



Fearless: Fearless; Sam; Run

By Francine Pascal

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A repackaged of a smart and sexy series whose heroine was born without the fear gene.

Gaia is a brilliant, beautiful girl who is trained in three kinds of martial arts, has a reflex speed that's off the charts, and can climb mountains, box, wrestle, and break codes in four languages. She has no trouble throwing a grown man over her shoulders. She doesn't care what people think of her, and she's never scared...

Because she is missing the fear gene.

In this action-packed bind-up, Gaia makes her way through the treacherous halls of high school and is forced to come to terms with herself, the boys in her life, and her completely MIA family.

But she can handle it.

She is....*Fearless*.

The release of *Fearless* coincides with the paperback release of the *New York Times* bestselling *Sweet Valley Confidential*.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Francine Pascal is the creator of several bestselling series, including *Fearless* and *Sweet Valley High*, which was also made into a television series. She has written several novels, including *My First Love and Other Disasters*, *My Mother Was Never a Kid*, and *Love & Betrayal & Hold the Mayo*. She lives in New York and the South of France.

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GAIA

Losers with no imagination say that if you start a new school, there has to be a first day. How come they haven't figured out how to beat that? Just think existentially. All you do is take what's supposed to be the first day and bury it someplace in the next month. By the time you get around to it a month later, who cares?

When I first heard the word *existential*, I didn't know what it meant, so I never used it. But then I found out that no one knows what it means, so now I use it all the time.

Since I just moved to New York last week, tomorrow would have been my first day at the new school, but I existentialized it, and now I've got a good thirty days before I have to deal with it. So, like, it'll be just a regular day, and I'll just grab my usual school stuff, jeans and a T-shirt, and throw them on. Then just like I always do, I'll take them off and throw on about eighteen different T-shirts and four different pairs of jeans before I find the right ones that hide my diesel arms and thunder thighs. Not good things on a girl, but no one else seems to see them like I do.

I won't bother to clean up when I'm done. I don't want to trick my new cohabitants, George and Ella, into thinking that I'm neat or considerate or anything. Why set them up for disappointment? I made that mistake with my old cohabitants and . . . well, I'm not living with them anymore, am I?

George Niven was my dad's mentor in the CIA. He's old. Like fifty or something. His wife, Ella is much younger. Maybe thirty. I don't know. And you certainly can't tell from the way she dresses. Middle of winter she finds a way to show her belly button. And she's got four hundred of these little elastic bands that can only pass for a skirt if you never move your legs. Top that with this unbelievable iridescent red hair and you've got one hot seventeen-year-old. At least that's what she thinks. We all live cozy together in Greenwich Village in a brownstone—that's what they call row houses in New York City. Don't ask me why, because it isn't brown, but we'll let that go for now.

I'm not sure how this transfer of me and my pathetic possessions was arranged. Not by my dad, He is Out of the Picture. No letters. No birthday cards. He didn't even contact me in the hospital last year when I almost fractured my skull. (And no, I didn't almost fracture my skull to test my dad, as a certain asshole suggested.) I haven't seen him since I was twelve, since . . . since—I guess it's time to back up a little. My name is Gaia. Guy. Uh. Yes, it's a weird name. No, I don't feel like explaining it right now.

I am seventeen. The good things about seventeen is that you're not sixteen. Sixteen goes with the word *sweet*, and I am so far from sweet. I've got a black belt-in kung fu and I've trained in karate, judo, jujitsu, and *muay thai*—which is basically kick boxing. I've got a reflex speed that's off the charts. I'm a near perfect shot. I can climb mountains, box, wrestle, break codes in four languages. I can throw a 175-pound

man over my shoulders, which accounts for my disgusting shoulders. I can kick just about anybody's ass. I'm not bragging. I wish I were. I wish my dad hadn't made me into the . . . thing I am.

I have blond hair. Not yellow, fairy-tale blond. But blond enough to stick me in the category. You know, so guys expect you to expect them to hit on you. So teachers set your default grade at B-minus. C-plus if you happen to have big breasts, which I don't particularly. My friend from before, Ivy, had this equation between grades and cup size, but I'll spare you that.

Back in ninth grade I dyed my way right out of the blond category, but after a while it got annoying. The dye stung and turned my hands orange. To be honest, though (and I am not a liar), there's another reason I let my hair grow back. Being blond makes people think they can pick on you, and I like when people think they can pick on me.

You see, I have this handicap. Uh, that's the wrong word. I am hormonally challenged. I am never afraid. I just don't have the gene or whatever it is that makes you scared.

It's not like I'll jump off a cliff or anything. I'm not an idiot. My rationality is not defective. In fact, it's extra good. They say nothing clouds your reason like fear. But then, I wouldn't know. I don't know what it feels like to be scared. It's like if you don't have hope, how can you imagine it? Or being born blind, how do you know what colors are?

I guess you'd say I'm fearless. Whatever fear is.

If I see some big guy beating up on a little guy. I just dive in and finish him off. And I can. Because that's the way I've been trained. I'm so strong, you wouldn't believe. But I hate it.

Since I'm never afraid of anything, my dad figured he'd better make sure I can hold my own when I rush into things. What he did really worked, too. Better than he expected. See, my dad didn't consider nature.

Nature compensates for its mistakes. If it forgot to give me a fear gene, it gave me some other fantastic abilities that definitely work in my favor. When I need it. I have this awesome speed, enormous energy, and amazing strength all quadrupled because there's no fear to hold me back.

It's even hard for me to figure out. People talk about danger and being careful. In my head I totally understand, but in my gut I just don't feel it. So if I see somebody in trouble, I just jump in and use everything I've got. And that's big stuff, and it's intense.

I mean, you ever hear that story about the mother who lifted the car off her little boy? That's like the kind of strength regular people can get from adrenaline. Except I don't need extra adrenaline because without fear, there's nothing to stop you from using every bit of power you have.

And a human body, especially a highly trained one like mine, has a lot of concentrated power.

But there's a price. I remember once reading about the Spartans. They were these fantastic Greek warriors about four hundred something B.C. They'd beat everybody. Nobody could touch them. But after a battle they'd get so drained they'd shake all over and practically slide to the ground. That's what happens to me. It's like I use up everything and my body gets really weak and I almost black out. But it only lasts a couple of minutes. Eventually I'm okay again.

And there is one other thing that works in my favor. I can do whatever I want 'cause I've got nothing to lose.

See, my mother is . . . not here anymore. I don't really care that my dad is gone because I hate his guts. I don't have any brothers or sisters. I don't even have any grandparents. Well, actually, I think I do have one, but she lives in some end-of-the-world place in Russia and I get the feeling she's a few beans short of a burrito. But this is a tangent.

Tangent is a heinous word for two reasons:

1. It appears in my trigonometry book.
2. Ella, the woman-with-whom-I-now-live-never-to-be-confused-with-a-mother, accuses me of "going off on them."

Where was I? Right. I was telling you my secrets. It probably all boils down to three magic words: I don't care. I have no family, pets, or friends. I don't even have a lamp or a pair of pants I give a shit about.

I Don't Care.

And nobody can make me.

Ella says I'm looking for trouble. For a dummy she hit it right this time.

I *am* looking for trouble.

A WALKING TRAP

HE LAY SPRAWLED IN A HALF-CONSCIOUS PILE, AND SHE WAS TEMPTED TO DEMAND HIS WALLET OR HIS WATCH OR SOMETHING.

THE POINT

Don't go into the park after sunset. The warning rolled around Gaia Moore's head as she crossed the street that bordered Washington Square Park to the east. She savored the words as she would a forkful of chocolate cheesecake.

There was a stand of trees directly in front of her and a park entrance a couple hundred feet to the left. She hooked through the trees, feeling the familiar fizz in her limbs. It wasn't fear, of course. It was energy, maybe even excitement—the things that came when fear should have. She passed slowly through a grassy stretch, staying off the lighted paths that snaked inefficiently through the park.

As the crow flies. That's how she liked to walk. So what if she had nowhere to go? So what if no one on earth knew or probably cared where she was or when she'd get home? That wasn't the point. It didn't mean she had to take the long way. She was starting a new school in the morning, and she meant to put as much distance between herself and tomorrow as she could. Walking fast didn't stop the earth's slow roll, but sometimes it felt like it could.

She'd passed the midway point, marked by the miniature Arc de Triomph, before she caught the flutter of a shadow out of the corner of her eye. She didn't turn her head. She hunched her shoulders so her tall frame

looked smaller. The shadow froze. She could feel eyes on her back. Bingo.

The mayor liked to brag how far the New York City crime rate had fallen, but Washington Square at night didn't disappoint. In her short time here she'd learned it was full of junkies who couldn't resist a blond girl with a full wallet, especially under the cover of night.

Gaia didn't alter the rhythm of her steps. An attacker proceeded differently when he sensed your awareness. Any deception was her advantage.

The energy was building in her veins. Come on, she urged silently. Her mind was beautifully blank. Her concentration was perfect. Her ears were pricked to decipher the subtlest motion.

Yet she could have sensed the clumsy attacker thundering from the brush if she'd been deaf and blind. A heavy arm was thrown over her shoulders and tightened around her neck.

"Oh, please," she muttered, burying an elbow in his solar plexus.

As he staggered backward and sucked for air, she turned on him indignantly. Yes, it was a big, clumsy stupid him—a little taller than average and young, probably not even twenty years old. She felt a tiny spark of hope as she let her eyes wander through the bushes. Maybe there were more . . . ? The really incompetent dopes usually traveled in packs. But she heard nothing more than his noisy X-rated complaints.

She let him come at her again. Might as well get a shred of a workout. She even let him earn a little speed as he barreled toward her. She loved turning a man's own strength against him. That was the essence of it. She reversed his momentum with a fast knee strike and finished him off with a front kick.

He lay sprawled in a half-conscious pile, and she was tempted to demand his wallet or his watch or something. A smile flickered over her face. It would be amusing, but that wasn't the point, was it?

Just as she was turning away, she detected a faint glitter on the ground near his left arm. She came closer and leaned down. It was a razor blade, shiny but not perfectly clean. In the dark she couldn't tell if the crud on the blade was rust or blood. She glanced quickly at her hands. No, he'd done her no harm. But it lodged in her mind as a strange choice of weapon.

She walked away without bothering to look further. She knew he'd be fine. Her specialty was subduing without causing any real damage. He'd lie there for a few minutes. He'd be sore, maybe bruised tomorrow. He'd brush the cobwebs off his imagination to invent a story for his buddies about how three seven-foot, three-hundred-pound male karate black belts attacked him in the park.

But she would bet her life on the fact that he would never sneak up on another fragile-looking woman without remembering this night. And that was the point. That was what Gaia lived for.

AN EASY CROWD

"Who can come to the board and write out the quadratic formula?" Silence.

"A volunteer, please? I need a volunteer."

No. Gaia sent the teacher telepathic missiles. *Do not call on me.*

“Come on kids. This is basic stuff. You are supposed to be the advanced class. Am I in the wrong room?”

The teacher’s voice—what was the woman’s name again?—was reedy and awful sounding. Gaia really should have remembered the name, considering this *was not* the first day.

No. No. No. The teacher’s eyes swept over the second-to-back row twice before they rested on Gaia. *Shit.*

“You, in the . . . brown, is it? What’s your name?”

“Gaia.”

“Gay what?”

Every member of the class snickered.

The beautiful thing about Gaia was that she didn’t hate them for laughing. In fact, she loved them for being so predictable. It made them so manageable. There was nothing those buttheads could give that Gaia couldn’t take.

“Guy. (Pause) Uh.”

The teacher cocked her head as if the name were some kind of insult. “Right, then. Come on up to the board. Guy (pause) uh.”

The class snickered again.

God, she hated school. Gaia dragged herself out of her chair. Why was she here, anyway? She didn’t want to be a doctor or a lawyer. She didn’t want to be a CIA agent or Green Beret or superoperative *X-Files* type, like her dad had obviously hoped.

What did she want to be when she grew up? (She loved that question.) A waitress. She wanted to serve food at some piece-of-crap greasy spoon and wait for a customer to bitch her out, or stiff her on the tip, or pinch her butt. She’d travel across the country from one bad restaurant to the next and scare people who thought it was okay to be mean to waitresses. And there were a lot of people like that. Nobody got more shit than a waitress did. (Well, maybe telemarketers, but they sort of deserved it.)

“Gaia? Any day now.”

Snicker. Snicker. This was an easy crowd. Ms. What’s-her-face must have been thrilled with her success.

Gaia hesitated at the board for a moment.

“You don’t know it, do you?” The teacher’s tone was possibly the most patronizing thing she had ever heard.

Gaia didn’t answer. She just wrote the formula out very slowly, appreciating the horrible grinding screech of the chalk as she drew the equals sign. It sounded a lot like the teacher’s voice, actually.

At the last second she changed the final plus to a minus sign. Of course she knew the formula. What was she, stupid? Her dad had raced her through basic algebra by third grade. She’d (begrudgingly) mastered

multivariable calculus and linear algebra before she started high school. She might hate math, but she was good at it.

“I’m sorry, Gaia. That’s incorrect. You may sit down.”

Gaia tried to look disappointed as she shuffled to her chair.

“Talk to me after class about placement, please.” The teacher said that in a slightly lower voice, as if the rest of the students wouldn’t hear she found Gaia unfit for the class. “Yes, ma’am,” Gaia said brightly. It was the first ray of light all day. She’d demote herself to memorizing times tables if meant getting a different teacher.

Times tables actually came in pretty handy for a waitress. What with figuring out tips and all.

NOT CLOYING

He saw her right after the seventh-period bell rang. She seemed dressed for the sole purpose of blending in with the lockers, but she stood out, anyway. It didn’t matter that her wide blue eyes were narrowed or that her pretty mouth was twisted into a near snarl—she was blatantly beautiful. It was kind of sick the way Ed was preoccupied with beautiful girls these days.

There weren’t many people left in the hall at this point. He, of course, had permission to take his own sweet time getting to class. And she was probably lost. She cast him a quick glance as she strode down the hall. The kind of glance where she saw him without actually seeing him. He was used to that.

He felt a little sorry for her. (He was also preoccupied with finding ways of feeling sorry for people.) She was new and trying hard not to look it. She was confused and trying to look tough. It was endearing is what it was.

“Hey, can I help you find a classroom or anything?”

She swiveled around and glared at him like he made a lewd remark. (Was she some kind of mind reader?)

“Excuse me?” she demanded. She wasn’t afraid to give him a good once-over.

“You look lost,” he explained.

Now she was angry. “This is not what lost looks like. This is what annoyed looks like. And no, I don’t need any help. Thanks.”

It was the spikiest, least gracious “thanks” he’d ever heard. “Anytime,” he said, trying not to smile. “So what’s your name?”

“Does it matter?” She couldn’t believe he was prolonging the conversation.

“Mine’s Ed, by the way.”

“I’m so happy for you.” She gave him an extra snarl before she bolted down the hall to the science wing.

He smiled all the way to physics class. He almost laughed out loud when he passed through the door and saw

her shadowy, hunched-over form casting around for a seat in the back.

She was in his class; this was excellent. Maybe she'd call him a name if he struck up another conversation. Even curse him out. That might fun. God, he'd probably earn himself a restraining order if he tried to sit next to her.

He was so tired of saccharine smiles and cloying tones of voice. People always plastered their eyes to his face for fear of looking anywhere else. He was fed up with everybody being so goddamned nice.

That's why he'd already fallen in love with this weird, maladjusted, beautiful girl who carried a chip the size of Ohio on her shoulder. Because nobody was ever mean to the guy in the wheelchair.

September 23

My Dearest Gaia,

I saw a mouse race across the floor of my apartment today and it made me think of you. (What doesn't make me think of you?) It reminded me of the winter of Jonathan and your secret efforts to save his little life. I never imagined I'd think longingly upon an oversized gray field mouse whose contribution to our lives was a thousand turds on the kitchen counter, but I grew to love him almost as much as you did.

Oh, Gaia. It feels as if it's been so long. Do you still love rodents and other despised creatures? Do you still carry a pocket full of pennies for luck? Do you still eat your cereal without milk? Do you ever think about me anymore?

I write it and think it so often, it's a mantra, but Gaia, how desperately I hope you'll forgive me someday. You'll understand why I did what I did, and you'll know it was because I love you. I have so many doubts and fears, my darling, and they seem to grow as the days between us pass. But I know I love you. I'd give my life for you. Again.

Tom Moore lifted his pen at the sound of the text. God, he hated that sound. He didn't need to look at his phone to know who was summoning him. It wasn't as if he had friends and family swarming about—it was his self-inflicted punishment that if he couldn't be with his daughter, he would be alone.

He snatched the wretched little device from his desk and threw it across the room, mildly amazed at his own rare show of temper as the text bounced off the windowsill and skittered across the wood floor. It was always the same people. It was always an emergency. By tomorrow he'd be in a different time zone.

Before he picked up the phone, he walked to the ancient aluminum filing cabinet and opened it. He thumbed through the files without needing to look. Locating the thick pile of papers, he placed the letter at the front, just as he always did with all the others, unsent and locked in the drawer.

A STUPID HOBBY

MACDOUGAL AND LAGUARDIA—*BZZZZT*—SLASHING VICTIM, FEMALE, AFRICAN AMERICAN IN HER THIRTIES—*BZZZZT*—YOUNG MALE PERPETRATOR—*BZZZ* . . .

HER FAVORITE PLACE

“Hello, Ceeendy.”

“Hi, Zolov. What’s shaking?”

“Shakeeeng?”

Gaia laughed. “How are you playing?”

Zolov worked his mouth. He drew his wrinkly brown hand over his lips, thinking about the question seriously, “I beat everyone.”

“Of course you did,” Gaia said loudly. “You’re the best.”

He nodded absently. “Tank you. You are a good geerl.”

In spite of the fact she was practically shouting at him, Gaia could tell he was reading her lips and that it was tiring for him. He sat back in the sunshine, ready for his next opponent, who would very likely not show. His favorite chessboard was set. As always, it was presided over by one of the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, a red, helmeted action figure he’d probably picked up in somebody’s garbage. He never played without him.

Gaia would have sat down across from him if she’d had more than twenty cents in her pocket. Instead she lay back on the bench and closed her eyes.

This park, these chess tables, was Gaia’s favorite place. It was her home in New York more than George and Ella’s house ever would be. Zolov was at least ninety years old and thought her name was Cindy, but even so, he was her favorite person.

Who says I have no life? she mused as she stretched her arms behind her head, feeling the fabric of her gray T-shirt creeping over her belly button. She inhaled the scent of sugary nuts roasting in a pushcart nearby. This was her favorite place, and that was her favorite smell. It was so sweet and strong, she could practically taste it. One of these days she was going to buy a big bag of those nuts and scarf them down without even pausing to breathe.

She felt a shadow come over her face and squinted one eye open. “Hey, Renny,” she said. “You ready for ‘dimes of demonstration’?”

Renny was a thirteen-year-old Puerto-Rican boy—Gaia’s second-favorite person. He was a self-proclaimed poet and such a whiz at chess he hustled great sums of money out of almost anybody who was dumb enough to sit down across from him. Today his face didn’t light up with its usual bravado.

Gaia sat up and put a hand over her eyes to block the sun. “You’re scared I’m going to steal your money and make you cry?” she taunted. She scanned the tables for a free board.

As she did, her eye snagged on a new piece of graffiti splayed on the asphalt just to the left of Zolov’s usual table. A swastika. It was at least a foot across, and the white paint was as fresh and bright as a new pair of sneakers. Gaia’s stomach was filled with lead. Could it be for her benefit? she wondered. Could somebody possibly know how the Holocaust had decimated her mother’s family and made her grandparents into heroes? No. Not likely, She was being paranoid. How would anyone know about her Jewish background? In fact, when she told some people, they acted all surprised—like if you had fair hair and blue eyes, it wasn’t

possible. That really annoyed her.

Her eyes flicked over the ugly shape again. Had Renny seen it? Had Zolov? But did they think anything of it?

For some reason Renny wasn't jumping in with his usual rhyming insults and eager put-downs.

"Gaia, you oughtta go home," Renny said almost inaudibly in the direction of his sneakers.

This was odd. "What's up, Renny?"

"It's gonna get dark," he noted.

"Thanks, Ren. It usually does."

He was wearing a stiff new jacket that advertised its brand name from three different spots. He licked his lips. "You oughtta, you know, be watching out," he continued.

"For what?" she asked.

He considered this question a moment. "The park is real dangerous after dark."

Gaia stood, impatient. She swept a strand of hair behind her ear. "Renny, cut the bullshit. What's the matter? What are you talking about?"

"Did you hear about Lacy's sister?" His face was slightly pink, and he wasn't meeting her gaze.

"No, why?"

"It was on the news and everything. All the kids are talking about it. She got slashed in the park last night," Renny explained. "She had to get sewn up from her eyebrow to her ear."

"God, that's awful," Gaia said. "What kind of blade?"

"What?"

"What kind of blade?"

Renny gave her a strange look.

"Was it a razor blade?" Gaia persisted.

"I guess. I don't know." He looked up at her a little defiantly. "How am I supposed to know?"

"Just asking, Renny." She softened her tone. "Thanks for warning me. I do appreciate it."

He nodded, his face growing pinker. "I was just . . . you know, concerned about you." He tried to look very tall as he shuffled away.

Gaia swung her beat-up messenger bag over her shoulder as she watched him. She had a bad feeling about this. She sensed that Renny was no longer satisfied with the insular world of chess misfits. He was starting to care what the big boys thought—those stupid boys who hung around the fountain, trying to look tough. Renny was smarter and funnier and more original than they'd ever be, but he was thirteen. He was at that brutal age when many kids would sell all the uniqueness in their character for the right pair of shoes. She longed to tell him not to spend so much time in the park, to go home to his mother, but who was she to talk?

Yes, Renny might be concerned about her. But not as concerned as she was about him.

She herself loved this misfit world, Gaia mused as she surveyed the tables. Curtis, a fifteen-year-old black kid, was sitting across from Mr. Haq, a Pakistani taxi-cab driver who appeared to like nothing more than parking his yellow cab on Washington Square South and killing an afternoon over a chessboard.

She loved that people who couldn't begin to pronounce each other's names played and talked for hours. She loved that a forty-something-year-old cab-driver and a fifteen-year-old from the Manhattan Valley youth program had so much in common. She loved getting a break from the stupid hierarchy of high school.

She loved that there weren't people like . . . well, people like . . . him.

The him was walking by slowly, looking confidently over the boards in play. His hair was light in color—a tousled mixture of blond and brown and even a little red. His chinos were cuffed, and his preppy gray jacket flapped in the autumn breeze. Gaia felt her stomach do a quick pitch and roll. She felt queasy and strangely alert at the same time.

You didn't find people who looked like that . . . as in, stunningly, astonishingly good. People like him sipped coffee at Dean & DeLuca or swing danced on Gap commercials or spouted Woody Allen-style dialogue on *Dawson's Creek*, where they belonged.

So what *the hell* was he doing lingering over chessboards with the freaks and geeks? She had half a mind to walk right over and tell him to get lost.

This was her favorite place, and he had no business here, reminding her of things she would never be.

DON'T BE AFRAID

“Thank you, Marco, you're a sweetheart.”

Marco nodded at the woman, making sure to tilt his chin so she had a good look at his left side, the side where his broken nose hardly showed at all. “No problem.” He kept his voice deep and smooth. She probably thought he was like twenty-five or something.

She took a long sip from the bottle of Coke he'd brought her, exposing her pale neck. She lifted one leg to rest on the low wall of the fountain, revealing several more inches of thigh under her stretchy aqua miniskirt. He tried not to stare. Or did she want him to stare?

He stopped breathing completely as she slowly, slowly brushed her fingers over his upper arm. “What happened here?” she asked.

He glanced at the purplish bruise. He paused before answering and cleared his throat, trying to make certain

his voice didn't come out squeaky. "Nothing much. I got jumped last night. These three big guys thought they were real tough. Probably black belts in karate or something."

Her eyes widened in just the way he'd hoped. "You're okay? Did you call the police?"

"Uh-uh. That's not how we—how I—do things." Marco ran a hand through his dark hair. It had come out perfectly today. "I've got some friends who will back me up if those guys ever come back here." Marco loved the way she watched him when he talked. So he kept talking. He wasn't even listening to what he was saying.

Man, she was gorgeous. She was older than he, twenty-something at least, but sexy as hell. Like some kind of goddess with her straight red hair and green eyes. And the legs on her. He couldn't look away.

He'd first noticed her at the beginning of the summer. All the guys noticed her—it was hard not to. She lived around here, he guessed, because she walked by this fountain almost every afternoon. He wasn't the only one who magically turned up each day around four o'clock to watch the show.

Lately he'd noticed she'd started returning his looks. Just a glance at first, but then her eyes stayed longer. Last week she'd said hello to him, and he'd practically peed in his pants. Today she'd been late, so most of the guys had wandered away, but some kind of crazy instinct made him stay.

He took his eyes off her breasts for a moment to see if he spotted anybody he knew. He would love for any one of his buddies to see him right now.

Just then she reached toward his collarbone and rested her index finger on the pendant that lay there. The electricity from her touch surged through his chest and seemed to throw his heart off rhythm. "What is this?" Her voice was almost a whisper. "I've seen this before."

He studied her face before he answered. He wasn't sure how much to tell—how much she really wanted to know. "It's, uh, it's called a hieroglyph—you know, like ancient Egyptian writing? It's the symbol for . . . uh, power."

"Where have I seen it before?" Her green eyes fixed on his.

His glance darted around the fountain. "I don't know. Maybe you saw one of the other guys wearing it. Maybe a tattoo on somebody's arm. It's kind of a . . . I don't know . . . kind of a . . ."

His voice trailed off awkwardly. He didn't want her thinking he was some kind of thug. He sure didn't want anybody to overhear him telling her secret stuff.

"A mark?" she supplied "Some sort of identification?" She didn't appear wary the way most girls he knew would. Her eyes were wide and intense, fascinated.

"Yeah. Like that."

"Ah. I see. Are you part of—"

Marco sucked in his breath. Suddenly this didn't seem so cool. What if she was an undercover cop or some kind of informer? He'd heard of stuff like this. He backed up, putting a few feet between them. "I gotta be

going. It's, like, after six, and I—”

With two steps she closed the distance. “Marco. Don't be afraid of me.” Her fingers fluttered over his cheek. “Don't tell me anything you don't want to. I'm just . . . interested, that's all! I'm interested in everything about you.”

All the blood in his body seemed to pool in his head. He felt dizzy, “You're not, like, a cop or anything?” He was pretty sure she'd have to say so if she were.

She laughed. “No. Most definitely not.” She gave him a look. It was a mischievous, sexy kind of look. “*Definitely* not.”

RAPUNZEL MONKEY

Gaia smacked the shortwave radio that sat on the table next to the bed. Her bed. She had trouble thinking of anything in this house as hers.

“Piece of crap,” she murmured. She'd picked up the radio at a junk shop on Canal Street. She'd gotten it to tune in to the local police frequency, but the damn thing emitted almost nothing but static. She rearranged the antenna she'd rigged until she heard a break in the fuzz. She rolled off the bed and walked to the window. Ah, that was good. She could decipher various bleeps that sounded almost like words. She stood by the door. Oh, it liked that. Now she could actually understand the words.

Bzzzzt—MacDougal and LaGuardia—*bzzzzt*—slashing victim, female African American in her thirties—*bzzzzt*—young male perpetrator—*bzzzz . . .*

Dammit. She tried jumping up and down.

—lost him in the park—*bzzzzzzzzzz . . .*

Shit. Gaia grabbed the radio and threw it off the table. What a stupid hobby. Why couldn't she just watch *Roswell* like a normal girl?

Well, for one thing, because the television was in the so-called family room. It would mean walking past, possibly even fraternizing with, George and his bimbo bride. It wasn't that she didn't like George. She did. He was trying really hard to make her feel comfortable. He tried so hard, in fact, that she found it awkward to be around him. He put on this peppy voice and asked her about her classes or her friends. What was she going to say, “I see my math teacher through crosshairs”? “My best friend has Alzheimer's”? George wanted something within the universe of normal, and she simply couldn't give him that.

Ella was another story. Stupid, vain Ella she genuinely disliked. There were Ella's fingernails, her passion for Victoria's Secret catalogs, her love of Mariah Carey. That was about it for Ella. How in the world had a sensible man like George fallen prey to a tarty thing like her? And God, he had fallen.

Gaia really needed some air. She strode to the door of the room and listened for signs of life. What sucked was that her room was on the fourth floor of a four story house because she hated walking past every other room on her way in and out. She was like a latter-day Rapunzel except her hair was only a few inches below her shoulders, slightly fried, not all that blond, and furthermore, who the hell was ever going to climb up to give her a hand? The guy in the wheelchair from school?

What she—and Rapunzel, frankly—needed was a decent ladder.

Gaia opened the door slowly. Hopefully George was still at work and Ella was—who ever knew where Ella was? By profession Ella considered herself a photographer, but Gaia had a hard time taking her seriously. It gave Ella an excuse to saunter through hip downtown neighborhoods with a camera slung over her shoulder. Apparently she got the odd commission to photograph somebody's dog or living room or something. Her "work" as George called it in his pious way was displayed over most of the wall space in the house—mostly artsy black-and-white pictures of dolls' heads and high-heeled shoes.

Thank God for the automatic camera that makes it all possible, Gaia thought sarcastically as she crept through the hallway and down the stairs.

At the second landing she was faced once again by "the photograph." Most days she averted her eyes. Although Ella hadn't taken it, it was by far the most upsetting in the house. It was a picture of a seven-year-old Gaia with her parents, snapped by George the week he visited them at their country house in the Berkshires. Once Gaia looked at the photo, she found it hard to look away and, after that, hard to get her mind to cooperate with her.

The Gaia in the picture made her think of a little monkey, clinging to her dad with long skinny arms, her wrists circled by several filthy friendship bracelets, her narrow shoulders lost in the beloved brown fisherman's sweater he'd bought for her on a trip to Ireland. Gaia's smile was big and exuberant, so pitifully unaware of what the next year would bring.

Now Gaia moved her gaze to her mother, even as she willed herself not to. If Gaia's face in the picture was all embarrassing openness, her mother's was pure mystery. No matter how many times Gaia searched it, no matter how clearly she saw those features, she felt she couldn't tell what her mother really looked like. She *needed* something from that face that it never gave. The same miserable questions started their spiraling march through Gaia's brain: *Why am I holding Daddy and not you? Why aren't I beautiful like you? Did you love me anyway? Did you ever know how much I loved you?*

And then, as always, the thoughts go so uncomfortably sad, they didn't even come in words. Her throat started to ache, and her vision swam. She couldn't pull enough air into her lungs. Without exactly realizing what she was doing, her hands shot out and yanked the framed photograph off the wall.

"What are you doing?"

Gaia spun around. Her heart was bouncing in her chest, and it took her a moment to focus her eyes on Ella. She cleared her throat. She took a deep breath. She tried to rearrange her posture into something less rigid.

"I am removing this picture from the wall."

"Can I ask why?"

"Sure."

Ella waited impatiently, "Okay, why?"

Gaia placed the picture facedown on the bookcase. She glanced at her watch. "I didn't say I'd answer."

Ella got that eye-rolling martyred look. “Gaia, you know George loves that picture. He put it up for you.”

Gaia cleared her throat again. She tried shrugging, but it didn’t come off with the indifference she was aiming for. “If George put it up for my benefit, he won’t mind if I take it down.”

Ella’s hands found their way to her hips as they mostly did within a few minutes of starting a conversation with Gaia. “I swear, Gaia, George does so much for you. I would think you could at least—”

Gaia tuned out the shrill voice as she made her way down the rest of the steps and out the front door. She knew every word of the speech. There wouldn’t be any vocabulary words or clever turns of phrase. Ella wasn’t going to surprise her.

Gaia took the sidewalk at a near run. She felt like she might explode. The sky was darkening as she turned left on West 4th Street, leaving bustling outdoor cafes, overpriced little restaurants, all-night delis, her favorite subterranean record shop behind her in a blur.

She headed straight for the park. No one was going to scare her out of her shortcut. And certainly not tonight, not in the mood she was in. And in fact, she hoped they’d try. Let them find her instead of some kid or some old guy who wouldn’t know how to handle it. Maybe if she did this enough, those creeps would learn that everyone who looked vulnerable wasn’t necessarily so. What a gorgeous lesson to teach them. After all, wasn’t that what her gifts were all about? Power to the little people!

MR. VALIANT

SHE SPUN AROUND, INSTANTLY ACCOSTED BY STRANGE BLURRED IMAGES. A FLASH OF CHROME. TWO LARGE WHEELS.

A FORCE FOR GOOD

Three more steps. Okay, five more steps. Okay, ten more. Just to the maple tree. Okay, not that one, the one behind it.

She was a little nuts. She knew it. Skulking around Washington Square Park for three hours and twenty-three minutes, counting steps (and okay, seconds), looking for trouble. It could be called entrapment. That’s exactly what she wanted to do, entrap those lowlifes.

Gaia lingered under the tree, feeling drops of sweat sliding down her spine. Wasn’t New York City supposed to be getting cool in September? The smell of late season pollen was so thick, it felt like paste in her nostrils. Please, somebody. Anybody. She’d come here with the secret hope that one of the notorious slashers would have a go at her, but now she’d grown desperate. She would take absolutely any criminal, from petty shoplifter to ax murderer; she really wasn’t choosy. Hey, who even needed a criminal? She was ready to pounce on the strength of a big mouth or a bad attitude.

But she wouldn’t. Gaia would never attack anybody unprovoked. She would never do more harm than necessary. That was the code, and as much as she hated her father, she was still bound to honor it. It was bred into her, just like her blue eyes that seemed to change shade with her mood, the weather, the color of her shirt. Just like her love of sweets. She had to use her Miraculous Gift (that’s what her father always called it) as a force for good. Her mission was to draw out violent behavior and squash it, not to produce more violence.

But sometimes carrying out her mission felt more self-indulgent than honorable. Did it count as a good deed if you enjoyed yourself? She liked to think she thrived on self-defense. But there were times, really upsetting times, when she saw the line between defense and offense as clear as day and barreled toward it. Hey, she had an extraordinary talent, and she wanted to use it.

What if one day she crossed that line that separated good guys from bad guys? It would be easy. There was only a hair's width between them. Why hadn't anyone warned her that inside the crucible of real anger, good and bad were so nearly the same?

Worse yet, what if one day she'd stop being able to see the line at all? She wouldn't know anymore if she was good or bad or crazy or sane. Maybe Gaia didn't know the meaning of scary, but that sounded an awful lot like it.

Gaia made a slow loop around the maple tree. She had to get out of this park, but she really didn't feel like going back to George and Ella's. God forbid George would put on that earnest face and try to talk about "her loss" as he often did after Ella complained about her.

She didn't feel like walking on Broadway—the street was mobbed with NYU students, tourists, and shoppers at every hour of the day. Instead she turned south on Mercer Street. She loved the deserted, canyonlike feel of the narrow street and the sound her steps made on the cobblestones. She'd walk straight down to Houston Street and see what was playing at the Angelika.

Suddenly, as if in answer to a prayer, Gaia heard voices behind her. She stopped and fumbled through her backpack as if she were looking for something. Jeez, what a girl had to do to get mugged in this city.

The voices turned into whispers, and then she heard footsteps, slow. Oh, *yes*. Finally. She turned toward the noise, pasting what she hoped looked like a terrified expression on her face. Inside, her heart was leaping with anticipation.

There were three of them, and they looked young—around sixteen or seventeen. Two of them had shaved heads. The smallest brandished a razor blade. Gaia detected more than a hint of nervousness under his swagger. She backed up (fearfully, she hoped), wanting the situation to escalate. She hated herself, but there it was.

The little thug was up front, covering the ground between them with a menacing lurch. The other two were hanging back, present to witness this feat of loyalty. It was becoming obvious to Gaia what was up here, and it pissed her off.

Come on, boys, she silently encouraged them. *Come and get me*. Her mind hovered on the swastika she'd seen painted on the ground in the park. That coupled with the shaved heads and the leather jackets gave her the strong suspicion that these assholes were some kind of neo-Nazi white supremacist outfit.

Her concentration was so keen, she had to remind herself to keep breathing. She couldn't let her anger get the best of her. She had to play this just right. If she struck back too quickly, she might scare them away. The kid was trying hard to look tough, but his toughness went about as deep as the sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

Now. He was right on her, razor blade lifted. She screamed helplessly as she drew back her arm for a sharp blow to his wrist. And just as she balanced her weight to deliver the strike she heard a thunderous shout and

a commotion behind her.

Suddenly noise was coming from every direction. Her adrenaline was rising fast, but her focus was thrown. She spun around, instantly accosted by strange blurred images. A flash of chrome. Two large wheels. She jumped back to try to make sense of it.

“Get away from her!” a familiar voice shouted.

Gaia’s razor-blade-wielding attacker fell back in confusion.

Equally confused, Gaia swiveled her head.

“It’s okay, Gaia! Go! Run!”

She watched in perfect amazement as Ed, the guy in the wheelchair from school, rolled into the fray. Her very own knight in shining armor come to save the day.

“You’ve got to be joking,” she muttered under her breath.

But no, there he was. Mr. Valiant.

Now what was she supposed to do? She couldn’t just burst into action with Ed sitting on the sidelines. He’d see everything. He’d know far more than he was allowed.

It was one thing showing an attacker her tricks. Every time she did this, she made a wager that her attacker wouldn’t confess to being pounded by a girl, and she’d never been wrong. But Ed was a different story. Ed would tell the nifty adventure to everybody in school. They’d probably recruit her for the judo club or something.

The adrenaline was surging through her veins, and the primary person she wanted to strangle was Ed.

The three attackers had been as surprised as she by Ed’s arrival, but they were now regrouping.

Okay, fine. She’d take a couple of hits. She wouldn’t let the razor blade near her, but that would be easy enough to dispose of in a stealthy way. They’d hit her. She’d scream. Somebody would hear the noise and call the cops. The three losers would feel manly and dangerous and go away. The little one would earn his initiation on somebody else.

It was disappointing as hell, but she’d deal.

ONE SMALL PROBLEM

Ed Fargo pushed his wheels as fast as he could. He sailed over the curb and bumped along the cobblestones. He’d often dreamed of running over somebody with his wheelchair, but he’d never actually done it before. His lungs ached for air and his arms ached with exertion as he plowed through the low bushes and into the guy with the razor blade. Thank God he’d been coming along Mercer just then. Thank God he’d heard the scream.

He heard the powerful meeting of metal and shin bone.

“Ahhhhhhh!” The attacker fell backward.

“Gaia, get out of here!” Ed shouted again. He’d never felt quite so important in his life.

She looked stunned. Why the hell wouldn’t she get her ass out of there? Was she paralyzed with fear? So traumatized, she couldn’t move a muscle? Thank God he’d arrived when he had. “Please go!” he commanded.

The guy with the razor blade fumbled back up to his feet, and his two accomplices came closer in for backup. Ed realized he didn’t have much time. Panic was taking hold of his chest. He looked at Gaia’s frozen form. He looked at the three hoods gathering for attack. Oh, man. This time their vicious eyes weren’t focused on Gaia; they were aiming directly at him. Oh, oh, oh.

His brain was spinning. His heart was pounding at least five hundred times a minute. The obvious thing to do was get out of there as fast as his arms would carry him, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t just leave Gaia standing there. She’d be slaughtered.

“What is wrong with you?” Ed bellowed at her. “Get the hell out of here *now!*”

Three big angry thugs were closing in and that stupid girl wouldn’t move. Panic was now weirdly tinged with resignation. He was dead. If they wanted to kill him, that is. Maybe they’d be satisfied just mangling him or slashing him to ribbons.

The biggest of the three took hold of the armrest of his wheelchair and gave it a powerful shove. Ed collided hard with the street and rolled from the toppled chair.

This was sad. It sure would have been handy if my legs worked right now. He looked up at the stripe of night sky between the old cast-iron buildings, waiting for the first blow. He put his arms over his face for protection.

Slam! He heard the sound of a foot connecting with hard flesh and then a deep moan. Was that him? Had he made that noise? He heard another searing blow. Jesus, was he so far gone, he couldn’t even feel the pain?

He moved an arm away from his face and cracked open one eye. He heard a groan and then a barking shout. Strange. He was pretty sure his mouth was shut. He opened the other eye and sat up. Then he shut both eyes again. Had he gone into cardiac arrest and died already? God, that was quick. Weren’t there supposed to be a lot of warm feelings and long tunnels and a bright light?

He simply could not have seen what he thought he saw. He was dead. Or hallucinating. Maybe that was it. His mind was dealing him some truly mind-bending hallucinations. Awesome ones, as it happened. He opened his eyes again. His mouth dropped open.

Gaia Moore, the lovely girl with the slim frame and sullen expression who haunted the back of his physics class, had suddenly transformed into Xena, Warrior Princess, only blond and even more beautiful. She crushed the jaw of Thug 1 with a roundhouse kick. She struck Thug 2 in the chest with such violence, he was left gasping for breath. Thug 3 came swinging at her from behind, and she spun around and neutralized him with a stunning kick-boxing move he’d only ever seen executed by Jean Claude Van Damme.

Holy shit. Could this actually be real? Gaia’s dauntless, intense, angry face looked real. The thought of her

sneakered foot in Thug 1's belly sounded real.

Unbelievable. Gaia was a superhero. Hair flying, limbs whirling, she was the most graceful, powerful martial artist he had ever laid eyes on. Her every move was a mesmerizing combination of ballet and kung fu. And not only was she magical, she was lethal. Thug 1 was writhing on the ground, Thug 2 was ready to flee. Although Thug 3 appeared to be rallying, Ed almost pitied him.

Suddenly Ed sucked in the moist night air. A chill began in his fingertips and crept up his wrists and arms. He saw only a flash at first, and then the image resolved itself. Thug 3 had a knife. Ed saw it clearly now glinting in the streetlight, looking awfully real.

Oh, my God.

Did Gaia see the knife? Did she realize what was coming? He certainly couldn't tell by her expression. Her eyes revealed not even the tiniest hint of fear. Jesus, she was tough. That or paranormally stupid.

"Gaia!" he heard his own voice bellowing, "He's got a knife!"

Her gaze didn't flicker. She stood there motionless as Thug 3 went after her. She looked as if she were in some kind of deep meditation.

Ed was hyperventilating. He didn't care how tough Gaia was; she couldn't defend herself against an eight-inch blade. Presumably her skin was made of the same stuff his was. He had to do something.

He supplied his seizing brain with some oxygen, then dragged himself toward his wheelchair. He pulled it upright and set his sights on the slouching back of Thug 3. Ed's legs might be useless, but his arm strength was formidable. He launched the chair like a missile.

Strike! The chair hit its mark, and Thug 3 staggered forward. Ed briefly registered the look of surprise on Gaia's face as Thug 3 careened into her and sent her sprawling backward. His stomach clenched. Oh, God. That hadn't been his intention at all.

Now the guy retrieved his knife and leaped on top of Gaia. Worse yet, from Thug 2's cowardly hideout behind a parked car, he saw the tide turn and was racing back to join the fight. Ed dragged himself toward Gaia as fast as he could, his eyes fixed on her throat and the knife hovering over it. "Stop!" he roared. "You're going to kill her!" He felt tears stinging his eyes.

It happened so fast, Ed wasn't sure he'd actually seen it. Gaia delivered a powerful kick exactly to the groin of Thug 2 and almost simultaneously struck Thug 3 in the side of the neck with her hand. Thug 3 rolled over, unconscious. His knife skidded along the stones. Thug 2 pitched to the ground, screaming in pain.

Gaia was instantly on her feet. She scooped up the knife and stepped over the prone body of Thug 3. Suddenly Thug 1 and Thug 2 seemed to forget their pain and sprinted for safety like jackrabbits in traffic.

Ed was watching Gaia, his heart overflowing with relief and admiration, when she surprised him again.

She got to the sidewalk and collapsed. Her legs literally crumpled under her body, and without a noise she fell in a heap on the pavement.

THAT OLD KRYPTONITE

Gaia breathed deeply and waited for it to pass. She wouldn't struggle to move or attempt to get to her feet. She knew by now it wouldn't work. The only thing to do was wait.

Pretty much right on schedule, she heard a noisy approach and felt a hand on her shoulder. Argh. She didn't need to open her eyes to see the worried, eager face.

Once he'd reached her, she heard him collapse beside her. Listening to his labored breathing, Gaia's heart was pulled forcefully by two equal and opposite desires:

1. Her desire to hug Ed for his valiant, misguided efforts on her behalf.
2. Her desire to murder him for being such an unbelievable pain in the ass.

"Are you okay?" He touched her shoulder again. She could hear the fear in his words.

She would have really liked to rouse herself right then. It was unthinkable that he should see her in this state of weakness—to see what happened to her after one of these episodes. And yet there was just no way around it short of killing him, which, though tempting, didn't seem all that sporting under the circumstances.

"Gaia? Gaia?" His voice was rising with panic.

"Mmmm," she mumbled.

"Oh, God, are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

A yellow cab cruised past them, slowed for a stop sign then drove on. If anyone in the car saw them, they apparently hadn't felt the need to get involved. That was New York City for you. Its inhabitants set a high standard for unusual.

With great effort she fluttered open her eyes and very slowly, by inches, shook her head. The sidewalk made a really bad pillow.

"What's the matter? Should I call for an ambulance?"

She gritted her teeth. If she'd had any energy left, she would have rolled her eyes. "Mm. Mmm." After another pause she reinforced it with another slight shake of her head.

"No? Are you sure?"

She wasn't accustomed to anyone seeing her like this and it was irritating. She found the strength to open her eyes for real and concentrate on Ed's face. It had suddenly become a much more significant face—the face of the guy who knew her secrets.

Holy shit. How had she let this happen?

It was so ironic. So ironic and pitiful and stupid and weird, she wanted to laugh. For some reason this guy had become her self-appointed guardian angel and nearly gotten her killed in the process. How typical that

her guardian angel would be a slightly scruffy ex-skate rat in a wheelchair who caused so much more trouble than good. How strange it was that he suddenly knew more about her than anyone else on planet Earth. (Except her father, of course.)

Gaia had been so careful over the years to keep everything secret. It was another of her father's curses: *I'll make you into a freak and not let you tell anyone*. Not like she was going to tell, anyway. She had no confidant and meant to keep it that way. Besides, the strange facts of her life were all connected. Telling a little would ultimately mean telling a lot.

"Gaia? Please tell me you're okay?"

It always seemed that when her body sank into this state of paralytic exhaustion, her mind zoomed into overdrive. She summoned the energy to move her lips. "I'm fine," she whispered.

"You don't look so fine."

Patience, Ed, she asked of him silently. She felt the energy returning to her muscles. It was tingly at first, as if her whole body had fallen asleep. She groaned a little as she sat up. She studied Ed. Worried, terrified, astonished, concerned Ed. She couldn't help but smile a little.

"I'm fine," she said. She paused for breath. "Except for the fact that I may have to kill you."

TO: L

FROM: ELJ

DATE: September 25

FILE: 776244

SUBJECT: Gaia Moore

LAST SEEN: Mercer Street, New York City 10:53 p.m.

UPDATE: Subject observed in fight with 3 suspected gang members, one armed with knife. Attack complicated by appearance of young man in wheelchair. Motive unclear. Confirmed subject's mastery of jujitsu. Subject displayed other martial skills previously documented. All 3 attackers subdued. Subject appeared injured but later observed to walk from incident unharmed.

TO: ELJ

FROM: L

DATE: September 26

FILE: 776244

SUBJECT: Gaia Moore

DIRECTIVES: Identify and create file on young man in wheelchair.

ISSUE IMMEDIATE INSTRUCTION: Subject not to be injured *under any circumstances*. Repercussions will be severe.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dorothy Walker:

The guide with title Fearless: Fearless; Sam; Run has lot of information that you can discover it. You can get a lot of gain after read this book. This specific book exist new expertise the information that exist in this guide represented the condition of the world now. That is important to yo7u to understand how the improvement of the world. This particular book will bring you throughout new era of the the positive effect. You can read the e-book on the smart phone, so you can read the idea anywhere you want.

Curtis Tyson:

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Irving Tarkington:

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