

STRANGE EXIT  
By  
Parker Peevyhouse

Chapter 1

The San Francisco Zoo: gates rusted open, weeds bursting through cracks in the asphalt, trees like many-armed scare-crows, broken and stunted. Lake figured she was the only person to set foot in the place in years. Not counting the boy in the tiger exhibit. Lake peered in at him through a curtain of dirt over the viewing glass. She guessed he was around her age, seventeen. He sat on a log, hunched over something she couldn't see. No tiger in sight. Was it wandering the abandoned zoo, looking for snacks like Lake was looking for people to rescue? Lake shivered. Hope not. Because that would mean she and the tiger were looking for the same thing.

Lake scanned the ash-gray landscape, the shattered dead trees. Checked the other big cat exhibits. Went and listened at the cracked-open doors of the Lion House. No sign of anyone other than the boy in the tiger yard.

How was she going to get him out? She could go stand at the glass that shielded the exhibit, and shout across the moat. But she'd long ago discovered that barriers made everyone more feral, no matter which side they were on.

She could scrape herself up climbing over the fake rocks that ringed the exhibit. Kind of a hot day for something that dangerous. That left the door at the back of the exhibit, which would mean going through the Lion House. Couldn't still be lions in there after so many years, right? They'd either be dead or roaming free—not lying in wait. But that was the kind of thing people said right before they broke into a lion house and got mauled.

She pulled at the back of her shirt, which was starting to stick. She was spending too much time here. There were other people holed up in other parts of the city, groups of them who needed her to tell them that it was time to come out. He was only one person.

But he was stuck, same as the others were.

Lake patted the flank of a bronze lion sculpture that lay toppled on the steps. "Wish me luck." The sculpture was green with verdigris, nested in pooled dirt. Real lucky.

Something tawny emerged from between the cracked-open doors of the Lion House. Lake almost toppled over the felled sculpture in her rush to back away.

It was only a dog, a yellow Lab speckled with dirt. Lake's heart battered her ribcage for another minute, then quit being dramatic. "Hey, there." Lake eased forward and held out her hand. The dog panted. It wasn't half as skinny as Lake would have expected it to be. "Someone's been taking care of you."

The dog thumped its tail but wouldn't come closer. "Come here. Please?" Lake said. "It's been a rough day. Month."

Wandering empty neighborhoods and now an empty zoo.

"Promise I'm friendly." Lake stepped forward, but the dog turned and vanished through the doors.

*You always rush it,* Lake told herself. *With people, too.*

She stepped toward the doors, envisioning great cats crouching in the darkness. But then, the dog didn't seem to sense danger.

She pushed into the darkness, smelled mildew but no fetid breath. Heard the dog trotting off. "Wait, buddy. Wait for me."

Her eyes adjusted to the low light, and she went after a tawny blur that she hoped was the Lab, past rusted barriers, through open doors with their locks thrown back. Sunlight streamed through the doorway to the tiger yard. Lake went through and then closed the door behind her, even though it protested with a rusty squeal. She needed it shut, for later.

The light stung her eyes. Before her, a weird Eden: stunted trees, yellow-green grass struggling up through dirt, a thorny bush clawing its way out of the moat. The boy was wrestling the bush now, hacking at a green branch with a hunting knife.

The dog supervised from the scant shade of a broken stump.

The boy stopped mid-hack to look Lake over, head to boots, eyes sharp like he expected her to have a weapon. Which she didn't. Well, except desperation, which was still no match for a hunting knife.

He didn't seem surprised to see her. Lake took that as a good sign. He must know that he didn't belong in this place.

He must know someone would come to take him away.

He didn't say anything. His hand shook.

"Your dog invited me in," Lake finally said, trying not to stare at the knife. "He said something about lemonade."

No smile from the boy. No one appreciated humor anymore.

He wiped sweat from his brow with his free hand, which was still shaking. "You're wasting your time here."

*Probably. But what's new?*

He was half a foot taller than Lake. And, you know, had a knife. Seemed distraught. Lake inched backward. "You live here?" She looked around at the new grass, and the gray dirt that must have once been completely covered in greenery, before nuclear winter. The exhibit was so much bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside. "I've always wanted to go inside a tiger pen."

"Most people don't. That's why I came here. Safer." He went back to struggling with the bush.

"Safe from what?"

"People who might want to rob me. Beat me up. Ask me lots of questions while I'm busy."

Lake smiled. "That last bit was a joke, wasn't it? What a relief. I was afraid those didn't exist anymore."

He turned to look at her again, eyes half-lost in overgrown hair. He frowned like he didn't know what to make of her.

Lake pulled her shirt away from her sweaty back again.

*How long have I been here now?*

*Don't rush it.*

"No tigers around?" she asked.

"Just its bones." He gave her an uncertain look. "I buried them."

Lake's stomach shrank. She glanced at the grass-studded dirt. At the boy again, his troubled gaze. He'd bothered to hold a funeral for a tiger—there was something promising in that. "Nice of you."

He shrugged. "Every time I looked at those bones, they made me think of . . ."

They both knew. "Death. The war."

*Impact fires and nuclear winter.*

"Didn't you hear? That's all over now." Lake looked up at the gray-blue sky. "The sun's out, the actual sun. Grass is growing.

And all tigers are buried."

He gave her a brief smile. She felt it like warmth from the sun overhead.

"There must be better places to camp out than a tiger yard," Lake said. "Seems lonely here." For one thing. The smell of mud and sulfur wafted from the swampy moat.

The boy nodded at the dog. "I've got him, at least. Found him wandering."

Lake moved toward the dog, and this time it let her put a hand on its head. So nice to feel fur and floppy ears, to see its pink tongue. She missed dogs.

"You ever think of leaving?" She took a step toward the boy. He stood straighter, his collarbone jutting, like he didn't want her to come closer.

*I'm rushing it.*

A folded blanket lay on a log nearby, along with a metal cup and a pocket-tin. Lake nudged open the tin. Inside lay two cherry-red cough drops. "Are you saving these?"

The boy eyed them like he might pounce on her if she took one. Lake couldn't think of anything she wanted less. She'd only been curious.

"Yes," he said.

"What for?" Lake asked.

"My birthday."

"One for you, and one for the dog?"

The boy shrugged. "One for me and one for . . . whoever might come along."

Lake's heart sped up. This could work. She could do this.

"Just been waiting for someone to wander into your tiger yard?" she asked.

He turned to the bush, wielding his knife. "First I went to my house, to look for my parents." The branch he'd been working at finally separated from the bush, like a leg at a joint. He tossed the thorny mass into the moat. "They weren't there."

A bruising pain blossomed in Lake's chest. "I searched my own house, once. It was horrible inside. Everything covered in a layer of dust like a new hide."

The boy nodded. "All the food in my house was expired.

Only the cough drops seemed any good. Weird what lasts and what doesn't."

*Weird* wasn't the word Lake would have used.

"I searched for my sister." She toyed with the bracelet on her wrist, a knotted blue thread.

"Searched almost the whole city. But . . ."

The boy turned to her, looked like he'd just been punched.

The knife fell to the dirt. "You didn't find her?"

"I found plenty of other people. You, for example."

The boy stared at the knife in the dirt.

*Is this working?*

Under Lake's fingers, notches in the lid of the tin said the boy had been counting the days he'd been waiting for someone to come along. "I always thought it was sad, seeing tigers locked up in zoos."

"Why? One tiger in a zoo probably saves a hundred in the wild. Anyway, zoos usually get the wounded ones. The ones that can't survive on their own." He pressed his hands together, and his fingers came away blood-streaked from the thorn-pricks on his palm.

"I think sometimes they let them back into the wild," Lake said. "When they're ready." *Are you ready?*

He looked down at his blood-spotted hands. "My birthday was two days ago."

That pain in her chest again, hollowing her out. One day, there'd be a hole where her heart was now.

Maybe she should stop coming to places like this.

But then—who else would?

She held out the tin to the boy. "Sorry I'm late."

She watched his face while he stared at the tin. Watched his expression change.

He took the tin from her.

*I didn't rush it.* That was a relief.

He turned away, and Lake felt a small burst of panic, but then she saw what he was doing. The branch he had cut off had revealed a cluster of deep red berries. The first fruit Lake had seen in ages. She went weak all over.

The boy twisted off the cluster and turned back to her.

"Berries so wild they have to be locked in a pen?" She smiled at the strangeness of it.

He smiled back. "Berries instead of tigers. Not a bad trade."

Lake pulled off a berry and ate it, and it was so tart she could have cried. The best berry she'd ever eaten.

The boy ate one too, plucking it with his red-stained fingers. Lake picked up the hunting knife from the dirt while he chewed. She strode to the back of the yard before he could protest.

She used the knife to scratch an X in the door there. Then she opened the door and held it for the boy like she was inviting him into the Land of the Lion House. Still holding the knife, which felt creepy, so she dropped it into the dirt.

The boy studied her a long moment like he knew the door would lead to somewhere other than the Lion House. "What happens when I walk through?"

"You stop living alone in a tiger yard."

He gave her a searching look. Blood and berry juice stained his hands and his jeans where he'd tried to wipe his hands clean. Like evidence of a pact they'd made.

*He'll walk through.*

He looked like he wanted to ask another question, so Lake smiled, waiting. "I'm sorry you didn't find your sister," he said.

Lake's smile faltered.

The boy walked through the door.

Lake stood alone in the yard for a moment, picturing Willow's crooked smile. Then she gave the place one last glance, blew a kiss to the dog, and stepped through.

The next moment, she was lying in a bed, staring up at a metal ceiling.

She gave herself a moment to come into her senses. Dull gleam of steel, stale smell of recycled air, hum of generators.

*You were in the simulation. Now you're out.*

And then the next realization hit her, same as it always did:

*No Willow.*

But she had saved that boy. Relief ballooned inside her.

He'd had a knife and was camped in a tiger yard, and she'd still convinced him to leave with her.

She wished she could have brought the dog through too, but it wasn't real, just a figment of the simulation.

She slipped her head out of the nest of wires and nodes, easing her temples past the touch-points. The plastic shell lifted and she pushed her legs over the side of the bed. Fumbled for the lock on the steel panel that opened the tiny room.

Beyond: rows and rows of more steel pods in a vast warehouse lit by flickering lights. Lake found her way through the maze to the warehouse's wide doorway, registering the hiss of air vents and the rumble of labored machinery that kept the ship running.

She stepped out into the smell of dirty clothes, farmed algae, desperation. *Welcome home.*

## Chapter 2

Lake followed the arrows her fellow passengers had scratched into the ship's walls. Most of the ship's hallways led to locked doors, pitch-black rooms, groaning machinery, barricades of smashed supply crates. Some led to dorms or toilets, or to makeshift workshops strewn with broken bots, or to banks of red-flashing panels Lake had long ago given up trying to decipher. The arrows passengers left for each other were the only way to stay oriented.

Lake's stomach was begging for food, but she couldn't stop herself from doing this—searching. *Willow's not here, she told herself. She's not on the ship.*

She had to prove it to herself every time she woke up.

Somewhere in these hallways, the boy she had rescued from the simulation must be stumbling along, weak from stasis. Someone had probably already found him and was taking him to get food and water. Lake would check on him later.

She ended up at a locked door and then decided to go back and scratch a mark to warn others about the dead end. She used a screw from a disassembled bot to do it. A girl heading out of a dorm room shot Lake a suspicious look. "Someone should make a map," Lake said lightly, but the girl hurried past. Everyone on the ship acted like they were still coming out of the fog of sleep, still trying shake some bad dream.

Lake's stomach grumbled again. *Okay, I get it. Time for the eatery.*

At the end of the next hallway, the eatery buzzed with skittish energy, as always. It was the place most passengers hung out, hungry or not. Lake wouldn't call it crowded, exactly, considering it was meant to service a few hundred more people than had managed to get on board. But even with its tall window screens and high ceiling it felt cramped, full of nerves and hunger and grumbling voices.

Lake kept her head down when she walked in, avoiding huddles of passengers who'd staked out their usual tables, where they played poker with makeshift cards, or went through all the same arguments over how to fix wheezing air vents and divvy up protein bars. Might have been a different scene if the passengers hadn't all been underage—but that was something Lake tried not to think about too much, the whole pied piper situation.

Scrawled all over the walls of the eatery were names of passengers lost to the simulation. Lake had been checking the names off one by one. Ninety-seven checkmarks. Only fifty-three left to go. Fifty-two, now.

And where were they all? It used to be easy to find people in the sim, even if it was hard to get them out. Now, she was more likely to find empty landscapes. Where in the sim could fifty-two people be hiding?

The eatery's overhead lights flickered.

*Meanwhile, the ship's getting worse every day.*

"Where are you coming from?" a boy barked at her as she tried to edge past his table.

Kyle. He'd been in Lake's government class back home, where she'd barely noticed him. Now, she couldn't avoid him—he liked to stand on tables and bark orders at people, as if studying power structures qualified him to create his own. He glared at her, arms crossed so he could show off his muscles in his ship-issue shirt.

"Catching up on my sleep," she said.

He caught her arm as she tried to walk past again. "You didn't go back into the sim?"

It was all she could do not to yank free. Eager as she was to escape his sweat and algae smell, she couldn't afford to fight Kyle. He was known for shoving people into the private dining rooms that ringed the eatery and served as makeshift holding cells. "Always out, never in," she said, the stupid motto everyone kept repeating. "Otherwise, we all just keep getting stuck." She forced a smile.

Kyle squinted at her.

*Dummy—how do you think you got out of the sim? If I hadn't gone back in and found you barricaded in a school closet . . .*

He was still gripping her arm, trying to decide if she was hiding something.

"Got anything to eat?" she asked, still smiling.

He let go of her arm like it was burning hot. "Sorry. Check the other tables."

Worked every time.

Lake found a chair at a mostly empty table and reached into the food box there. Empty. Her stomach complained.

A young girl sitting across the table silently chewed a protein bar. Lake had rescued this girl from the sim days ago. A week ago? Hard to keep track of time on a failing ship. She'd found the girl in an empty house, waiting for parents who would never come.

Was she any better off now, waiting to leave the ship?

The girl broke off half the protein bar she was eating and held it out to Lake.

Lake hesitated, surprised. "Thanks." She tapped her half against the girl's. "Cheers."

The girl was maybe thirteen—Willow's age. Eyes held that same challenge and curiosity. Probably had strong opinions on which music was the worst, which books the best, which Pop Tart flavors were better cold or hot. Lake was willing to hear it all.

"You remember me?" Lake asked her. *Is that why you're sharing your food?*

The girl shrugged. "Sure. You come in here, sit by yourself. Leave alone."

Lake winced. "But you don't remember . . ." Of course she didn't remember Lake rescuing her. Lake was always careful to change her appearance when she went into the sim. Otherwise, people like Kyle would catch on and lock her up. "Never mind." Disappointment mingled with the loneliness Lake thought she had done so well at squashing.

She shifted her attention to the wall screens. "Best view around." She gazed at the glowing curve of Earth and imagined herself looking through tall panel-windows. White swirling clouds, as beautiful from above as they had been from below.

Her throat ached at the thought.

*How much longer until I'm under them?*

"He likes it too," the girl said, and Lake shifted in her seat to see who the girl was pointing to.

The boy from the tiger yard.

Someone had shut him into a private dining room currently serving as a makeshift holding cell. He stood with a shoulder pressed against the glass door, staring at the distant wall screen, trembling so hard it was a wonder the glass didn't shake. Fresh out of stasis, and no one had bothered to feed him.

He caught her staring. Raised one shaking hand to press against the glass.

Lake looked away, rattled. But he couldn't have recognized her. He only wanted help.

She couldn't give it to him. She was trying to keep off everyone's radar. *Sorry.* She'd rescued him from one cage only to get him locked in another.

She chanced another quick look. He was so weak. *Don't do it,* she told herself.

But she got up and slinked to a drink dispenser. *Hope he likes algae smoothies. Nothing quite like the feeling that you're drinking a fish.* He wouldn't be able to keep much more down. He'd been getting all his meals through an IV.

She set the drink on the table someone had pushed in front of his cell to barricade it shut. Then she dragged the table from the door, wincing at the squeal of metal scraping over metal.

"What are you doing?" someone barked.

Kyle again. He strode over, his glare undercutting her sense of accomplishment at budging the table.

"Did you ever have a pet?" Lake mustered the nerve to keep dragging the table. The boy behind the glass stood straighter, watching her progress with wide eyes. "You know how they die when you don't feed them?"

Kyle shoved the table back toward the door. "He'll be fine for a few hours. Take the fight out of him."

"Fight? He obviously *just* got out of the sim."

"The new ones always try to go right back in."

Lake glanced at the boy trapped behind safety glass. Skinny and sad. They always looked like that when they first woke up. It almost made her feel sorry for saving them. "So you're going to keep him in there until . . . ?"

"Until I feel like letting him out," Kyle said. "He gets trapped in the sim again, we're that much worse off."

"So explain it to him." Lake turned to the boy behind the glass. She owed him eye contact while she delivered the bad news. "We're going to die unless everyone gets out of the sim so the ship will let us go home."

The boy broke her gaze, but didn't otherwise react. Hard to process anything when you were exhausted.

Kyle slapped the glass so that the boy jerked back. "They never understand. They think it'll be easy to get out again." Kyle crossed his arms, somehow looked authoritative even in his sweat-stained ship-issue uniform. Maybe he'd been captain of a sports team back at school and all uniforms were the same to him. He spoke at the glass. "You know anything about avalanches? Ever heard of people dying because they dig downward instead of toward the surface? They get tumbled around in the snow, get disoriented. That's how the sim is. Even when you know you're in a simulation, you end up losing your bearings and digging yourself in deeper."

Lake thought about how it had felt to wake from the sim not half an hour ago. That first gasp of breath, Willow's name on her parched lips. He wasn't wrong.

Lake pointed her algae shake at the prisoner watching from behind the glass. "I don't think he wants to go back into the sim. I think he's just thirsty." She moved the cup from side to side and the boy's gaze followed it. "I'll keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

Kyle crossed his arms again, considering. "Always out, never in," he said finally. That obnoxious motto again.

"Like burps and farts," Lake said with a smile.

Kyle looked more annoyed than amused.

But he didn't stop her when she went back to dragging the table.

The moment she cracked the door open, the boy behind it grabbed the cup from her.

He made a face at the taste. "Yeah, I know," Lake said apologetically.

He downed the rest and leaned heavily against the wall, exhausted. "Thanks," he croaked.

"How do you feel?"

"About right, for a dead person. I'm assuming this is hell."

"No . . ." Lake looked back, past the turmoil of the eatery, to the screens that showed Earth's distant surface. "That'd be what we left behind when we got on this ship." *Smoking craters and impact fires and blackened skies.*

"We left."

"The lucky ones did."

"And then . . . I was in a simulation?"

"You leave stasis, then you enter the sim before you fully wake up. It's supposed to show you what Earth's like now: war over, skies clear." She pointed at the distant wall screen he'd been staring at earlier, where white clouds still swirled. "But it didn't get everything right. The sim's broken. Like the rest of this ship."

"The ship's . . . ?" He couldn't seem to bring himself to finish the sentence. His hand shook so much Lake thought he might drop the cup. "What do you mean?"

"The ship was never meant to be an emergency bunker. It was supposed to be for exploration. You know the guy who made the virtual reality app Paracosm? He had this ship built so he could, like, *boldly go*. But I guess it wasn't quite finished when the war started and we all hurried aboard."

The boy's legs shook. They weren't used to holding him up. Lake thought about telling him to take a seat, that all the news she had was bad news anyway. But he was pressing up against the wall as if he were trying to get as far as possible from what she was saying.

"I was trapped in there, wasn't I?" he asked. "In the sim."

Lake gave him a sympathetic smile. "Now you're just trapped on the ship. Until everyone gets out of the simulation. The ship won't let us leave until then. Won't let us access most of its areas, let alone the shuttles. We've got a whole group of volunteers trying to beat down the doors to the shuttle



bay on a twenty-four-hour rotation. But I'm pretty sure those doors can withstand a lot more than homemade battering rams."

This was usually the point when the newly rescued went back to slumping. The boy just gave her a determined grimace. Fine, he could join battering-ram duty when he found his strength. She wouldn't stop him from wasting his time.

"How do we get people to wake up?" he asked.

Lake's shoulders stiffened. A normal question, she told herself. *It doesn't mean he knows it was you in the sim.* "We let them figure it out on their own."

He eyed her like he knew she was lying.

Lake ducked his gaze. She leaned forward and took the empty cup from his trembling hand before he could drop it, noted the stars tattooed on his forearm—some constellation. "What's your name?"

"Taren."

"Don't try to go back into the sim, Taren. Forgetting reality feels nice for a while, but in the end, it only makes you more miserable." *Trust me.*

He stared at her a long moment, and Lake couldn't decide whether he believed her. The new ones usually didn't. "What's your name?" he finally asked.

"Lake."

"Why did you look at me that way before, Lake? When you were eating at the table? No one else bothered to notice me."

Her skin itched. *He's going to figure it out. And then they'll put me in here.* "I have an eye for potential organ failure." She shrugged. "Just—don't go back into the sim. If anyone finds out, they'll lock you up for good."

She slipped back out the open door, dropped the cup on a table, and left the eatery, forcing herself to take it slow under the weight of his gaze.