been doing?" she asked.

In a time when the world made no sense at all, I was happy to be heading toward the sort of conversation I was most familiar with.

"Have I ever told you about the time I was nearly eaten by a fish?" I asked. I tried to seem serious, but it was hard. I tried to relax my mouth, but it kept pulling into a smile, which felt odd after everything.

"A fish?" She stressed the "a" and held up a finger as if that was the part difficult to believe. Just one fish.

"I mean, it was a big fish," I said with a smile forced so wide it hurt my cheeks.

She leaned back.

Apparently it wasn't as funny a story as everyone had led me to believe. Or intriguing. At least the intro was usually seen as funny. Or perhaps everyone just liked being polite to me.

I noticed a bush moving about three feet away from me. Though no one could have been in there, it was too small, I was happy to be on this side. Lenore saw nothing. I was blocking her view.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you’d just have gone with me immediately,” Lenore said. “Or better yet, not stopped.”

I knew there had to be a problem in that logic. For my sake, there had to be. “She might have just started firing sooner.”

“You don’t know that. You just don’t want to admit you messed up,” she said. I looked away from her. “You messed up in releasing our messages for the world to see, and you messed up in going to talk to her.”

I sighed, then worked on figuring out how to release my lip from the bite I had on it. “What’s next?” I asked. I hadn’t intended to speak under my breath.

“Shut up.”

“We can’t just sit here forever,” I said while leaning back and shifting my legs in the dirt to make myself more comfortable. At the same time, I knew that once morning really started, the area would be packed with tourists.

“It isn’t even dawn, and I haven’t slept,” Lenore said as if it wasn’t true for both of us. “Shut up before I hit you.”

“You wouldn’t hit me,” I said. I had complete confidence in that. I still do.

“Cállate.”

I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. She put her hand on top of it. It was nice to feel how warm she was—I’d never been near a dead body, but I was pretty sure they weren’t warm.

An hour later, Lenore noticed tourists staring at us. I wasn’t sure why they were doing so, but I couldn’t imagine that two women with wrinkled clothes, horribly tangled

hair, and dark, dark circles around their eyes, sitting against a stick-thin tree, was an everyday sight. I stood up to leave the moment she pointed them out, but she was unexpectedly hesitant.

I reached out a hand to help her up, and she accepted it. As usual, she looked around instead of at me. This time, her eyes were fixed on the monument, which seemed natural at least. It was better than all the time she spent staring at a wall while talking to me.

“Before this, I don’t think I’d left my house in five months. I’d never left my state,” she said. She spoke so quietly that I knew she wasn’t speaking to me, but I could never tell when she was.

Still, I asked, “Where did you work?”

She didn’t jump. She didn’t look upset. Perhaps she actually had been speaking to me? “From home,” she said. “Freelance. I write and proofread and translate.” She was quiet for another moment while I thought about that. “I was planning on taking a few jobs from the hotel to get us some cash, but I’m so tired I can hardly think.”

We found some benches that may or may not have been for a bus stop, but no bus appeared to be visiting, at least not regularly.

As Lenore was back into a weird sort of don’t-care depression, I again had permission to use my phone.

Sometimes I knew I wasn’t taking this as seriously as I should have been. Today, looking back, I think I improved after meeting up with Lenore, but it was after seeing those not-so-little holes in my car that I started thinking more about what I should be

doing. Some stuff still didn't matter, especially when I was stuck on a bench with a woman that hated my guts and had every reason to do so, but I at least cared to try to care.

I started by dialing my mother's number, but I quickly reassessed and called my sister. "Hi, Valerie."

"Are you dead?" Valerie asked, sounding blunt and honest.

I don't know if it counts as a flashback if you don't lose track of where you are, but I had to close my eyes and rub them as my brain brought up images of bullets flying, which was ridiculous as I know I hadn't been able to actually see the bullets. "That's a complicated question."

"Mom says you haven't called her in an age. You know how she is. We have a funeral planned for next Thursday, if you'd like to attend." I knew my mother had done nothing of the sort. This was pure Valerie. She was probably jealous I hadn't called her first or something.

"I'm serious, Valerie. I need help." I felt Lenore lean closer as if to hear, as if I'd been hiding some trouble from her, as if the trouble we were in right now wasn't enough to merit calling my sister for help. I tried not to feel self-conscious on the phone, but I did.

"If you ain't dying, you can handle it," she said. I'm pretty sure she meant it. At the same time, as I write this, I feel like I need to mention that no one ever helps me like my sister. No one.

I checked the time. It wasn't that early in the morning. "Please, just go to my blog."

“Now I have homework?”

“Go to my blog,” I repeated. “You’ll see the whole situation.” It took a lot of effort to continue, and I sucked in a deep breath to make it through. “Explain to Mom, and try to stay safe—all of you.”

“What did you do?” Valerie asked. I could hear the sisterly act drop, and mentally, I could almost see her sit up in her chair.

“As I’m constantly reminded, stupid things,” I said. If she couldn’t hear as I was saying, that wasn’t my fault. But she heard.

“Yeah, that’s a trend with you.”

I wasn’t in a position to argue, especially if she found out about what had happened that day, or the day before. Whenever. I closed my eyes and tried to massage away some of the tension that had suddenly taken hold of my face. Valerie couldn’t see me. “Thanks.” I couldn’t decide if I should go with sarcasm or not, as I knew she would do as I asked. “And thank you for helping.”

“I’ll look. I’ll talk to Mom. You can jump out of a plane, but you can’t call your own mother.” That did feel a bit comforting, though perhaps not enough. I knew myself well enough to have no issue with being called a coward, and I knew there weren’t many people that had faced a situation like this before.

“Bye now!” I said, trying to sound upbeat. It wasn’t until I ended the call that I started to wish I’d said something nicer. ‘I love you’ or something.

Lenore was now on her phone. She wasn’t talking, just reading something. I still didn’t know when or if she ever contacted her family.

I sat back and enjoyed the occasional breeze. My mind would occasionally drift to wondering what our next step could be, but I tried to keep bringing it back to the moment.

Lenore darted over and sat beside me, clearly not focused on the breeze.

“Regional language.”

“Sorry?” I immediately thought back to the phone call, but I hadn’t thought my accent was that significant. “I didn’t even say--”

“Some words are used in some parts of the US but not in others. Think ‘soda’ and ‘pop.’ But many are more significant. Many wouldn’t even make sense to someone outside of a region, much less be used. Rei Locke uses some regional words. It’s probably not something she just picked up here and there because just about every instance seems to be from Texas.”

“So that would mean that Rei Locke is from Texas?”

“Yes.” Lenore had a big smile. “There are vague hints, clearly deliberate, that she is from New York, but that is clearly part of the lie. She didn’t manage to hide this, and she probably didn’t do it on purpose. If we point out exactly who Rei Locke is, we can make people go after her. She must know people. They probably aren’t so willing to go along with the lie—jealousy, annoyance, name it.”

I felt stiff from sitting up so straight, so alert. Breeze forgotten. “That sounds--”

“Ridiculously dangerous. It’s a completely stupid idea. I just saw that she has to be from Texas, and I jumped on it. Stupid.”

I leaned forward as she started leaning away. “That sounds brilliant.”

Lenore sat down with enough force to rock the bench. "It's not," she said, but her slouch was clearly an act as she preened at my assessment.

"If we went to Texas and reached out to the people that knew her."

"We could meet more Odetts," she said. She was biting at her lip, but she also had an ear turned toward me.

"There can't be many more Odetts."

"We shouldn't go." She shook her head, obviously to make sure the message was conveyed clearly to me. "I tend to offend in person."

"You offend in writing too," I said. I was expecting her to glare at me, but she seemed to think I had a valid point. "All right, what are our other options?"

"We have none," Lenore said. She flicked a leaf that had fallen on her knee and then kept flicking at invisible remains of it.

I nodded, leaned back, crossed my arms, and looked around while still nodding. "Hey, you're in charge. This is at least somewhat comfy a spot. Great view. I'd be happy to sit here forever and ever."

"What? No. We have to keep moving before--"

I nodded, adding enthusiasm as I continued. "Ok. Keep moving around. Run forever. That is option A."

Lenore huffed and rolled her eyes, turning away from me a bit more, even though she hadn't really been facing me.

"We can hide," she then listed, as if calling out the missing groceries.

"My vote is for that one so far," I said. "I could live the rest of my life camping, honestly. I'd be happy to do it, too. Mom would hate me, though." At least, I imagined

she would. She'd always seemed to fear I'd never settle down into a "normal" life. A few days, even a few weeks, of fun were fine, and most people would think her version of fun was excessively daring and unusual, but life didn't exist outside of the suburbs. Not in a lasting way.

I also suspected Lenore would hate me. I didn't think Lenore was much of a fan of camping. "We could also hide through witness protection or something," she said, physically distancing herself from me and my ideas.

"We haven't witnessed anything."

Lenore set her hand on mine, overly friendly. "You witnessed the rise of a cult and then left it. We then witnessed attempted murder as someone *attempted to murder us*. How much more witness-y could you get?"

"It isn't a cult!" I said. I felt bad about my outburst and closed my eyes while counting until that outburst felt in the past. Friendship was so much harder in person. It wasn't a cult, but it was so much simpler than this. And I missed that, which I felt bad about. "And I think you need to have betrayed the mob or something."

"Of course it--"

"I was there," I said. "I was not part of a cult. It wasn't a cult. I'd know a cult."

I wasn't even thinking as I spoke, just trying to make myself heard. I could hardly finish speaking as I refused to take breaths between the words and sentences.

The space between Lenore's eyebrows grew thinner and thinner. "The followers--"

I threw my hands up. "It's just a little internet community. That's what they're called. Followers. Don't twist this--"

“Ok,” she said. But it clearly wasn’t ok.

I paused as if the breeze could carry away the last few seconds if given enough time.

“So,” I said. “To Texas?”

“Texas is huge. If we just narrow it down to a state, there’s no way of finding people that knew her,” she mused to herself, and I again threw my hands in the air, wondering about the point of this conversation.

“Why didn’t you point that out in your fifty pages--”

That frustrated Lenore. She gripped and twisted her sleeve so much I thought she’d rip it off. “I was proving that she was lying, not her identity. There’s a difference. Irrelevant material.”

I paused and leaned away for a second, aware that I should try to turn the conversation into a little less of a fight at some point. We were sleep deprived, shaken, and bitter, but we were also friends. I prided myself on a long history of being a good friend—I’d known her for days now.

“Ok,” I said. “How can we--”

“What would she gain out of this? It doesn't make sense. This is a ton of work to write and maintain. It has gone on for years. It can't be for amusement. Is it for fame?”

Lenore wasn’t looking at me, and probably wasn’t even talking to me, but I was stupid enough to actually say something. “The money?”

I knew it was stupid the moment I spoke. It didn’t take Lenore’s look. But the look helped. Of course, it wasn’t a look that expressed doubt of the money idea. It was more like a horrible epiphany.

“How much money did you give her?”

I tried to find a way of shifting blame. I probably shifted from side to side as I did, because that makes me more believable. “I’m just saying, there were a bunch of--”

“How much?” She moved closer. I found myself more attached to my space than ever before, and I didn’t like giving it up.

“A bit.” I tried to stand so we could leave, but Lenore didn’t take the distraction. She stayed seated. It’s not like I knew where to go.

“How much is a bit?” Leaning closer. “You’re young. You don’t even have money. What could you have given?”

“See? I don’t have money. Not much.” I spread myself wide as if to say she could search me, though I don’t know how that would have helped except to reveal that I didn’t have money.

Lenore didn’t believe me. I could tell from the depth in the corners of her lips, the narrowed eyes, and her slight shift forward.

It is funny how I still feel the need to defend myself today. I almost didn’t write this part, but I recognize how stupid that impulse is. The truth is that I only gave a little at a time. Five dollars at first. Twenty dollars here. Forty dollars there. So on. My estimate is that the total would be around nine-hundred dollars. I assure you, I didn’t realize that as I was giving.

“So, she’s collecting money. The fake life is a story to make people give money, but that’s so easy these days. Set up a page, fake an illness...She doesn’t need to go through so much effort. She’s spent years building a following. The story reflectively,

intentionally, portrays too many flaws for it to be the work of a narcissist. Most con artists would pick something a bit simpler.”

I was simply happy we’d stopped talking about me. I sat down carefully, trying not to attract too much attention. “Someone with way too much time--”

“No, it’s brilliant. I love it.” She had a new light in her eyes.

“You have problems,” I said. I didn’t want to be the only one. About a minute passed of waiting for an explanation before I decided she needed prompting to know I couldn’t follow. “What is it?”

“She’s trying to invent an identity. Someone she can live as after going public. That’s why she’s so careful. The holes in her lies are there, but they were so hard to find and mostly occurred when she first started. You followed her for years and didn’t see it. She’s trying to create an identity with power and money and followers. What a lovely cult,” Lenore said. I ground my teeth together so hard chips must have gone flying. “Let’s go to Texas.”

I rubbed my head, trying to dig into the headache. “I thought you said she might not be in Texas.”

“Oh. She won’t be in Texas. But that’s where her roots will be. We can find enough to figure out who she is and point it out to the rest of the world. Let them hunt her down.”

“Ok, but if all we know is that she’s from Texas....”

While I was trying to rub my headache away, Lenore looked like she wanted to grab my head and shake it. Her hands kept moving forward then being pulled back.

“That’s the brilliant part. Look at the posts from 2012.” She paused as if I could mentally

go back to that exact year, recall them word for word, and realize what she had pieced together. There was no part of that I was capable of, and I could watch as the disappointment drained her, just a little. “We need to find a suspicious death. No body.”

I felt the instinct to speak while simultaneously feeling like my voice was caught deep in my throat. “You think she killed someone!”

“I think she faked her own death,” Lenore said. She wore one of the most genuinely happy smiles I’d ever seen, clearly pleased with herself and her own brains. Her confidence was contagious.

The headache was gone, but my heart was pounding with the need to just move.

I had the keys in my hand before I stood up. “Ok. Explain on the way.”

COMMENTS:

1/111—Dec 1

RobertA.

mery Christmas.

2/111--Dec 1

endisnear

Ok. Don’t do it. You all are being stupid and should go to the police. I’m going to call them and tell them about this right now. Don’t be stupid.

1 of 4 replies—Barb: you relize ths happened last april right? Also, anyone with a TV knows about this, so save your call.

3/111--Dec 1

AngryBlogger

I can't wait to find out what happens next. Hope you're not being shot at these days. Please update soon.

4/111--Dec 1

followme

isaw abot this in th news. yr a liar. we knw the real story.

CHAPTER 5: TURNS AND DETOURS

Blog Post By: Amelia 11

5 December 2016

Friends, family, and readers: I'm still alive. Still. Isn't that nice? I'm going to jump, just a little bit. I'm trying to show you as much as I can about our life on the run, let you get to know us, but after we got in the car, it became abundantly clear that we were in no state to drive. The car itself was working fine in spite of the hole in the right-side door, hole in the right-side window, and scratch that Lenore said might have been a shopping cart but I hadn't noticed before. We, however, were not working so well. So, I slept in a different car. My back hurt, again, but at least it was a slightly new experience—her seats had a different shape and texture from mine. We left as soon as I felt ready to drive. Lenore kept napping a few hours more while I drove. Then she drove and I napped. When I woke up again, it was late in the afternoon. Lenore didn't want to stop driving and instead had me reading out messages from the blog. She's enormously bossy.

“Read me the last message from Rei Locke again.” It wasn't a request.

“It seriously isn't that important,” I said. My eyes were struggling to stay open, not because I was tired in general but because I was tired of doing the same thing over and over again.

She didn't seem to even notice my feelings, or me. Like summoning Siri, she said, "Read it anyway."

I closed my eyes and summoned patience. I think mine had dropped to my toes by that point, but I summoned it. I went back to reading, but I was distracted by a little notification. "Odett just wrote us," I said.

I watched her knuckles go white over the steering wheel.

"Ok," she said while barely moving her mouth to get the words out through clenched teeth. "Read that first."

I'd like to talk to y'all. I know it is totally understandable if you never ever want to see me again, but I'd really like to listen. I think we've been talking past each other.

Apparently, I'm not even good at reading out loud because she pulled over to the side of the road to look at it.

Then again, it might just be that she wanted to look at it. I had to spend at least five minutes just watching the thoughts go through her head.

"So?" I finally asked. I didn't know just how much she could figure out from three sentences, but I didn't want to wait three hours to find out.

"Her grammar has improved," Lenore said.

Five minutes. More than five minutes. "That's it?"

Lenore passed the phone over. "It's a bit unusual. It doesn't sound overly elevated, like she's trying to impress us. It just improved." Lenore then snatched the

phone back and started scrolling. “The earlier messages were almost too messed up to be believed.” She pointedly looked at me. “Almost.”

“What does that tell us?” I asked. I just couldn’t figure out the importance.

“That Odett is pretty manipulative.”

I rolled my eyes. Great news. Much scarier than the gun.

“What if it’s her?” Lenore asked. At my unintentional expression, she continued, “What Odett is the real Rei Locke? Or at least her latest identity.”

“That would be weird. It’s a pretty big risk, isn’t it?” I asked. After all, our survival (or her capture) would mean the chance of everything falling apart. “If she wanted to hide her identity, why would she keep meeting with us? Or shooting at us?”

“But if desperate,” Lenore said. She didn’t bother to finish.

I knew what she meant and nodded. “We should write to her,” I said.

Lenore moved the phone far, far from my reach. “How could you possibly think that is a good idea?” she screamed. It echoed around the car, and I wondered if the cars passing by might have heard.

But I wasn’t backing down. “Our plan worked. We wanted to make Rei Locke freak out so she’d make a mistake and--”

“And there are bullet holes in our car.”

I wasn’t sure when it became “our” car, but I certainly didn’t object. I was actually happy to hear it, even if I couldn’t understand why. “And we know who she is,” I said, much calmer now.

“We speculate,” she said, now moving in the opposite volume direction. “We need more evidence.”

“There are bullets still lying around in our car. How much more do you need?”

Lenore made an effort to look away from the holes, looking toward the left side of the car and probably not aware that I noticed. “I thought our new plan was Texas.”

“Are we really going to ignore this opportunity?” I asked. “Texas isn’t going anywhere! Odett might!”

“Why are you so obsessed with being her friend. She clearly doesn’t want to be friends. What makes you so determined to--”

“Ok,” I said. “What else are we supposed to do? What’s your plan?”

I wanted her to have an answer. She needed to have an answer because I couldn’t choose between the two. She didn’t answer. She didn’t even flinch or blink or do anything to show she was listening, but I knew she was. I was beginning to think she always listened, even if she didn’t always speak to me.

She wasn’t going to speak this time, so I continued. “We keep going back to that run and hide deal, and I’m pretty sure we dismissed that. There are only so many ways to fight.”

Lenore broke, though she stayed facing the left. “All right fine. We’ll fake a change of heart. She tried to make you side with her, right?”

“She almost seemed normal at that moment.”

Lenore did not find that amusing. “We’ll go and talk to her, gather information about her, or at least about her current identity. We can then give an anonymous tip about someone that is using a fake, probably stolen identity to build a cult and shoot at people.”

Under my breath, I said, “It’s not a cult.” At the time, I didn’t know if she was trying to test me or convince me or what. And I probably don’t need to mention that I’ve changed as a person over the past few months.

About three hours later, getting somewhat close to sundown but not quite there, Lenore had taken to sulking. We were in a little town south of St. Louis, and she was not happy to be meeting Odett, but she was even more annoyed that Odett was late.

I’d tried getting her to talk about her family, which she’d refused to say anything about, horrified when I remembered that she had relatives in Wisconsin and Wyoming. I then had less success when asking her about hobbies, languages, school, politics, and anything else I could think of. Eventually, she just stayed completely quiet. I could tell she was listening, but she didn’t respond.

I was less impatient, but that didn’t necessarily mean I felt particularly patient. “Should I send her another message?” I asked. I knew Lenore wouldn’t ignore this question.

Lenore shrugged. “It’s not like she’s lost.” She didn’t explain, but I knew the town and its few roads in were too small and simple for that. “It’s not like she won’t be able to find us.”

I waited a little while before continuing. “She’s not going to meet us, is she?”

Lenore’s reply was automatic, as if she just opened her mouth to expel the thoughts already running through. “She last updated an hour ago. Prior to that, she was posting every 30 minutes, undoubtedly while driving.”

“Do you think she got in a wreck?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if I felt doubt, fear, or worry. And there were big differences between each. Lenore was trying not to look at me, but I persisted as worry started to take over. “There are only so many roads into this town.”

“She’s not your friend,” Lenore said under her breath. I have no idea if I was supposed to hear because I almost didn’t.

“That doesn’t mean I want something to happen to her,” I said.

Lenore glared at me. I hadn’t moved and hadn’t said anything, but she said, “If we die because you’re curious, I will be so angry.”

“You’re always angry,” I said with great maturity.

“You’re always a pain,” she said with greater maturity.

It took less than 15 minutes to find her car. Luck probably contributed more than anything else, but we felt pretty sure it was the same car we saw the night before.

We didn’t see Odett.

The area seemed pretty open. There weren’t any cars on the road, any trees in the area. There weren’t even any signs. Mostly, the land was flat with long grass, though it did seem to form small hills.

Lenore got out of the car first this time. “I have a bad feeling,” she said. She was leaning against the car, but she wasn’t quite tall enough to look over the top at me. Again, I couldn’t be sure that she was speaking to me.

“We found her,” I said, even though I knew that was the bad feeling.

“I have a bad feeling,” she said, directly to me. “Very bad. Worse than instinct. This is bad in feeling and in thinking it through.”

For those 15 minutes or so, I'd been imagining all sorts of terrible wrecks and fearing we were partially responsible for bad circumstances. Those imagined scenarios vanished and left little in their place, which just left me feeling exceptionally uncertain. "It doesn't look damaged," I said. Somehow, I didn't feel any sense of relief.

"She did this before," Lenore said.

"Just stay alert," I said.

We walked up to the car, which was clearly empty. We were still scared of it.

At least I was terrified and definitely projecting those feelings onto Lenore, but she might have been afraid also.

"You don't think she's on the phone somewhere near, do you?" I asked, even though we could see pretty far around. I convinced myself the uneven ground, the small hills might be able to hide a person. Maybe.

Lenore opened the door and grabbed a phone. That ended my idea. Unless Odett had many phones.

Lenore started looking through it.

"Are you sure that's legal?" I asked. I started looking around nervously, like the police could run by at any time.

"The last calls were from someone named Rei," Lenore said.

That distracted me from my nerves, but brought in some different ones. Worse. "Ok. Not our person. That's not good." For one thing, someone was so devoted to this random blogger that they were willing to attack us. For another, without any real possibility of gain, we'd just met up with someone that recently tried to kill us. And we

weren't any closer to figuring out who Rey Locke was—at least, not that I could see at the time.

I backed away, far and fast, then swirled around to see if she would be walking toward us; this had to be the part of the movie when she appears in the background, ready to strike just as we realized the danger.

I saw her. She wasn't walking.

I don't know what I did when I saw the body, but I know that I'll never forget the look that settled on Lenore's face, or the tension that controlled every muscle of her body as she froze.

"Get in the car," I said.

She still didn't move.

I grabbed her by the arm and started to pull. When she stumbled, I ended up dragging her, but she eventually got her feet back to work.

"We need to call 911," she whispered, but I heard her as if she were shouting.

"Get in the car while you call 911," I said, and we ran.

COMMENTS:

1/1519--Dec 05

lolooll

first.

2/1519--Dec 05

fotofan

I think you're lying. I think you killed her. Am I right?

3/1519--Dec 05

Tod O.

Listen I dont really comment like this, but this really bothers me for a
number of reasons, and I wanted to speak out...[Read More](#)

4/1519--Dec 05

Ann N.

I want to interview you. Can you pm me?