

ELIXIR

PROJECT



EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,
EVEN THE TRUTH

KARY OBERBRUNNER

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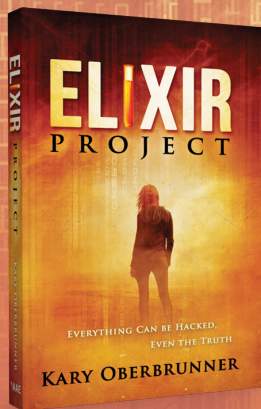
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CHAPTER ONE

“STRIP SEARCH 'EM,” barks the senior TSA officer to his junior. Then he lowers his voice. “After last week’s events, I’m not taking any chances.”

The younger officer snaps up from his stool. “You heard him. You two, follow me!” he says, scowling at an attractive couple in their mid-twenties.

Both look innocent enough. What set the agents off? I’m not sure if the junior officer’s abrupt tone is meant to impress his superior or intimidate those of us waiting in line. Judging by our expressions, I don’t think either strategy is working well for Mr. Mall Cop.

“You can’t be serious,” the woman says. “I’m not going with you. And I’m *definitely* not getting naked.”

Her travel companion jumps in. “We’re just tech professionals on our way to meet with a private client in London. Why the search?”

They argue back and forth. Their growing resistance and escalating voices cause other officers to stop their check-in process. Pens freeze midway through verifying a long line of travelers anxious to get through security and one step closer to their anticipated destinations.

The other officers place their paperwork down and shuffle closer to the couple. Easygoing chitchat among the passengers dissipates. Like a thin metal wire stretched taut, the patience in the room is dangerously close to snapping.

"I think there's going to be a problem here," Nick whispers to me, Darren, and Chloe.

"Yeah," Chloe says. "This is starting to feel a little weird."

The senior officer towers directly over the couple in front of us. He looks crusty and weathered, like old leather left out in the afternoon sun too long. His eyes bug out slightly, but oddly they don't blink. He's close enough to smell—a musty odor, a mixture of cheap aftershave and wet dog. I read the lettering on his narrow tan name tag:

Officer McNulty

"Don't give us that 'tech professional' spiel," the irritable officer hisses. "We know exactly *who you are*. We can either discuss details here or privately back in our control room."

At the words *control room*, I catch a glimmer in his eye. Maybe even a wink?

The woman's eyebrows narrow. "I said, I'm not going anywhere with you." Her speech drips of a strength that I envy.

Her associate maintains his poise, too, but I'm near

enough to see his fingers twitch nervously. I'm sure he's capable, but the officers outnumber him half a dozen to one.

I want to look at my three friends instead. Maybe they know something I don't? But that would require turning from McNulty, and I'm not sure that's a good idea.

"We have passports and papers," the young businessman says, reaching in his pocket.

"*Stop!* And keep your hands where we can see them. We know you're linked with a SWARM sleeper cell here in the States."

Time stumbles and spins as I process his accusation. *SWARM? Here? Now?* A bead of perspiration trickles slowly down McNulty's face.

"Did you say SWARM?" a deep voice growls directly behind me.

A thick elbow smacks my back. I turn to see a large, balding man shaking with rage. His face twists and contorts, seizure-like. Bright shades of red streak from the tops of his ears all the way down to his wide neck and the gold chain encircling it. Tufts of dark chest hair sprout out from his button-down Hawaiian shirt.

He struggles to speak, as if someone has kidnapped his tongue. "*Filthy pigs. Y-you murdered my wife!*"

He lunges forward, flailing his arms and nearly knocking me over. The close quarters in this crowded line don't offer me much space, but Darren still has the presence of mind to react quickly. His arms catch me, gripping the small of

my back, wrapping around my waist, and stopping me from a nasty fall on an unforgiving floor.

Before I can gather my thoughts or my balance, another voice screams from behind us. “*Hackers from hell! You ruined my family,*” a petite soccer mom yells. “You stole my identity, our money, and our dreams!”

Several others shout, voicing their disdain. Our once organized line pushes forward, mimicking a Black Friday crowd overly amped about doorbusters waiting on the other side.

“Quit pushing,” an older man with a cane yells, trying to maintain his balance.

“Let security do their job,” pleads a woman to my left.

Without space to stop the force welling up behind us, bodies begin toppling forward like bowling pins smacked by a heavy ball. Anger mounts, the cane falls, and fists begin to fly, in this supercharged, unforeseen escapade.

Scrunching down as low as we can, Darren, Chloe, Nick, and I crawl to the right, hoping to avoid getting caught in the fray.

I catch a glimpse of the large balding man. Using his weight, he knocks over several more bystanders and army-crawls toward the young businessman, who must have fallen during the commotion. The balding man sits on the chest of the alleged SWARM member and pummels his face, bouncing his skull off the tile floor with each blow.

His arms pinned under the large man’s weight, the businessman’s only response is a series of high-pitched squawks.

This barbaric scene rivals any mixed martial arts competition.

I want to run for help. As much as I hate SWARM, he should be tried in court, not beaten to a pulp. Before I can move, a red dot appears on the balding man's back, and a second later I hear a loud crackling and clacking noise. Blue bolts of lightning dance between the two electrodes at the tip of the senior officer's gun. I watch as thousands of volts of current shoot through his body. The balding man screams and shakes and then goes stiff.

Officer McNulty bellows in a deep voice, "Freeze! Everyone!" Even the other officers stop trying to break up the fights all around them.

The order finds its mark, and silence soon replaces pandemonium. The crowd sheepishly settles down, like elementary school kids caught misbehaving on the playground.

"Get an ambulance for Gramps here," he says.

Two other officers spring into action, helping the older man to his feet. Another recovers his cane, which got knocked away during the scuffle.

"What about the guy with the bloody face...and his blond friend?" the junior officer asks. "Better get them an ambulance, too?"

"Not a chance," the older officer says, putting his gun back in its holster. His tone is emotionless.

The junior officer doesn't pick up on the cues. "Yeah, but we're not even sure they're associated with the hacktivists."

The weight of the moment closes in on my chest. It looks like McNulty is going to turn his stun gun on his junior

officer next. But instead, he tightens his lips and cranes his neck at an awkward angle. "Take them anywhere other than our control room and you can kiss your job good-bye." He whips around and storms away, huffing as he marches.

Heat flushes into the junior officer's cheeks. He straightens his belt, then issues a command of his own. "You heard him. Call an ambulance for the old guy." Then his voice drops. "And take those two suspects into the control room."

"What should I do with them there?" a middle-aged female officer whispers. My friends and I are still close enough to hear her.

"You know what to do," he mutters. "Dispose of them."

CHAPTER TWO

NONE OF US speak until we get through airport security and to our gate. From our seats, we can still see the officers, but at least they can't listen in.

Darren breaks the silence. "Did he say 'dispose of them'?"

I didn't think much of Darren until we did a group project last semester. The girls in my dorm studied him more than the exams for their gen ed courses, often commenting about his wavy ash-brown hair. He is easy on the eyes, but I would never admit it to them—or him.

Darren listens unlike anyone I've ever met. On the surface, some might chalk it up as shyness. While others bumble on about their opinions, Darren stops to ask for mine. After a couple of conversations, I discovered what's truly behind those brilliant brown eyes: sincerity.

"I know," Chloe replies. "Think he was joking?"

"Hope not," Nick says. "They have what's coming to them."

Although it was a callous comment, he does have a point. Most everybody I know has suffered at the hands of SWARM.

“Cai warned us about the potential for high alert during our trip,” I point out.

“Should we still board our flight or head back to campus?” Nick asks.

He doesn’t sound scared, just a little concerned. Nick isn’t the type to get alarmed by officers in the airport or by opponents on the football field. He can thank his running back frame for that extra shot of confidence—muscles bulging out from all directions of his dark mahogany skin. I bet Officer McNulty wouldn’t last ten seconds against him—if he didn’t have his stun gun to help him.

“It *only* counts as a whole semester’s worth of credits,” Chloe reminds us. “Besides, don’t you think we owe it to Sienna’s uncle after all the strings he pulled to get us this opportunity?”

Nick, Darren, and Chloe stare at me, waiting for my response.

“Sienna?” Chloe says.

“What?” I clear my throat before continuing. “He insisted on hooking us up.”

“I’d say,” Nick says, nodding. “The plane tickets, hotels, and meals...”

“Don’t forget the details between the registrar and the Center for Global Engagement,” Darren adds. “First quan-

tum mechanics majors spending the summer abroad in Greece. Can't beat that."

The longer we talk, the better I feel. Conversation creates distance between the incident and us. Still, I wonder about the blond woman. *Did they succeed in transporting her to their control room? If so, she might be dead by now.*

"You boys pick your perks," Chloe teases. "But I've enjoyed our smart-rings the most."

I have to agree. Our smart-rings are the coolest invention I've ever worn or seen. I can't live without mine now, but last October was a different matter. I've never enjoyed receiving gifts. I get anxious thinking about what reaction I'm supposed to have when I untie the bow. Most years I forget about my birthday until the day it arrives. But this year Uncle Cai wouldn't let me. Between those reminders, he dropped hints about an extra special gift he'd selected for my eighteenth birthday. He insisted on giving me matching ones for my friends to help us prep for our trip to Greece. Though he never listens to my pleas of going cold turkey on his gift-giving addiction, I can't help but appreciate his thoughtfulness. For as long as I can remember, Uncle Cai's been the steady presence in my life and the closest thing I have to a father—or mother, for that matter.

I glance around at the other gates. People stand relaxed, scrolling on their phones and sipping beverages. All signs of what happened only fifteen minutes ago are gone.

The junior officer still flexes his dominance, flitting about to various stations. From this distance, I can't make

out what he's saying. His gestures seem overdone, like he enjoys playing the part of the main character in his own personal drama.

I scan the faces of passengers filling the gate area. That SWARM couple were going to be on our flight to London. I know Cai is probably busy this morning, but I should call him anyway. He'd want to know.

When I was a toddler, my parents were in an accident. My lone memory of our former life together is captured in a family photograph from my third birthday. Uncle Cai told me the picture had been taken days before my parents were removed from me and from this life.

Over the years, I've stared at the picture more than I care to admit. Guess I keep hoping to find the truth. Like, what really happened? The details surrounding their deaths have always felt conveniently cryptic in nature. Fifteen years later, unanswered questions still infiltrate my mind regularly.

Heaven knows I've coexisted with ambiguity for far too long. A couple of years ago, I launched my own amateur investigation about my parents' accident via the Internet. A junior in high school at the time, night after night, I followed every lead in a web of interrelated mouse clicks. But in the end, I failed to uncover an alternative besides the official pronouncement: "an unfortunate accident."

Don't get me wrong. I'm deeply indebted to Cai for adopting me. My father's kid brother wore his protector role well, given the circumstances. Inheriting a toddler overnight is a big responsibility for anyone, much less a

single guy highly committed to his career.

Growing up, I viewed Cai more like an older brother than an uncle or legal guardian. Still, I can't shake the unsettling sensation I have deep in my gut. Something about my parents' accident screams *non-accidental*.

"What do you like best about the ring, Sienna?" Darren asks, interrupting my thoughts.

"Umm...the ability to talk on it," I announce, trying to look engaged in the moment. I don't want him to think I'm distracted. Chloe calls my habit daydreaming. I call it a part-time job, staying afloat in my deluge of thoughts.

"Agreed," Nick says. "That feature saved all our butts last semester. No thanks to you, Chloe." He gives Chloe a flirtatious jab with his elbow.

"The way I remember, you were the one getting distracted. Don't you know you can't watch a playoff game and ace quantum physics at the same time?"

"She's got a point," Darren says. "They say multitasking decreases your IQ—producing the same effect as being stoned."

Chloe grins at Darren. She looks stunning as usual, despite the fact that we're in an airport and barely managed to escape a brawl. She has so much to be thankful for. Nick, her boyfriend, adores her, and her mom and dad love her. In a weak moment, I could let jealousy spring up and choke out the kindness I feel toward her. Lucky for me, Chloe's loyalty melts any ill will I'm tempted to entertain.

Our friendship blossomed over the past couple of semesters.

She was the first girl I met on campus, even before moving in—all thanks to the admissions office. They switched our welcome packets on accident. Feeling responsible, they gave me her phone number, and we ended up tracking each other down through text messages.

After straightening the debacle, we chatted in the campus café for the remainder of the afternoon, talking about whatever popped into our heads: class schedules, embarrassing moments from high school, and how to avoid the freshman fifteen. To our surprise, later that day admissions reassigned us as roommates—not a common gesture at our college, I'm told.

Cai had worked his magic at the admissions office. He'd waltzed into Ravenwood Hall and emerged fifteen minutes later with a spring in his step.

"Good news, ladies. Admissions owned its mistake and regrets the welcome packet mix-up. They've reassigned you as roommates *and* put you in an upperclassmen dorm."

"Wow, Mr. Lewis," Chloe remarked. "You've got some serious pull here."

"Please call me Cai," he corrected. "I'm just happy you've got each other now. Sienna could use a friend like you."

"Thanks, Uncle," I said. "You think of everything, even picking my friends." I winked. "Guess I'll keep you, roomie. That is, if you still want me?"

Nick gets up from his chair. "You guys hungry?" he asks. "I saw they had some protein bars over there."

“No thanks,” I respond. “After that latte on the drive over, I’m good.”

If only it were true—me feeling good? This knot in my stomach isn’t going to loosen until I talk to Cai. He always knows what to say.

In the tech world, Cai became known as a phenom at a relatively young age. Selling your first start-up while still in college tends to have that effect. He turned the heads of all the major players in the industry. No need to climb the corporate ladder when you can take the elevator straight to the top. His key roles at ELIXIR and on the Senior Board of Clerics, the governing entity for the global organization, come with plenty of perks.

“Sienna, when was the last time you saw Cai?” Darren asks.

I love the way Darren says my name. I could listen to him say it over and over.

I try recalling his question, but I’m distracted again, focused more on his mouth than finding the correct answer.

“Umm...he’s been pretty busy with ELIXIR stuff. I guess they’re putting the finishing touches on a new project. But I think we chatted Tuesday...in prep for our trip.”

“He’s so lucky, striking the lottery by joining ELIXIR when he did,” Nick says, still hovering since nobody else wanted any food. Guess he gave up on those protein bars.

“Yeah, I’d give my left arm to work there,” Chloe says. “You know I’m counting on you getting me in there for my internship.”

“Who said I could get you in?” I tease. “I’m on Cai all the time just to get my résumé in front of the right people.”

“Well, don’t forget about your friends when the opportunity comes.”

Cai joined ELIXIR way back when it was still relatively unknown. About five years ago, it became more popular among those with a taste for technology and innovation. But with the release of their new SWARM-fighting technology and recent stamp of approval from the League of Nations, ELIXIR crashed into the mainstream—definitely claiming the spot as the cool kid on the block.

“Which is it for you, Chloe—revenge or career?” Darren asks.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“Your motive for working at ELIXIR.”

“Motive? What am I, on trial or something?” she replies with an icy edge.

“It was just a question,” I say. “I don’t think he meant anything by it.”

She stares blankly ahead. Tears well up in her eyes and start rolling down her cheeks and off her chin. I know the source of her sorrow because, as roommates, we often confide in each other. I even know things Chloe hasn’t told Nick.

“I’m sure your secret is safe with Darren and Nick,” I tell Chloe, trying to make it easier for her.

“I’m sorry, guys,” she says. “SWARM’s a sore subject

for me.” No one speaks—because it doesn’t feel like we’re supposed to.

“You could say SWARM stole my high school best friend—Amy. Back then I didn’t know how SWARM tricks girls into the human-trafficking industry. They go online and pretend to be a teenage guy. After establishing trust and chatting for a few days, they ask the girl to do something she’ll regret—nothing too big, but still something embarrassing.”

“That’s horrible,” Darren says.

“It gets worse. They record it by hacking the webcam and then use it as blackmail, threatening to send it to her parents and classmates unless she continues down the regretful path. Each day they apply more pressure—upping the ante and demanding more. After weeks of torture, guilt, and self-hatred, victims will do anything to end this toxic cyber cycle. SWARM then offers an ultimatum. If she agrees to meet in person, they’ll destroy the videos. If she doesn’t, then they’ll go public.”

“Sounds like hell,” Nick says, putting his hand on her arm.

“Nobody knew Amy was stuck until she didn’t return home one weekend,” she says, her voice cracking. “After confiscating her computer, the authorities put together all the pieces. For all we know, SWARM is still using her in one of their trafficking rings in some dark corner of the world.” Chloe wipes her tears with her hands. Nick leans

in—giving her a comforting hug. “I’d do anything to take out SWARM,” she says.

“Wouldn’t we all,” Darren mumbles under his breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the junior officer and his female colleague huddled around an electronic gadget, like a tablet or something. They both seem animated, maybe even upset.

I turn back to my friends and look down at the new text on my ring—an alert about boarding beginning in fifteen minutes.

I remember when I first opened Cai’s gift, I wasn’t exactly sure what it was, so I simply stared at the box instead.

“Come on, Sienna,” he prodded. “You don’t even know what it is—do you?”

“Well, no.” I blushed. But then I went on the offensive. “It looks like a ring, but okay, Einstein. What is it?” I picked up the simple silver band and turned it over in my hands, appreciating the sleek design.

“Try it on.”

I slipped the ring on my finger.

“Cortex, call Cai,” he said.

His phone rang on command. “Hello, birthday girl,” Cai’s voice boomed through the ring with crystal clarity.

“Shut up! It’s a *phone*, too?”

“More than that,” Cai boasted with as much pride as a new dad showing off his baby’s pictures. “Watch this. Cortex, play Sienna’s favorite childhood movie.”

The ring glowed softly and then more intensely. A bright

flash ripped through the silver circle. Above us, recognizable images were projected onto the flat white ceiling. The surround sound in his home office sprang to life somehow integrated with the operating system.

Cai spent the rest of the afternoon educating me on Cortex, the new smart-ring he and his ELIXIR team had developed.

The gift opened up my mind to possibilities I never knew existed. Of course, it contains all the expected features—unlimited access to all things digital, an internal projector with built-in GPS, and Internet of Things integration. IoT connects you to everyone and everything, including your bank, your mechanic, and even your doctor.

Think you might need to change a lightbulb or replace the filter in your refrigerator? Cortex does most of it for you, the knowing, the buying, and the shipping—all done by instant drone delivery.

“What’s this?” I asked. “A text informing me to drink a glass of water outside?”

“Oh, that’s Prompts technology,” Cai replied. “Your current level of hydration is low and your cortisol is high—hence the text message. You could use some water and sunlight.”

Only in its infancy stage, Prompts influences brain waves by suggesting new thought patterns. Beta testing found it extremely effective for overcoming addictions to substances such as heroin and nicotine. Parents sang its praises for aiding their children in replacing night terrors with sweet dreams.

“But isn’t it a little...*dangerous*?” I asked, shifting my weight on Cai’s dark brown leather sofa. I tucked both feet up under my legs to get into a comfortable position.

“Prompts? How so?” He rested his chin on his fist.

“Well...,” I fumbled, trying to form an educated objection. “Thought-influencing technology sounds awfully similar to mind control. Isn’t it risky?”

“Risky? Come on, Sienna. What news feed have you been scanning? Sure, we have skeptics and haters, but think of all the good it can do.”

“Like what?”

“Well...in beta testing, Prompts increased academic scores, decreased anxiety, and raised our propensities for charitable giving. Plus there are privacy settings you can enable. I set yours extremely high, so you have nothing to worry about.”

He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. His blue eyes searched for a smile on my face. We both knew he had me. And although Cai often proves his point, it’s my job to make him work for it.

“Need more proof?”

“Prompts also decreased violence in hostile environments and helped athletes shatter records in nearly every sport. And...” Cai stretched out his next statement for emphasis. “We need any edge over SWARM we can get. They’re playing for keeps, remember?”

I let silence have its place, filling the empty space between us.

“Okay, okay. You’ve proved your point,” I said. “Prompts might be a breakthrough, but sometimes I worry about all of you at ELIXIR. You seem so busy creating I wonder if you have time to evaluate what you’re doing. There’s a price for playing God, you know.”

“Well, any time God wants to step in and stop SWARM he can,” Cai replied. “In the meantime, we’ll do our part.”

“Sienna. Earth to Sienna,” Chloe says, tapping my shoulder. “That’s the third time I said your name. Someone’s calling you.”

I snap out of my daydream. Tiny orange letters encircle my ring, revealing the identity of the caller. *Why would Cai be calling me?*

“Sorry, guys. I need to take this.” I excuse myself a few feet away and accept the call.

“I thought you were on assignment with ELIXIR in—” But before I even have a chance to finish, Cai interrupts me with unfamiliar urgency in his voice.

“Sienna, whatever you do, don’t get on that plane to London.”

CHAPTER THREE

“WHAT’S WRONG, CAI?”

“No time to explain.” Then he shoots off a series of directives. “Find a TV or use your ring. SWARM is in London. They did something to the royal family.”

“What are you talking about? When?” A thousand other thoughts hijack my mind.

“They’re dead—all of them.” Then, in a somber tone, he warns, “This is the beginning, Sienna. Everything is about to change—forever.”

I don’t recognize this person on the other end of the line. Cai has never been one for melodrama. He’s the complete opposite. Forever the eternal optimist, he downplays negativity, sensationalism, and fear-based media.

“You’re scaring me, Cai.” Anxiety creeps up from the pit of my stomach, making it hard to swallow. Then our call drops—and he’s gone. I take the ring away from my mouth and close my eyes. Darren, Chloe, and Nick stare back at me.

“You okay, roomie?” Chloe notices the fear plastered all over my face. She reaches for my hand. I clasp it and walk forward, pulling her with me, not once taking my eyes off the adjacent wall.

We join a small group of travelers huddled around a public transparent projection screen. I gaze at shaky footage on the left side of the screen shot by a cameraman who appears to be running through a crowded street toward a river.

The right side of the screen shows video from what looks like a mobile phone. Several cars with tinted windows speed down a city street, striking people and breaking through barriers.

Chloe and I inch forward hand in hand. Nick and Darren press in behind us. A reporter speaks:

“A day that started out so perfectly will end tragically for billions across the planet. Historically, May 9 is known as Europe Day, a day dedicated to peace and unity.

“The queen’s eight state limousines—two Bentleys, three Rolls-Royces, and three Daimlers—departed at eleven a.m. Eight veteran chauffeurs, each extremely loyal to the royal family, transported European dignitaries from more than two dozen countries. Supporters lined the streets, waving flags, cheering, and greeting one another with shouts of peace in their native language.

“Around eleven thirty a.m., the lead car with the royal family suddenly accelerated. Shortly after, the other seven cars in the motorcade broke line and followed in reckless pursuit. Reaching speeds of more than ninety miles per hour, the vehi-

cles plowed through bystanders and barriers, killing several people. The chase ended when the cars broke through a final barricade and drove straight into the River Thames.

“Calls made from the dignitaries in the vehicles are now being compiled by officials. Apparently, screams of being trapped in the cars and cries of doors and windows that wouldn’t unlock pepper these voice mails.

“Witnesses say several dignitaries broke the windows, but because of high speeds, they were unable to jump out. The onboard cameras reveal chauffeurs who appear oblivious to the screaming and pleading of their passengers. Each driver looks physically present, but mentally absent—not even panicked or aware of danger.

“Rescue attempts are being made as we speak by the emergency workers behind me. As of now, no bodies have been recovered. At the same time as this tragic accident, several large European government websites were hacked. Each site went completely dark except for the word ‘SWARM.’

“We’re left with more questions than answers. Was SWARM’s attack retaliation for London’s recent support to resurrect the League of Nations?

“One thing is for sure. This current attack is by far the most devastating and perplexing. Experts wonder if we’ve witnessed the first hack upon the human mind. Were these chauffeurs key players in a suicide mission they knew nothing about?

“If these suspicions are confirmed, then hacktivism has crossed a new echelon of evil, one that could infect us all.

“An official at ELIXIR—the international organization

dedicated to SWARM eradication—promised a formal response within the next forty-eight hours. Our correspondent believes ELIXIR may reveal some new technological advancement that will deliver a deathblow to SWARM.

“Apparently, ELIXIR officials have been testing this technology for some time. And according to its spokesperson, Ms. Tilda Tulane, the world can’t wait any longer.

“This is Lori Wicker reporting on-site in London. Stay tuned for more updates, including coverage of ELIXIR’s response.”

A man to my right curses, and a lady to my left cries.

“This is bad,” Nick says. “Really bad.”

Chloe lets go of my hand. She turns to Nick, burying her head in his chest. He wraps his arms around her and holds her close.

My eyes catch Darren’s. Must be nice—finding comfort in the arms of another. But relationships never come easy to me—the price you pay for losing a mother and father you can’t even remember. I’m not willing to drop my guard ever again if it means the possibility of loving and losing.

Cai is the exception—probably because I was too young to know otherwise. A three-year-old orphan needs love and affection no matter who they are. Research proves it. In my freshman psychology class, I learned about a study of infant deaths on forty newborns. Despite getting all their physical needs met, over half died within the first four months. The single reason: not being touched.

“Think we should still leave the country?” I ask Darren, since Nick and Chloe seem a little preoccupied with each other.

“Well, I don’t think we should stay here.”

He’s right. The entire airport feels like a giant tinderbox ready to explode. No wonder Cai sounded flustered. ELIXIR is probably scrambling over how to respond. Dignitaries from across Europe might be dead, including the royal family. And SWARM is probably celebrating with champagne bottles in hand.

All those lives, gone with one single hack. But if SWARM can hack our minds and not just our devices, then we’re all in danger.

I want to run, but my feet feel heavy, like they’re stuck in thick mud. My finger beeps again. “Sorry. Think we got disconnected,” Cai says.

“I just saw the news. You okay? Was it SWARM? What’s ELIXIR going to do?” I fire off questions.

“They didn’t report even half of it. Look, I can’t have you board that plane.” He sounds more relaxed this time, more like the Cai I know.

“I’m worried about SWARM and so I’ve made some arrangements for you and your friends to get out of the airport safely,” Cai instructs. “In a couple minutes, a guy in a uniform is going to come get you. Go with him. He’s on our side.”

“Okay. We will. So I take it our summer in Greece is on hold. No connection flight to London means no—”

“Sienna, I need to run. We’re making a big announcement in the next forty-eight hours.”

“Sure, go,” I say. “What’s the name of the guy coming to get us?”

“Officer McNulty,” he replies.

CHAPTER FOUR

“SIENNA LEWIS!” a gruff voice behind us calls.

Chloe frowns. “Oh, it’s you...Stun Gun himself. How can we help you today?”

“I’m the one asking the questions,” he barks. “Unless you have a problem with that, Chloe?” The officer moves his right hand near the stun gun clipped to his belt.

“How do you know her name?” Nick asks.

“Nicolas Logan Elliott. Highly recruited football player from Columbus. Quantum physics major, 4.0 honors student. Want me to keep going?” McNulty says with a sparkle in his eyes.

Although taken aback, Nick isn’t one to step down. “Try me.”

“Favorite restaurant? Hot Wings and Things. Childhood friend? Cardale Smith. Fear of snakes and fear of failure,” the senior officer says. He unloads his words the same way a soldier in a firing squad unloads bullets. But I think

McNulty, unlike a soldier, enjoys inflicting pain. “I got more where that came from, Nick, but that might just embarrass you in front of your friends. Want me to talk about who you dated before Chloe? Your deceased older brother? Or the organization you contacted at age sixteen?”

I wait for a comeback from this all-American running back, but instead I hear nothing.

McNulty looks him over with a condescending smirk. “Didn’t think so. Hey, next time how about you keep your mouth shut?”

Then he turns in my direction, like a predator in pursuit of his next meal. “Ah, yes, of course, Ms. Sienna. You’re even more stunning in person. Me and Kiran enjoyed reviewing some footage we found on your Cortex,” he says, wiping his mouth. “You know, it’s amazing what these new smart-rings capture when you’re not even expecting it. Next time you might want to take it off before you freshen up after your morning run.”

“You’re bluffing,” Chloe argues. “Don’t listen to him.”

Darren tenses up, but I grab his wrist before he shifts his weight forward.

“Not now,” I whisper under my breath. He stops and puts his foot back down. “We need you.”

Darren turns his head and fixes onto my gaze. The energy between us ignites a spark deep within my chest. But I don’t give myself permission to unpack those feelings. Even if I cared for him in that way, I’m not about to let him know. In the long run, it’s far less painful to keep on pretending.

“Your uncle instructed us to take you,” McNulty says.

“And if we don’t go?” Chloe asks with an undercurrent of defiance. “Will we miss out on our summer abroad?”

“Young lady, SWARM just murdered European dignitaries from more than two dozen countries,” the officer smirks. “A summer abroad doesn’t even matter at a time like this. How about you grow up for a second? ELIXIR is the only one with a potential answer, and Sienna’s uncle is on the Senior Board. I’d shut up, if I were you, and do whatever he says.”

She flushes with embarrassment.

“I’ll go,” I burst out, surprised by my own voice. My friends stare, their expressions convincing me they think I’m insane. I swallow hard before speaking. “I don’t like the idea, either, but Cai told us to go with McNulty, and my uncle hasn’t led us the wrong way yet.” Nobody moves a muscle or speaks a word. And the longer they wait, the more my stomach turns.

“She’s got a point,” Darren says, breaking the silence. “Nobody’s landing in London until they get this mess sorted out anyway.” I lock onto his brown eyes and push the corners of my lips upward, acknowledging his support.

“All right,” Nick responds, still looking shell-shocked from the verbal spar with the senior officer.

We all stare at Chloe. She shrugs. “Okay, fine.”

“Follow me,” McNulty says. Then he takes off in the direction of the security line.

“Where are we going?” Nick asks.

He halts and turns his right shoulder in our direction. Beaming back at us, he says, “To the control room, of course.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CONTROL ROOM IS underground. We traveled by a six-seater electric cart from the terminal and out to the tarmac. After driving into an airplane hangar, McNulty led us to an elevator, where we descended to level five. After a series of security checks, we arrived at a dimly lit hallway. On a desk a few feet behind me, I see what looks like a blond wig with a dark red streak on it.

“Still think we should have listened to Cai?” Chloe whispers to me.

Her question stings because, on the drive over, I had a similar thought. Why would Cai associate with the likes of McNulty?

“Guess we’ll find out soon,” I say as relaxed as possible.

“Drink this,” McNulty orders. His eyebrows squish together at the top of his forehead just below his hair. Streaks of silver give away his age. He points to four vials of orange liquid on a high-top table in front of us. The

clear glass cylinders rest on a simple glass tray.

“What is it?” Nick holds one vial between his right index finger and thumb. He lifts it up to the single lightbulb overhead, trying to identify the contents.

“An elixir, you might say,” a high voice says from beyond the shadows down the hall. “Created by none other than ELIXIR.”

“Oh, I didn’t see you,” Nick says, cupping his left hand above his eyes, squinting into the darkness.

“I’ve been overlooked my entire life.” A short man surfaces from a corner. “Standing less than four feet tall has that effect, you know,” he giggles, finding humor in his own comment. More humor than the comment deserved.

“Forgive me.” He clears his throat. “I’m Kiran, and I’ve been following you all for quite some time. It’s an honor to finally meet you face-to-face.” With jerky movements, he extends his hand up. But rather than shaking our hands, he bows dramatically, as if he’s greeting somebody important.

I glance at Chloe. His comment about following us makes me feel more anxious than I already do.

“Ready to verify them? What’d you call it...3FA?” McNulty says, interrupting Kiran’s pageantry.

“Is that similar to 2FA?” Nick butts in.

“Same thing as two-factor authentication, except we use three sources to confirm your identity,” Kiran replies. “When you drink your vial, you’ll already have two identities confirmed. But I’m not answering any more questions until you swallow the elixir.”

Darren fidgets with his sleeve—folding it one more time, up toward his elbow. None of us knows what to do, so we don't do anything. I'm certainly not a fan of drinking anything they recommend.

"Chloe, don't you want to see your best friend from high school again?" Kiran winks. "Amy is her name, I believe?"

"How do you know her?" Chloe says, surprised.

"And you, Sienna. Wouldn't you like to know more details about a certain couple who died years ago?"

"Come on, people," the senior officer growls, tapping his foot on the hard floor. "We have to move." He places his hands on his hips, one hand near his stun gun.

For all we know, Kiran is manipulating our emotions, baiting us to drink the vial. But his cruel methods create anger and resentment, not trust and belief. As much as I want to resist his directives, I need to discover the truth.

I reach for one of the vials. Chloe follows suit.

"Ah, gentlemen, there's a reason you two may want to follow orders, too," McNulty says. "Something about your past. Hmm...?"

Reluctantly, Nick and Darren each grab a vial, too. Although I try to give Darren an encouraging smile, he looks down at the floor instead of at me.

Together, all four of us drink the orange liquid. The sugary aftertaste reminds me of summer evenings by the fire pit in the backyard. I sipped more drink boxes than I can count sitting next to Cai on those white Adirondack chairs. He told adventurous stories, and I licked gooey

marshmallow that'd leaked out onto my fingers when I'd squished the chocolate and graham crackers together.

"Perfect," Kiran says, wringing his hands.

"Now for the explanation?" I ask.

Kiran reaches into a pocket inside his jacket and pulls out a clear pane of glass just a tad bigger than a smartphone.

"For the past seven months, you've each been *wearing* the first identification credential. You know it as your smart-ring. We refer to it as a luxury wearable. As for the second identification—ingestibles—you just drank it. Each vial contained tiny microchips. I'm verifying your identity and monitoring your vitals here on my tablet."

"That's only two," Darren says.

"Oh, of course, dearies, I almost forgot," Kiran admits with vigor in his voice. "Injectables." Then he raises both hands in the air and announces, "McNultery, fire at will."

Perplexed, I turn in McNultery's direction. But instead of seeing a crusty old man, I stare straight down the barrel of a pistol. I hear four loud pops, and then Kiran cheers with glee. Cotton fills my ears and the space just above my eyes. Sounds muffle and then fade. My world grows dim and then swarthy dark.

I am no more.

CHAPTER SIX

MY MIND STIRS before my eyes open. I hear muffled sounds, and I'm not sure if I'm awake or asleep—or somewhere in between. I want to lift my eyelids, but they feel frozen shut.

My head spins. I remember waking up in a similar semi-conscious state sometime in my past. I strain, trying to access the memory, something about a dentist's office and wisdom teeth.

The first injection of local anesthesia didn't faze me, so he settled for a double dose instead. A few minutes later, when I still tasted the sensation of chewing broken glass, he resorted to general anesthesia.

I woke up in my bed a day later, with Uncle Cai in the adjacent room on his laptop—catching up on work for ELIXIR, I'm sure. The instant I stirred, he pushed the footrest on his recliner down and sauntered over to my bedside, trying his best to cloak any concern for my condition.

“Morning, bright eyes,” he said, putting the back of his hand on my forehead.

“Morning,” I moaned, using my arms to prop myself up. The toasty flannel sheets clung to my body.

“What happened?”

“Well...the dentist said he couldn’t put you under, despite his best attempts and strongest medicine.” Cai chuckled. “He warned me his next option was a baseball bat.”

“You sure he didn’t use that bat?” I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Evidently, you have quite an immunity to pain medication. His exact words were ‘a freakish resistance.’ Is there something you’re not telling me?” Cai said, folding his arms across his white T-shirt.

He hadn’t shaved in a day or two, but his kind eyes softened his appearance. Up until a few years ago, Cai took his impeccable health for granted. But then, at a routine physical, his doctor discovered an irregular heartbeat that scared us both.

Around that same time, his colleague at ELIXIR had been working on an advanced digital implant designed to regulate the heart. Always an early adopter, Cai volunteered to test this new technology inside his chest. Since then, he’s been a poster child for perfect health.

“Morning, bright eyes,” says an unfamiliar voice this time. The greeting jolts me out of my ride down memory lane, even if that road was about wisdom teeth removal.

“How about I fill in some blanks, dearie? I’m sure your

journey into Neverland has you flying higher than usual.”

“S-sure.” I yawn. The slumber clings to the corners of my mind, trying to pull me back into the dream world.

Bright sunlight soaks into my face. I open my eyes slowly and notice dense, tinted windows. Nick is zonked out in the seat behind me—his neck cranked at an awkward angle. His body swallows up the thin black seat belt.

The mental fog lifts—but at a sluggish pace, like a steamy morning mist burned off by the rising sun. Chloe is next to me, leaning against the right window. At least her seat belt fits her better, keeping her somewhat erect.

A pang of panic sets in. *Where’s Darren?* I turn and see a crumpled-up combination of plaid and denim lying facedown on the dark leather seat behind me.

Maybe the haze dulls my inhibitions or maybe with all the recent events, I just need *someone* to hold on to. My fingers extend confidently—dancing in and out of his thick brown hair.

My breathing quickens, as does my pulse. A jolt of fire travels up through my arm and into my shoulder. I’m wide awake now. My lips curl up, content to be connected to a person I’ve only admired from afar. And as long as he sleeps, I don’t need to waste time worrying about being rejected.

But then a speck of guilt grows from somewhere deep inside. Is it right to enjoy a connection with someone who’s unconscious of the experience? I push away the thought, knowing now isn’t the time or place to wrestle with complicated issues. For all the incongruence I feel around me—

with Cai, SWARM, and ELIXIR—the world is right, even if in this single moment.

“Hey, did you call me bright eyes?” I ask. The stranger’s odd greeting took a minute to sink in. *Is he reading my thoughts or accessing past memories, or perhaps it was just a lucky guess?*

“My bad, dearie,” says the voice. The stranger turns and I see what looks like a small boy gleefully rocking in the front passenger seat—Kiran, of course. “I figured using a familiar greeting would help you acclimate easier.”

I snatch my hand away from Darren’s head and move it near my chest. *Am I dreaming?* I press three of my fingers around my sternum, mining for broken bones from getting shot in the chest. Rather than finding fractured ribs, I locate a heart full of angst. A flood of emotions rips through me.

My uncle, my one source of stability, put me up to this. I want to believe he knows what he’s doing. He’s always protected me from pain. *But now he’s the one allowing it.* He’s either culpable or ignorant. But when has Cai been ignorant of anything? His work at ELIXIR demands meticulous precision. A civil war commences between my heart and my head. And the one logical explanation leads me to a lonely place—one without Cai. But if I don’t have him, then who else do I have?

My friends and I followed Cai’s prompts with unquestioning obedience. I glance down and see Cortex—my smart-ring—wrapped around my finger. *Prompts?*

Speculations spin around like the saucer ride at the

annual carnival. Faster and faster. I feel my body beginning to detach.

How much of the last seven months has been the result of my own volition? And how much has arisen from the Prompts and Thought Influencing Technology pulsating into my brain through the metal band bestowed to me as a gift? Was it even a gift? Or simply a digital leash designed to monitor my friends and me?

My mind can't stop racing. I'm not quite sure how much of my life is actually *my* life. What events have been manipulated or manufactured simply because I'm part of a larger experiment? Am I some kind of lab rat, the plaything of irrational ELIXIR scientists?

Anxiety rises within me. I want to rip this ring off my finger. I want to jump out of this vehicle. I want to get back home. But right now I'm not so sure who to trust.

Right now I'm not sure of anything.

Right now I feel like the orphan I truly am.

I put my hand around the ring, intending to remove it. I don't like being monitored. But before I can, a voice interrupts.

"Congratulations, Sienna," Kiran announces, scanning his device. "Confirmed. Genetically speaking, we had to make sure it was really you."

Confirmed? A haunting thought hits me. "Unplugging" from Cortex isn't even an option. They would know if I removed it because I'm not alone anymore. And I haven't been for quite some time. For how long? Who knows?

Probably Cai—if he’s willing to tell the truth.

“Glad to hear it works,” the driver says mockingly. “Your department requires a big enough budget to fund all your little toys, especially this new wii initiative.”

I tilt my head to get a better view of the speaker and see McNulty. *Why am I not surprised?* “Did you say wii?” I can’t help asking. “ELIXIR created a *gaming* system?” At this point, any facts would help me feel grounded.

Kiran snickers and spits, doubling over in his seat from my comment.

He’s wound tight—so tight his gestures are simply reflexes birthed out of the weird, internal world he occupies. I have a hunch his oddities originated from sitting glued to his computer screen for twenty-plus hours a day in somebody’s basement—maybe his mom’s—if he even has one.

“Not a gaming system, silly,” Kiran laughs. “Try an initiative to take down SWARM. Wearables, ingestibles, and injectables? Get it? Wii? You and your friends were the very first civilian beta testers.”

I hear every word Kiran says, but I’m far from understanding the connection.

“You going to play her Tilda’s video?” McNulty asks.

“Ahh, yes, of course,” Kiran responds. “But according to my monitor, the other three will be out cold for at least another twenty minutes. Sienna’s resistance levels were much higher.”

McNulty accelerates the vehicle, despite the road

signs cautioning us of the upcoming curves. “Well then, genius, put the stupid thing on repeat and play it again when they wake up.” He tilts the rearview mirror with his right hand.

“Hey, I thought you were a TSA officer. How do you know Cai?” I still can’t believe Cai would put me in harm’s way, sending us with these two kidnappers. Maybe I just don’t want to believe it?

“*TSA?*” he sneers. “Those officers back at the airport are part of *my* team, not the other way around. I can be whomever I need to be to get the job done—TSA, FBI, CIA. But if you’re asking who pays my salary, it’s ELIXIR, just like the freak next to me in the front seat.”

Kiran starts the video and bobbles in his seat. He reminds me of a tiny tot standing in line at the Ferris wheel. When the video begins, he cocks his head sharply and grins. “Welcome to your new destiny, Sienna. We’ve been waiting for you.”

As if choreographed, the intro music cuts in. A yellowish-orange ELIXIR Project logo materializes and then fades away. The speed and angles of the cinematography remind me of Cai’s drones we flew occasionally during my senior year of high school.

He taught me how to hover, steer, and even engage the onboard camera. One time we flew the drone over my teacher’s house. When Cai spotted old Mr. Mackenzie’s backyard, he grabbed the remote and broadcasted a warning through the speakers:

“Make the senior history final exam easier or suffer wrath from above!”

I slugged him and stole back the controls, and we both cracked up at the innocent prank. Lucky for me, Mr. Mackenzie never discovered who owned the drone.

But right now I’m not laughing, and I can’t push away the rage I feel for anything to do with Cai.

A female voice narrates over the breathtaking cityscapes.

“Welcome to ELIXIR. My name is Tilda. I serve as spokesperson for the Senior Board of Clerics.”

Hovering in midair, the drone drops abruptly with dizzying speed. The earth pushes up, threatening to swallow it. A second before crashing, it hovers again, this time above one particular skyscraper.

In theatrical flair, layers of dark, dystopian, electronic music rise. The camera zooms in, projecting the outline of a woman’s back. Her thin arms stretch out on the railing in front of her as she watches over the city. She rotates to face the camera. Cheekbones protrude from her thin face, and her sandy-colored hair flows high above her forehead. Hints of unkind years infect the corners of her eyes.

But then I find them—or maybe they find me.

Unmistakably blue, ignited by a bottomless fire. Her gaze pierces me, unwrapping every fiber and undressing every mask. Then she speaks again, her voice a blend of seduction and mystery, dripping with hypnotic intonation:

“Please let me offer an apology and congratulations. First the apology. Although I’m unsure of the exact measures administered

to bring you to ELIXIR, I'm assuming they were somewhat extreme. Understand, our current campaign against SWARM demands we adhere to the highest levels of security. We could not jeopardize our Project at this time by providing details about your relocation to you or your families. In the future, you will know the whole truth.

"And now for the congratulations. Unbeknownst to you, we've been monitoring you for quite some time. We'll share more on this topic when you arrive. You are one of twelve clerics we have recruited from all corners of the world to assist in the overthrow of SWARM. Soon you will become household names.

"I'm sure you have questions. But rest assured, ELIXIR has the answers—and in time you will, too. Breathe deeply. I know the angst you taste. I was once recruited by ELIXIR, too. I chose to accept the call for my country, my family, and myself. Today my life is forever changed.

"I look forward to meeting you very soon. Remember, fear no one but truth."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“HOW LONG TILL we get some food?” Nick says, yawning from the backseat. “I’m starving.”

“That’s how you feel when you go without food the entire night,” Kiran says.

“Yeah, I guess getting knocked unconscious works up a significant appetite,” Nick replies.

Kiran checks his tablet, then announces something about the other three being confirmed thanks to the nanotechnology from the injectable.

“I think I got Tilda’s whole over-the-top video, but would either of you care to explain why you had to drug us?” Chloe asks. “Walking out the front entrance of the airport would have been a little less...traumatic.”

“Couldn’t,” McNulty replies. “We received confirmed reports of more SWARM agents at the airport. And the board gave us strict orders about transporting all twelve clerics safely.”

“And we’re supposed to believe you?” Chloe asks. “I’ve already snapped photos of you with my ring. Who says we’re not going to turn both of you in to the authorities on charges of kidnapping?”

“*Authorities*,” McNultey laughs. “Did you hear that, Kiran? Young lady, you’re going to find out real quickly something you’d better never forget. We are the authorities. And someday you’ll look back and thank us for ‘kidnapping’ you. SWARM knows you twelve clerics are valuable, and that’s why they’re after you.”

“Where are we going?” Darren says, sitting up in his seat. He moves gingerly like the rest of us.

“Don’t these rolling hills look even a little familiar to you?” Kiran replies.

“Should they?” Chloe sputters back. Though she is still groggy, her sharp tongue never sleeps. “McNultey shot us in the chest, remember? We’re still a little out of it.”

After a few more minutes and even more twists, we turn onto Route 1318 toward our college campus. “I recognize it now,” Darren says, stretching his arms above his shoulders. “Wow, you must have used some potent stuff, to mess us up like that.”

“Only the best,” McNultey mutters.

We turn right onto Liberty Street and head up the hilltop. It doesn’t look like the same serene campus we left yesterday morning. “Who are all those people?” I ask, looking at the young men and women across the lawn, sparring with each other. Dressed in dark attire, they resemble a

special ops militia in some kind of elite training.

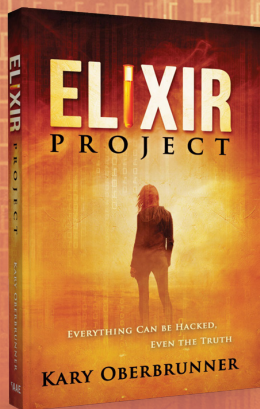
Kiran pounces to answer. “We’ve commandeered the campus, and the people you see in black are ELIXIR—proxies, we call them.”

Outside the campus café, I notice a black tent with the word *ELIXIR* printed on the side. I bet they’re not playing cards and drinking coffee in there.

McNultey takes a right and heads down a narrow road. After a minute we close in on Radcliffe Hall with its characteristic daunting stone tower. As we pull up to the curb, I spot someone I’m not sure I want to see. Without time to prepare, I can’t decide whether to hug him or hit him—or which he deserves more.

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EVERYTHING CAN BE HACKED,
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WILL THIS FACT SET SIENNA FREE OR
PLUNGE HER INTO AN EVEN BIGGER LIE?

ELIXIR PROJECT

Sienna Lewis lives in a world constantly threatened by a hacktivist group known as SWARM. After SWARM executes its deadliest attack yet, Sienna and her three college friends learn they have been chosen for the ELIXIR Project—a master plan designed to overthrow SWARM—and participation is mandatory.

As she faces the deadly challenges of the Project, Sienna confronts layers of conspiracies that force her to question everyone she trusts and everything she believes about her friends, her parents' untimely deaths, and herself—all while staying one step ahead of SWARM. In this fast-paced, near-future thriller, will love and loyalty have time to catch up with Sienna? Or will she crack under the pressure of a future already chosen for her?

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