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A
GAME
OF
LIFE
OR
DEATH

TRIONA CAMPBELL

 SCHOLASTIC



To those we lost, who lit the way for us.

Especially my Dad, Eugene Campbell.

Saying goodbye during a full lockdown never felt right.

*This dedication feels like something you would have
enjoyed more. Miss you, love, always.*



1

London, near future.

I know it's bad when I realize the nurse is leading me towards a room and not one of the cubicles.

Her pace is unhurried. The frantic Saturday night chaos is all around us, but she doesn't want to reach this destination any more than I do. The police officer who gave me a lift to the hospital shuffles alongside us. Plainclothes, white, middle-aged, middle everything, with the overconfidence to think that the too-small leather jacket he wears is retro-cool. The nurse ignores him, eyes multitasking. I watch them darting into the cubicles we pass, each with its own slice of drama inside. It's like I

can see the numbers moving up as she mentally tallies the patients, the trolleys, the staff. Every time we fail to stop at one of those beds, my fear worsens.

The air is heavy with a mix of alcohol and disinfectant: hushed voices, monitors, occasional groans, perforated by loud, drunk talk. My palms are sweaty now, so I wipe them on my jeans as we move along. My head feels dizzy as we pass underneath the flickering strip lights. The hum of air purifiers signals we are in the “clean” area.

The door she stops outside has one chair beside it along with a strategically placed small box of tissues, hand sanitizer, and a prominent display of organ donation leaflets. “The doctor will be right with you.” A sympathetic, efficient nod. A final repeat of her last question: “You sure there is no one you want us to call?”

I shake my head again. It’s always been Maya and me. No one else.

The nurse leaves. The police officer sits down in the chair while I lean against the opposite wall. I stare at the ground, numbing out, counting the square pattern on the linoleum floor. If I let the feelings in, will I drown? I keep seeing her blue lips as I pushed against her chest over and over again, trying to get her heart to restart. I block out the image. I create a fantasy in my head while we wait. When the door is pushed open, Maya will be sitting upright in a hospital bed, an embarrassed look in her eyes. Some doctor beside her, talking about not overworking herself so much. Stressing the need for fluids, the importance of self-care...

This can't be happening. Not the hospital, not me arriving home late from work. Not the weird smell in our apartment when I got there. That sharp aroma of burnt food from a pot left too long on the cooker.

"Maya?" I had dumped my bag and jacket by the door and trudged to the kitchen, the boredom of eight hours working in Sam's local fast-food outlet and the smell of fish and chips pooling off me. I hadn't wanted to work at Sam's – Maya had called it character building; I called it a lot of other things. There was irritation in my voice at what smelt like another forgotten veggie culinary disaster. "Mai..."

I saw it then. The TV screen flickering, casting a pale blue light over the sitting room area. It's on a pause screen for a video game: some web banner advert for an eSports tournament plays on the top. My sister hates those events despite her job. I looked down, and the world stopped.

Maya wasn't answering because she was lying on the floor a few feet away. Body painted in the cold tones of the monitor's images. Eyes hidden behind a VR headset the size of a small pair of glasses. A tiny blue light blinking on the frame, confirming her connection to some online game. A controller in her hand. Fingers wrapped tight around it. No movement. Completely, terrifyingly still.

The rest of the night is just fragments. I called the emergency services. The questions started over the phone. "Is she breathing? Was she sick? Did she take something? Can you see any sign that she was attacked?"

I looked around. Nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Just her and some game that had switched off when I removed her glasses.

There was no breath – no rise and fall. The voice talked me through the chest compressions. My tears started streaming down my face as a horrible thought entered my mind – am I too late? I pushed against it, clinging desperately to hope. One, two, three. One, two, three. The ambulance crew and a detective arrived at the same time. It took ten minutes and all eternity for them to get there. They took over. One paramedic wearing blue quickly talked to the officer and a dispatcher on his radio. The siren not blaring as the ambulance took off. Me walking past our neighbours' eyes; they all watched from their own doorways, none of them meeting my stare.

“Is there anyone I can call for you?” the police officer asked.

“No.”

“Other family?”

“No.”

“A friend?”

“No.”

A sigh. The realization that there was no one to hand me off to. “My name's Murphy.”

In my mind, I keep processing what I know. That the doctor isn't going to come back with good news.

I slide down the wall and sit on the floor. Head buried in my knees, trying to make myself smaller. From a distance, all that is visible is slightly torn denim, dark trainers, and a mop of long brown hair. How could this have happened? Maya wasn't sick. I go back to my last memory of her, searching for clues.

The frustration in her voice. "I called them. You never sent the acceptance forms."

I stared at the ground.

Her tone changed, became more pleading. "They said they can still give you a place..."

I didn't look at her. It was the same argument we'd been having for weeks. Maya pushing me to take up an early offer for an engineering course miles away. I knew why she wanted me gone. Maya worked for Zu Tech, the leading company in VR technology. Among other things. Their logo is on every platform, game, smart and wifi-enabled device; they are the biggest hardware-software corporation on the planet. The company who only hired the best of the best and then worked them hard. Maya didn't have time to look after her kid sister any more.

She lost patience and snapped at me. "We've talked about this..."

She had dark circles around her eyes. I remember that now. She'd seemed tired. But then, she'd been looking

exhausted for weeks. Was that a sign I should have spotted?

I had lost my temper too. “You got me out of the system so we could be together, and ever since I got here, you’ve been trying to get rid of me. That college is in the middle of nowhere, Maya!”

“It’s one of the best. They’re offering you a full scholarship. Everything is covered, including rooms. And with my salary, I can take care of anything else you need.”

“Why can’t I stay here in London with you? Finish regular school. Do college in two years’ time like everyone else. Why are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Not everything is a game, Asha. You can’t just spend all your life alone in your room escaping into the metaverse.”

“You never even went to college. You said it was a waste of—”

“I don’t want you to end up like me. This is an opportunity, Asha. I didn’t get one handed to me.”

I had looked away, ignoring the feelings that curled in my stomach. “You didn’t get one because of me.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it? You could have gone to college if it wasn’t for me. If you weren’t stuck with a little sister to look after? I’m sorry I’m such a burden. That you giving me a home and taking that stupid job meant you never got to go. Once again, Saint Maya needed to do the right thing. But you could have just left me in care. I didn’t ask you for any of this.”

I had turned towards the door.

“Asha, please. Don’t leave like this.”

But I had. I slammed the flat door behind me, and now that stupid argument and me walking out is the last memory I have of my sister.

Murphy shifts uncomfortably on the hard plastic seat while the world of the hospital moves around but doesn’t interact with either of us. I watch him fidget with his phone and notebook before he stands up. “Let me see what’s keeping them...”

I’m too numb to respond. I am not a people pleaser, and that isn’t going to change. Maya was the one who cared about manners and being nice.

Murphy returns after a few minutes with the doctor. Thin hands covered by surgical gloves. “Maya Kennedy’s next of kin?” Then a pause, a look at Murphy. “No adult?” she asks.

I stand up. “I’m her sister. It’s just the two of us.”

Her eyes are sympathetic. I guess this part of the job never gets easier. She looks at her notes. “I’m sorry that I can’t give you better news. Your sister died between ten and eleven p.m. The ambulance crew couldn’t revive her at the scene.” A pause. Of course Maya was dead. I knew that all along, but now it becomes real, and I can feel myself shutting down. “We’ll need to do an autopsy to determine

cause of death. She'll stay here with us till the Health Plus morgue opens in the morning. If you need to call anyone, you can use our phone."

I blink at her. "Health...?"

The doctor glances up at me and then back at the chart. "Your sister worked for Zu Tech. They offer private healthcare. The dispatcher on the scene notified them of her death; it means your sister will be processed faster. If she had company life insurance, they will help you with the paperwork. All I can say for now is that the scan doesn't indicate any biohazard. I am sorry for your loss. It's always a shock when it's someone so young." Another pause, and then she says, "You can see her if you like? Say goodbye?"

I swallow.

"After that, the team here will need some information. Her doctor's name, and there are some forms you and the social will need to sign. She was your older sister, is that right? You're around fourteen, fifteen?"

"Sixteen. My birthday was a few months ago." Maya had made a vegan cake. *This can't be happening.*

She nods and catches the eye of a nurse standing to one side. "The hospital needs someone eighteen or over to sign. We'll make the arrangements for you. Someone can come and collect you from here."

The words don't sink in at first. "Someone can come and collect you." The doctor ushers me towards a room – before the door shuts, I catch a glimpse of Murphy outside, notebook open. The nurse is talking to him. The logo of

social services is visible on the back of the documents she holds out.

My brain wakes up. Maya was my sole guardian. My only family. Without her, they're going to try and put me back into the system.

The doctor leads me to the bed and then leaves. I look at Maya's still form. It's her, and yet it's not. What made Maya special was her energy, her smile. I take a moment to breathe and say goodbye. Talking to her in whispers and tears about what I need to do next. Out of everyone, she would understand. We always said we would never go back.

She would be the first to tell me to run.

An hour later. Drizzle is washing the pavements clean. I cling to the shadows, hoodie up, head down to avoid the cameras. Keys laced through fingers, my ears searching for any sound behind me. Heart thumping whenever a car passes by. Cold wind wiping the tears away. Stupid – there's no reason to panic. The social system is fast, but not that fast. I have time. Focus. Emotions lead to mistakes.

When I get back to our building, it's quiet. I stay in the shadows for a while and check the perimeter – old habits. Count the number of lights, check the cars parked outside. Look for anything out of place. It helps me not to think about Maya. What comes next? Pack, erase, trigger the surveillance system. Leave. I wait for a few moments and then enter the building, making sure the communal door catches behind me.

Inside the apartment, I listen to the silence. The smell

of burnt food mixed with something else still lingers. My jacket and bag sit on the floor. Everything looks the same until I glance at the sitting room and see the forgotten plastic glove from the ambulance crew on the floor, the small black electrode sticker from the portable EKG. I can't look inside that room without seeing her lying there so I close the door. Breathe. Think. I grab a sports backpack from the hall cupboard and go first to my hidden stash of cash and codes. What next?

I hesitate outside Maya's bedroom door, feeling the chrome of the handle before I push it open, forcing myself to go in. Her make-up is scattered on her home office desk/dressing table/dumping ground for lost things. Books and clothes lie on the floor. The smell of coconut body lotion from an open bottle. She never used to be this untidy. A yoga mat with a daisy on it, her favourite flower, is rolled up in a corner by her gym bag – I wonder when the last time she went to a class was. Then I stop. Quick. If I'm quick the feelings can't rush in. I make a pile of her things on the bed to take with me. Handbag, mobile phone, which I remove the SIM card from, laptop powered off. On impulse, I grab the cheesy snow globe with the picture of us together and her favourite perfume, her "signature" scent, the good one she rarely uses because it's expensive. Precise motions. No time to waste.

When I've finished packing, I take one last look around, glancing back at her unmade bed. It has clothes, pillows, a hairbrush strewn across it. I go to the right-hand side

and slide my hand underneath the mattress till it finds the square edges of a book. I pull it out. *World Myths and Legends*: the dog-eared copy that Maya has carried with her ever since I can remember. The only thing left from the time when we had parents. My eyes well up, but there is no space to let go now. I hug the book and then push it towards the bottom of the bag before zipping it shut.

I move fast. The last thing I do is take my phone and dismantle it. I place it in the microwave and hit start. I don't want to leave a trace behind me, nothing that might be saved to the phone's internal memory, some random bit of data that might lead someone to where I am going next. It rotates inside, sparks, a few small flames that die as the microwave stops, leaving a black, bubbling, melted mess. I lock the door behind me. Will I ever be able to go back? Don't think. *Run*.

I don't stop till I get to the takeaway a few blocks over. Sam paid me off the books, so they won't know to come here right away. The streets are empty as I disable the alarm and slip in the side door and into the back room, a sort of office with camera monitors, files, storage. Normally employees don't have access, but Sam didn't hire me for my people skills. If I'm honest, the main reason he hired me was probably to impress Maya when his Portuguese charms didn't work, but the other reason I got my Saturday/part-time job was tech. My ability to upgrade his security system for a fraction of the cost.

Within a week of installing the cameras, they caught

someone doing credit card skims on the night shift. By week two, I had made his shop impenetrable, both online and physically, rigging a silent alarm and introducing a lockdown protocol for maximum security. Now I use it to seal myself inside the closed takeaway. The clock on the wall says it's one a.m. By six a.m., I need to be somewhere else. To *become* someone else.

I can't break; that can only come later. Fear can either destroy you or drive you. It's the only choice people like me get to make.