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THE MISSING
RISKED

Rewriting the past to save the future

For my parents, who told me fascinating stories about Russia when I was a kid

Jonah Skidmore took a deep breath as he peered at the, computer screen in front of him. He'd recently survived time travel, a war zone, betrayal, deception, mutiny, and the near destruction of time itself. Surely he was brave enough to call up a list of names on a computer.

Wasn't he?

He kept his finger poised over the computer mouse.

I'll be brave enough in a minute, he told himself. Or . . . two.

"What's wrong?" his sister, Katherine, said from behind him. "Did Google lock up or something? Hit that link again."

Patience wasn't one of her virtues. Before Jonah had a chance to reply, she shoved her hand over his, pressing his finger down on the mouse.

"There," Katherine said. "Just what we need. Famous missing children in history. Let's see . . ."

There was a good chance that Jonah's name might be on the list coming up on the computer screen before them. Not his real name—not Jonah Skidmore. But his original name. The name he'd been born with.

To keep from actually looking at the screen now, Jonah whirled in his seat to glare at Katherine.

"Keep your voice down!" he commanded. "Do you want Mom or Dad to hear?"

Unfortunately for Jonah, his parents were the kind who believed all those warnings about monitoring kids' computer use. So the Skidmore family computer was right smack in the middle of the kitchen. And Mom and Dad were just around the corner and down the hall, where they were hanging Jonah's and Katherine's newest school pictures along the staircase.

Mom and Dad had no clue that Jonah and Katherine had traveled through time again and again and again, their lives in danger in one century after another.

But even without the complications of time travel and historical danger and intrigue, Jonah would have wanted his parents to know how desperate he was to find out his preadoption identity.

Not that I exactly want to know it, he told himself. I just . . . need to.

"Mom and Dad wouldn't mind us talking about history," Katherine said, barely bothering to lower her voice. Then she leaned in closer and dropped her voice to a total whisper: "Do you think you might be the Russian kid?"

She pointed to a name on the screen.

Jonah grimaced so fiercely he could barely see.

What if I'm wrong about everything? he wondered. What if there's some chance my other identity will never actually matter? Can't I go on ignoring it and pretending it doesn't exist?

He knew the answer to that question: No. He couldn't. He was only thirteen—and Katherine was nearly twelve—but in the last few months they'd learned that the past had a way of coming back and grabbing you.

Sometimes literally.

That is not the right way to think about time travel, Jonah told himself. Remember, you have a new attitude now.

He forced himself to open his eyes wide enough to read the words on the screen before him—and then wider still, in indignation.

"Alexis Romanov?" he protested. "No way—that's a girl's name!"

Katherine reached over Jonah's shoulder and clicked on a link for the name.

~~"No, it's a guy," she corrected. "It's Russian, remember? Sometimes he's listed as Alexis, sometimes Alexei. Same kid, just different translations. Definitely a boy. See?"~~

Phrases jumped out at Jonah from the screenful of information she'd called up: *heir to the throne of the Russian empire . . . World War I . . . Russian Revolution . . . Alexis was imprisoned with the rest of his family . . . then in 1918 the Bolsheviks decided . . .*

Jonah didn't know much about Russian history—or anything about it, actually—but he was pretty sure that things hadn't gone well for this Alexis or Alexei Romanov back in 1918.

Well, duh, Jonah told himself. Kids don't vanish from history because everything's going great. All of us were in some kind of danger.

For most of his life, Jonah had believed what his parents believed: that he was a perfectly ordinary kid in a perfectly ordinary family, growing up in a perfectly ordinary Ohio suburb. He was adopted and his sister wasn't—that was the only detail about him that had ever seemed the least bit unusual. And Jonah's attitude toward that little fact had always been, *Well, so what? Who cares?*

Then the mysterious letters had begun arriving, and Jonah had found out that he wasn't an ordinary adoptee.

Not at all.

Instead, he and thirty-five other kids were, depending on how you looked at it, either refugees from history or children audaciously stolen from the past. Or both at once. The only reason he and the other kids were growing up now, at the start of the twenty-first century, was because their kidnapers had crash-landed in this time period with a planeload of stolen babies. Fearing the wrath of time agents, determined to keep history on its original track, the kidnapers had abandoned the babies and run away, vowing to come back for them as soon as they could.

At least we got thirteen years of happy ignorance before everyone started fighting over us again, Jonah thought.

And that wasn't the right way to think either. Ignorance wasn't a good thing. Jonah and Katherine had traveled back and forth through history multiple times in the past few months, repairing time and rescuing other kids endangered by their own time periods. How many times on those trips had ignorance almost gotten someone killed?

Let's see . . . in 1483 . . . 1485 . . . 1600 . . . 1605 . . . 1611 . . . 1903 . . .

Jonah had returned from his last trip through time vowing to face up to even the facts he desperately *didn't* want to know.

Facts like what his original identity in history actually was.

Just yesterday he'd asked JB, the time agent he knew best, to finally reveal it.

This may have been a little unfair. After their last trip through time, JB was going through an identity crisis of his own. It probably wasn't surprising that JB had refused to tell.

So Jonah had decided to take matters into his own hands.

Because you never know, Jonah told himself. You never know when I might be zapped back in time, when I might have to deal with whatever historical mess this Alexis or Alexei Romanov—or whoever I really am—had to deal with. I refuse to take another time-travel trip blind!

He made himself focus on the words on the screen and read them in order, not skipping around:

Alexis Romanov, the last tsarevitch of Russia, was born in 1904. He had four older sisters—Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia—but as the first and only male child of Tsar Nicholas II, he was the designated heir, intended from birth to inherit the throne. At that time, the Russian empire covered a sixth of the globe . . .

Jonah stopped reading.

"If I really was, like, the future leader of Russia, don't you think I'd . . ." He let his voice trail off because ~~there was no way he could say what he was thinking. If I really am this kid, shouldn't I feel more special? Shouldn't I be smarter, more talented—more obviously someone capable of ruling a sixth of the planet?~~

"What? Do you think you should look more like a prince—or a 'tsarevitch' or whatever the Russians called it?" Katherine teased. "Do you think you shouldn't look like such a goofball?"

"How I should look . . .," Jonah muttered. "Duh, Katherine, we're idiots. In 1918 they had cameras. They—"

He stopped explaining and started typing instead. He clicked back over to Google and started an image search for Alexis or Alexei Romanov.

Within seconds he'd called up a picture of a boy in a sailor suit. The kid was maybe nine or ten, and staring unsmilingly toward the camera. It was a black-and-white image, so it was impossible to tell if the boy's hair was brown or just dark blond. It was impossible to tell eye color. It was impossible to tell what the boy looked so serious. But Jonah could tell one thing for sure:

"It's not me," he said, relief swimming over him.

Katherine squinted at the picture.

"Maybe you just think that because it's such an old picture, and you're used to seeing yourself in the 21st century," she said. "Or—you know how sometimes people don't look like themselves in one particular photograph?"

Jonah clicked the back arrow, returning to the lineup of dozens of images of Alexis/Alexei Romanov. He reached to the top of the computer desk, where Mom had stashed the packets of the other copies of his and Katherine's school pictures, ready to be handed out to various relatives at Thanksgiving. He shook out a five-by-seven of himself and held it up beside the computer screen.

"See?" he said. "No way that's me."

"Okay," Katherine said softly.

She was looking too closely at the picture of Jonah. Jonah couldn't help staring at it too.

Did anybody like his or her seventh-grade school picture? Jonah's hair stuck up in a weird way, and his grin was both crooked and too wide. But there was something else about the picture that bothered Jonah.

It was taken back in September, before I got the first letter. Before I went back in time for that first trip. It might as well have been a million years ago.

The Jonah in the picture looked too baby-faced, too unformed, too innocent.

Too ignorant.

It hurt, just looking at this picture of the kid Jonah had once been.

No wonder Katherine was doubtful about Jonah and Alexei/Alexis's appearance. Even Jonah didn't look like himself anymore.

He turned the picture facedown and slipped it back into the packet at the top of the computer desk. He caught only a glimpse of the packet of Katherine's school pictures, the multiple images of her blonde hair, her blue eyes, and her confident gaze, which seemed to say, *You think there are going to be a lot of mean girls in sixth grade? So what? I'm not worried!*

As if that was all Katherine was ever going to have to worry about.

Katherine looked like a total little kid in her school pictures from a few months ago too.

"Oh, hey," he said loudly, trying to distract himself and Katherine. He pointed back toward the computer screen. "Why are all these pictures of girls mixed in with the images of the *boy* Alexis? Maybe you're wrong after all."

Katherine took control of the mouse and the keyboard again.

"No, those are his sisters," she said, clicking through images until she came to a large one of four girls in lacy white dresses and Alexis/Alexei—looking much younger—in yet another sailor suit. "Do you remember, back in the time cave, back in the beginning of all this, when we saw all the names of the missing kids from history on that plane? Two Romanovs were on that list, weren't they? Alexis and Anastasia?" She zoomed in until only the two youngest children showed on the screen. "Do these kids look familiar?"

Jonah frowned. He had met almost all of the other kids stolen from history in the time cave, the day the original kidnapppers had come back hoping to retrieve each one of them. But Jonah didn't have quite enough imagination to mentally replace the old-fashioned lace dress and sailor suit in the picture of the Romanovs with the modern jeans and T-shirts and sweatshirts the other kids had been wearing in the time cave.

"I don't know," Jonah said irritably.

Anastasia and Alexis Romanov seemed to stare back at him from the computer screen, their expressions plaintive and pleading. Jonah wished he'd never thought to look for pictures. Now that he knew he himself wasn't a Romanov, he didn't want to learn anything else about these kids. It was too much of a burden. He already had to worry about his friends Chip and Alex, trying to recover from the trauma of the 1400s, and his friend Andrea, who'd wanted to stay in 1600 even though it was a complete mess, and Emily, who—

Katherine gasped beside him. Jonah turned and saw that she'd gone totally pale.

"What's wrong with you?" he muttered.

"Everyone's just supposed to be missing, right?" Katherine asked, her voice shaking. "You and the other kids—you just vanished from history and nobody was ever supposed to know what happened to you. Isn't that how it was always supposed to be? For all thirty-six of you?"

"Uh, sure," Jonah said uneasily. "Why?"

Katherine raised a trembling hand and pointed to a sentence Jonah hadn't noticed before, directly below the picture on the screen.

"Because," Katherine said. "Because this says Anastasia and Alexis Romanov are dead."

Jonah read the sentence beside Katherine's fingertip:

Thanks to this most recent DNA testing, we now know that the entire Romanov family was executed in the early morning hours of July 17, 1918.

"Did *we* do that?" Katherine asked in a strangled voice.

"I think we would have known if we'd killed anyone," Jonah said, trying to make a joke of things. He couldn't take Katherine sounding so grim. "Let alone *executed* a whole family. Besides, we've never even been to 1918."

"No, I mean, is it our fault?" Katherine asked. "Did something we changed in time on one of our trips make it so Alexis and Anastasia died in 1918 instead of being kidnapped and turned back into babies and brought to our time?"

Jonah had known that that was what she meant. He leaned his head back.

"JB?" he called softly. "Don't you think now would be a good time to show up and explain everything?"

This was a little twisted. Five minutes ago Jonah had been hoping that JB wouldn't know what he and Katherine were up to. Now Jonah *wanted* the time agent to be watching and listening and ready to swoop in.

Jonah looked around. He heard footsteps coming toward the kitchen.

And then Mom came around the corner, a hammer in one hand and a yardstick in the other.

"Every year," she said, shaking her head grimly. "Every year we *think* we're going to be able to hang those pictures without having them look crooked. And every year we find out we have to measure down from the ceiling, not up from the baseboard along the stairs . . . and it still drives us crazy trying to do it right. What are you two up to?"

Jonah could feel the guilty expression spreading over his face.

"Nothing," he said.

"School project," Katherine said.

Mom glanced at the computer screen.

"The Romanovs and the Russian Revolution?" she said, sounding surprised. "Which of you is studying that? Jonah, I thought your social studies class was working on the Minoans and the Mycenaeans. And Katherine, I thought you were still on that geography unit."

Sometimes it really stank to have parents who paid attention to what you were doing in school.

"It's kind of an extra-credit thing," Katherine lied smoothly. "You know Mrs. Hatchett thinks the curriculum leaves out a lot. She likes to add enrichment activities."

Jonah had to hand it to Katherine: She rolled her eyes so convincingly that even Jonah almost believed her.

"I was helping Katherine look up a few things," Jonah added, to explain why he was sitting in the computer chair and Katherine was standing beside him.

Katherine shot him a disgusted look, as if to say, *Now you're pushing it too far. That's just going to make Mom more suspicious! Why would I need your help?*

Mom leaned in toward the computer, staring at the picture of Alexis and Anastasia.

"Good for Mrs. Hatchett," she said absently. "It's great she's trying to make history come alive. . . ."

remember being fascinated by the Anastasia story when I was about your age, Katherine. Of course that was before they'd found any of the bones."

"Bones?" Jonah repeated faintly.

"Well, yeah—how much research have you done so far?" Mom asked.

"We just started," Katherine said.

Mom put down the hammer and yardstick and took over the keyboard and mouse.

"I'm trying to remember when everything was revealed," she said, starting new searches of her own. She clicked through one screen after another until she came to a list of dates. "Okay, here we go. The book says the family was killed in 1918. At first the Soviet leaders said only the tsar had been executed, but there were all sorts of stories floating around about what had happened to the rest of the family. Somehow it was almost always the youngest daughter, Anastasia, that people thought had escaped—a woman showed up in Germany years later claiming to be her, and even some of the Romanov relatives believed her."

"Why Anastasia?" Jonah asked. "Why not one of the other girls? Or the boy?"

"I don't know," Mom said, tilting her head thoughtfully. "Maybe it was because Anastasia had a reputation for being feisty, and the other girls didn't. The son, though—he was so sick to begin with. . . . It was kind of amazing he lived as long as he did, anyway."

"He had hemophilia," Katherine said, sounding like such an expert. Which was ridiculous, because Jonah knew she hadn't known that a moment ago. She was just reading from the computer screen.

"Right," Mom said.

"And there wasn't a cure for that back then, but there is now, right?" Katherine said. Jonah could tell she was trying to catch Jonah's eye without Mom noticing. At least one of the other missing children from history—Emily, the girl they'd helped most recently—had been endangered in her original life because of an illness.

But Mom was frowning.

"I'm not sure there's a cure for hemophilia even now," she said. "But I'm pretty sure it's treatable. We can look that up too—"

Jonah didn't have the patience for a long detour. He put his hand protectively over the mouse.

"Katherine can do that later," he said. "Keep explaining—what were you saying about bones?"

"Well, the rumors kept flying for decades, because the people who murdered the Romanovs hid the bodies," Mom said. She pointed to a chunk of text on the screen. "It was about sixty years before anyone found any of them, and—look here—even that was kept secret until 1989, about the time the Soviet Union was starting to fall apart. There were tests done on the bones after that, and scientists said it was the tsar, his wife, three of the daughters, the family's doctor, and three loyal servants. The bodies of the son and one of the daughters were missing."

"So Anastasia and Alexis could have escaped!" Jonah exclaimed. "The fact that their bones were found with the rest of the family's— isn't that kind of proof that they did?"

Mom was scanning the computer screen.

"Well, there was some disagreement about whether it was Anastasia or Maria whose bones were missing," she said. "And anyhow—here it is—in 2007 someone found other bones nearby, and they did DNA tests and then the scientists pretty much said, 'It's a hundred percent certain. These are the missing Romanov bones. The whole family died in 1918. No one escaped.' Tragic, isn't it?"

Now Jonah was the one trying to catch Katherine's eye. The year 2007 wasn't that long ago. If he and Katherine had changed something in history that led to the death of Anastasia and Alexis Romanov in 1918, wouldn't time agents like JB have tried to keep it secret as long as they could?

Would JB have even bothered to tell Jonah and Katherine what had happened?

~~Was there any way to undo whatever had changed Anastasia's and Alexis's fates?~~

"JB, we *really* need an explanation," Jonah muttered, softly enough that there was no way Mom could hear.

The doorbell rang just then, and the sound made Jonah jump.

"I'll get it," he said, sliding out of the chair.

If that's JB—wow, that was quick, he thought.

He just needed to be prepared to play along with whatever story JB would come up with to explain his presence to Jonah's parents.

Jonah rushed down the hall and yanked the door open.

It wasn't JB. But it was someone Jonah recognized.

There, on the Skidmores' porch, stood Anastasia Romanov.

THREE

To his credit, Jonah did not blurt out, *Aren't you supposed to be dead?*

He did consider it. His mind tried out and discarded several other possible things to say, but most of them sputtered away after an initial *What . . . ? How . . . ? Why . . . ?*

Maybe you could figure out a few things before you say anything, he told himself.

He blinked a few times, and his eyes kept assuring him that this was the exact same Anastasia Romanov he'd seen on the computer screen only a moment earlier. She had the same rounded face, the same impish gleam in her eyes, the same long, flowing hair. But this wasn't like seeing a black-and-white picture colorized and come to life. The Anastasia standing before him wasn't wearing a strand of pearls around her neck. She didn't have her dark blond hair pulled back in some puffy old-fashioned style; it was parted on the side and tucked behind her ears. The long, lacy white dress from the picture had been replaced with blue jeans and a University of Michigan sweatshirt.

So it's not Anastasia zapped straight from the early 1900s to our front porch, Jonah thought. *It's modern Anastasia. Anastasia who's grown up in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, just like me.*

So if Anastasia was standing on Jonah's front porch, why did the Internet say DNA tests proved she had died in 1918?

And if she was one of the kidnapped/time-crashed missing children from history, like Jonah, why didn't Jonah remember seeing her at the time cave when almost all of them had been gathered together? Especially since, now that he was looking right at her, he could tell that even in blue jeans and a sweatshirt Anastasia Romanov looked 100 percent like Anastasia Romanov?

Jonah realized that he'd been standing there for a ridiculously long time staring at Anastasia without saying anything. The only thing he'd done was blink and maybe open and close his mouth a few times like a fish.

"Okay, okay," Anastasia burst out. She crossed her arms defensively across her chest. "I get it that people in Ohio hate the University of Michigan, and I'm making everyone I meet hate me by wearing this shirt. But *get over it*. All my other clothes are in boxes being carried off the moving van right now. I'll wear something different tomorrow. Sheesh."

University of Michigan, Jonah thought. The University of Michigan was in Michigan, of course. Jonah even knew what city it was in: Ann Arbor. And there was something important about Ann Arbor in Michigan, something that had to do with someone moving . . .

Jonah's brain couldn't quite make the shift from thinking about people moving from one time period to another, to thinking about people moving from one state to another.

He was still squinting stupidly at Anastasia when he noticed his friend Chip jogging up the sidewalk.

"Daniella insisted on meeting you," Chip said. "Posthaste."

Jonah frowned at Chip and shook his head warningly. Chip had been back from his trip to the 1400s for a couple of weeks now, but he still sometimes acted and sounded like he was stuck in the Middle Ages. He'd lived the years 1483 to 1485 as Edward V, an English king who'd mysteriously vanished from history. Jonah could see how it would be a little hard to just snap back into normal life. But Chip real

needed to be more careful.

"Er . . . remember Daniella McCarthy?" Chip asked, trying to cover his mistake. He gestured toward Anastasia. Evidently, Daniella was her twenty-first-century name. "Remember how I talked to her on the phone before she moved down here?"

That was the hint Jonah needed. It was a first step, anyhow. Way back when Chip and Jonah and Katherine were just starting to figure out that something very, very weird was going on, they'd come across two lists of names, one labeled "survivors" and one labeled "witnesses."

Daniella McCarthy's name, like Chip's and Jonah's, had been on the survivors list.

But is she actually a survivor if she's really Anastasia and the Internet says Anastasia Romanov died in 1918? Jonah wondered. What sites were we looking at, anyway—would the school librarian say they weren't reliable?

But if this was just a case of getting bad info from the Internet, why had Jonah's own mother been convinced that Anastasia was dead?

Jonah realized he was still staring stupidly at Daniella.

"Oh, uh, welcome to Ohio," he managed to say. "Your family's moving into your new house right now? To—" He barely stopped himself from saying, *To 1873 Robin's Egg Lane?* It would seem way too creepy and stalkerish that he remembered her street address. Especially if she didn't know . . .

Wait a minute, Jonah thought. She doesn't know anything. Daniella McCarthy was the one and only missing link from history who wasn't in the time cave that day we found out everything. Because there was some kind of mix-up that delayed her move. So she doesn't know she's in the wrong time period. She doesn't know people have been fighting over whether to take her back to the past or on to the future. She only knows what Chip told her when he called her on the phone, and that was before we knew much of anything ourselves.

Really, the only thing Chip had talked about with Daniella was her move. Not time travel. Not history. Not her identity.

Jonah cleared his throat, delaying.

"To . . .," Daniella prompted him.

"To . . . Hey, wasn't there some problem with the paperwork for your house? Messing things up? Your parents must have worked it all out, huh?" Jonah asked. As soon as he said this, Jonah realized it was a mistake. He didn't have a good excuse for knowing about the paperwork problems.

"Everything worked out. Unfortunately," Daniella said, with an emphatic eye roll. "I still hate Ohio. And I hate my parents for making me move."

"It's not so bad here," Chip said quickly.

Jonah saw that both of them were just acting. Neither one of them actually wanted to talk about the pros and cons of moving to Ohio. Daniella's bright blue eyes darted about, studying first Jonah's face, then Chip's. She seemed to be waiting to see what they would accidentally reveal next. Chip was watching Daniella just as carefully, as if waiting for her to ask, *Whoa, dude. How is it that you even know about my parents' paperwork problems? And, while you're at it, would you mind explaining how you two yahoos knew about my move in the first place—before I did?*

Why didn't she just come out and ask? Didn't she trust them to give her a truthful answer?

Jonah guessed he could see why she wouldn't. She didn't even know them, and they knew too much about her. But why had she hunted up him and Chip anyhow? Had Chip even mentioned Jonah when he'd talked to Daniella on the phone?

"Um . . . did you come looking for us because your neighbor told you about us? Did she say we were on the middle-school welcoming committee, or something like that?" Jonah asked.

"Are you?" Daniella asked. She leaned in close. She was probably six or seven inches shorter than Jonah—physically, she shouldn't have seemed any more threatening than a kitten. But Jonah took a step

back.

What am I supposed to say? Jonah wondered. *Should I admit we asked her neighbor nosy questions about her family? Should I tell her we know her original identity?*

"How did you find us?" Chip asked. He put his hand on Daniella's shoulder, maneuvering her to the side slightly, probably neutralizing any attack she might have been planning to launch against Jonah.

That's how you do it, Jonah told himself. You ask a question instead of answering hers. All that stuff about "the best defense is a good offense" probably dates back to the medieval battle strategies Chip learned in the 1400s. It's not just one of those things coaches say.

Daniella seemed to be blushing.

"You called me," she said. "So I had your cell number, and then, uh—"

"But I never even told you my name," Chip said. "And Verizon doesn't give out customers' info to total strangers."

Chip's voice stayed polite, and his face gave away nothing. At times like this, Jonah thought Chip really had missed out, not getting to stay in the 1400s and rule over his country for years and years and years. He could have been a good king.

Of course, if Chip had stayed in the 1400s, he would have ended up dead before he left his teens.

"Well, um . . .," Daniella began. She lifted her chin defiantly. "For your information, you weren't the only one who contacted me."

What was that supposed to mean?

Jonah looked to Chip, because Chip seemed to be handling all of this better than Jonah was.

"Who else called you?" Chip asked in a low voice.

Daniella smirked ever so slightly.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she teased. "Let's just say there were evidently lots of people who couldn't wait for me to move to Ohio."

Did my friend JB contact you? Jonah wanted to ask. *Or—did Second? Did Gary and Hodge?*

Second and Gary and Hodge were Jonah's enemies. It was distressing that he could more easily imagine them getting to Daniella rather than anyone he trusted.

No, Second's gone off into another dimension, and he promised to leave original time alone, Jonah reassured himself. And Gary and Hodge are still in time prison. Aren't they?

Just a couple months ago, Jonah probably would have blurted out all the names, all his questions. But he had learned a little caution on his dangerous trips through time. It would be much better if they could get Daniella to tell them what she knew before Jonah or Chip revealed anything.

Chip raised one eyebrow—putting on an act again. Acting as if it didn't matter in the least if Daniella told them anything.

Jonah tried to imitate Chip's expression.

Daniella started to giggle.

"He said the two of you could be kind of funny," she snorted.

"He'?" Jonah asked, trying to sound as if he didn't care that Daniella was laughing at him. And as he'd caught her revealing some huge clue about her informant's identity, when really all she'd made clear was that it was a guy.

At least we've narrowed it down to half the world's population, Jonah thought. We know Daniella wasn't secretly talking to, say, Katherine.

Of course, he wouldn't have believed that, anyhow.

But thinking about Katherine made him wonder why Katherine hadn't shown up at the door—because of hearing Chip's voice, if nothing else. Chip and Katherine had kind of become boyfriend and

girlfriend after the trip to the 1400s. But given that Katherine had ended up traveling with Jonah ~~three different centuries after that, Jonah guessed it wasn't exactly a normal middle-school relationship~~

At least Katherine was doing better with Chip than Jonah was with Andrea, the girl he liked. Andrea had given him the "let's just be friends" talk after they'd both returned from the 1600s. Jonah hoped he might be able to change her mind someday, but so far that hadn't happened.

Don't think about Andrea right now. . . . Should I be worrying about what Mom and Katherine are finding online that would keep Katherine away from Chip?

Daniella had gone back to watching him and Chip very carefully. No—she had one of her own eyebrows raised, mocking them.

Jonah turned around and pulled the door open just a crack.

"Hey, Katherine?" he hollered into the house. "Want to come out here for a minute? There's someone you might want to meet."

Maybe Katherine could figure out how to deal with Daniella. Sometimes girls were better at understanding other girls.

A moment later Katherine pushed her way out the door. But—so did Mom. The last thing Jonah needed was Mom figuring out that something weird was going on.

"Hi," Daniella said, holding out her hand. "I'm Daniella McCarthy. My family just moved here today."

Jonah saw Katherine's eyes widen. As soon as Mom and Daniella were distracted shaking hands, Katherine mouthed silently to Jonah and Chip, *Is that who I think it is?*

Jonah winced and nodded. Then he looked quickly toward Mom to make sure she hadn't seen him wincing and nodding.

Mom actually looked a bit dazed herself.

"Wow," she was saying to Daniella. "Has anybody ever told you you look almost exactly like . . . She caught herself and shook her head quickly. Jonah wasn't sure if she was telling herself *That would be impossible* or *No kid wants to hear that she looks like some girl who's been dead for nearly a century*. But Mom put on a polite smile. "Sorry. I guess it's the power of suggestion. Retained images on the eyeball, or something like that. My daughter and I were just looking at some pictures online and it just made me think . . . um . . . have you met Katherine?" She kind of pushed Katherine forward. "Where did you say you moved here from?"

It had been a long time since Jonah had seen his mom act so flustered. It wasn't like she was actually going to figure out that this really was Anastasia Romanov standing before them, but still. She was making him nervous. How could he get Mom to go away without making her even more suspicious?

Now Daniella was shaking Katherine's hand and saying, "I'm from Michigan. Ann Arbor, Michigan." And the whole time she was watching everyone carefully, observing Mom's befuddled fumbling, and Katherine's eyes widening all over again at the mention of Michigan.

"And you say you just got here today?" Katherine asked, her voice too high-pitched and curious.

Mom began looking suspiciously at Katherine, too. Katherine dug her hand into her sweatshirt pocket.

"Kath—," Mom began.

Just then, the phone rang inside the house.

"Oh, excuse me. I'd better get that," Mom said.

She disappeared back into the house.

Now it was Daniella looking at Katherine with wide-eyed amazement.

"You use that trick too?" Daniella asked. "I thought my parents were the only ones who didn't have caller ID on their landline."

Jonah realized what had happened: Katherine had secretly called the home phone on her cell, just to get Mom to go away.

Katherine flipped a strand of her long blond hair over her shoulder and smiled angelically.

"It's only going to work for a minute," Jonah said. "She'll be back as soon as she picks up the phone and nobody's there."

Katherine kept smiling.

"But we won't be here when she comes back," she said. She opened the front door again and hollered inside, "Hey, Mom? Dad? Jonah and I are going down to Chip's for a little bit. Okay?"

She didn't wait for an answer.

"Smooth," Daniella said admiringly.

Devious, Jonah thought. *And—likely to get us in trouble, since, technically, we didn't get permission.*

But he stepped down from the porch with everyone else. The four of them walked through the yard and out to the sidewalk in an uncomfortable pack. Jonah wished he could pull Chip and Katherine aside and confer with them: *Should we just tell Daniella everything? Is it fair to keep her in the dark? How much should we worry about whoever else she's been talking to?* Of course there was no way to do this without Daniel noticing. But Jonah glanced around anyway, on the lookout for hiding spots between his house and Chip's.

That was how he first noticed the boy crouched behind the shrub in the next-door neighbor's yard.

Jonah elbowed Katherine.

"Do you think that's—," he began.

He wanted her to tell him the boy was just one of the neighborhood kids playing hide-and-seek or capture the flag. It was a little early in the school year for the high-school kids to be out playing senior tag, but who knew, maybe this was a particularly ambitious senior class.

Jonah didn't even get to finish his sentence.

Katherine was just starting to turn and look toward Jonah, when suddenly the boy sprang out from behind the shrub and lunged at them. Jonah saw only the boy's clothes: jeans and running shoes and a black sweatshirt, with the hood of the sweatshirt pulled forward to cover most of his face. And then the boy was grabbing all of them, pushing Jonah and Katherine together with Chip and Daniella, trapping them in his long arms.

"Now!" the boy cried.

Everything else around them disappeared.

FOUR

"You set us up!" Katherine screamed at Daniella.

"I did not!" Daniella screamed back. "I didn't know . . . Where are we? What's happening? Where are we going?"

Her voice held pure, stark terror, so Jonah was inclined to believe that she was telling the truth. C that if she had set them up, she hadn't known where it would lead.

"Relax," Jonah said. "You're not in any danger. Well, not right at this moment. I know it's hard to believe, but we're traveling through time right now." He looked around at the familiar blank darkness of Outer Time. The only lights were far off in the distance, rushing toward them. "There's a lot that somebody should explain to you, but for now you don't have anything to worry about."

"How can you be so sure?" Daniella screeched. Jonah could barely see her, but he could tell that she was whipping her head from side to side in panic. If she wasn't careful, she might end up giving herself a whiplash.

"Me and Katherine—well, and Chip, too—we've got a lot of experience traveling through time," Jonah said, trying for a soothing tone.

"Not like this," an unfamiliar voice growled near Jonah's ear. "Not in this direction."

Jonah turned his head to the side and made out the dim outline of a black hooded sweatshirt.

"You mean—" Katherine began.

"That's right, Katherine," the boy said mockingly. "This time we're going to the future."

Katherine gasped. For all Jonah knew, Chip and Daniella might have done the same thing, but Jonah blanked out of the conversation for a moment.

The future . . . ? Why . . . ?

Jonah wormed his right arm out of the boy's grasp and reached out to knock the other kid's hood back from his head. The boy's face shone pale in the dim light, his hair unnaturally dark.

"You!" Jonah snarled.

"You know who I am?" the boy taunted.

"Alexis Romanov!" Jonah accused, because he'd just figured that out. "And—"

Before Jonah could explain the other identity he knew for the boy, the boy suddenly let go of Katherine and Chip and Daniella. They floated ever so slightly away. But the boy kept his hold on Jonah. He slid his hands up until he had them cupped around Jonah's neck.

"Don't call me that!" the boy screamed. "Anyway, it should be Alexei, but—I am not Alexis or Alexei Romanov! I refuse to be him!"

Chip and Katherine and Daniella struggled back toward Jonah and the boy. They began tugging on the boy's arms, pulling him back from Jonah.

"What is wrong with you?" Daniella asked the boy. "You never said anything about wanting to choke anyone to death! Or about traveling through time—"

"You were one of the kids with skulls on their sweatshirts, weren't you?" Katherine asked. "That day at the time cave—"

"And you were the one who helped Gary and Hodge!" Chip accused.

Jonah rubbed his hands against his neck, trying to rub away the soreness where the boy had grabbed him. He felt dizzy. Could he be suffering from oxygen deprivation just from the one second the boy had had his hands around Jonah's neck?

No, I've just got a lot to figure out, Jonah decided.

He thought back to the time cave, the day of the adoption seminar at Clarksville Valley High School. It seemed centuries ago, even more distant in time than the 1400s. And really, in Jonah's life the adoption seminar *was* more remote and long ago than his trip to the 1400s or any other time period he could remember visiting. He had lived through the time-cave experience first.

The boy in the black sweatshirt had been there that day, part of a group of surly kids who'd been mean to Jonah and Katherine. Jonah hadn't seen the kid's resemblance to Alexei Romanov at the time because he hadn't been looking at hundred-year-old pictures back then. But Jonah remembered this kid in particular because, at a moment in the time cave when the kids had taken control from all the conniving adults, this boy had secretly tipped the balance of power back to Jonah's enemies Gary and Hodge.

Didn't that make this kid Jonah's enemy too?

And Daniella—whose side is she on? Jonah wondered. How does she know this kid? And—if he's working for Gary and Hodge again, does that mean they've escaped from time prison somehow? And sent him to do their dirty work? Does she know about this?

There were too many questions to deal with all at once. Maybe that was why Katherine and Chip had fallen silent too.

Not Daniella.

"Where's the information you promised me about my birth parents?" she demanded, staring at the boy in the black sweatshirt. "Or was that just a lie to get me to talk to these kids? Do you even—"

The boy flicked his gaze from Daniella to the others and back again.

"Later," he growled.

"Why should I trust you, anyway?" Daniella asked. Even floating through Outer Time she looked as if she sounded fierce. She put her hands on her hips. "I don't think you even told me your right name. You said you were Gavin Danes. Who's this Romanov person they're talking about?"

"I *am* Gavin Danes!" the boy shouted back at her. "I've got nothing to do with any Romanovs!"

"Gavin," Katherine said softly. "When Gary and Hodge offered to send you to the future, they were going to turn you back into a baby again, to be adopted by total strangers. So you wouldn't be Gavin Danes anymore. You'd be somebody else."

"That was the deal for *other* people," Gavin said wildly. "They offered me a special deal! In exchange for—"

He broke off, as if afraid to reveal too much.

Yeah, look around, Jonah thought. *Regardless of what side Daniella's on, you're still outnumbered.*

At the moment, anyway. Who knew what would happen once they landed wherever they were going?

Jonah could see the lights beyond them, spinning closer and closer, brighter and brighter. What had Gary and Hodge had done something to make him and the other kids younger? When would it start? How much time did they have left?

"Are Gary and Hodge back?" Jonah asked quickly. "Did they break out of time prison? Did they give you your own Elucidator, so you could come and kidnap all of us?"

Elucidators were the devices time travelers used to move from one time period to another. But the

were tricky things, able to take on the appearance of any common item from any century. They might look like a cell phone or a candleholder or a compass or a rock.

"Where is it?" Chip demanded. "Where's the Elucidator?"

He grabbed the other boy and began ransacking his clothes. He shoved his hands into Gavin's sweatshirt pockets, turned his jeans pockets inside out, even grabbed his shoes and felt around the laces.

Good idea, Jonah thought, and joined Chip in patting down Gavin.

"Elucidator, don't take us to the future!" Jonah screamed, just in case it was still on some voice-activated control. "Don't make us babies again! Take us back where we were! Where we're supposed to be!"

Jonah was hoping for some sense of instant reversal, of gliding backward. But it was impossible to tell what direction they were going. Because right at that moment they hit the point in the trip where Jonah always felt totally disoriented. Everything sped up. The lights ahead of them—or behind? Or just surrounding them?—whirled closer and closer.

"What's happening?" Daniella screeched. "What did you do?"

"I—" Jonah wanted to explain, but he was being flipped about so violently he couldn't force the words out. He knew he was still tumbling freely, but he felt pinned in place, his jaw forced open, his face distorted. He felt like he was being pulled apart and put back together, and every cell in his body hurt.

And then he landed.

FIVE

"Where . . . ," Daniella whimpered. "Where are we?"

Jonah's vision swam in and out, unable to focus on anything.

Need to remember . . . something important . . . need to warn Daniella . . ., he thought vaguely.

He hated the symptoms of timesickness that always greeted him when he arrived in a new time period. It wasn't just that all his senses went on the fritz for the first few moments; his brain blinked out of service too.

Like now. There was something he should be telling Daniella, something he should be concerned about. But his brain couldn't come up with anything but *Shouldn't you worry about . . .*

"Shh," he heard Katherine whisper to Daniella. The sound seemed to come from a million miles away, but Jonah was relieved to be able to hear it at all. And he was glad that Katherine had figured out she needed to warn Daniella.

"Don't make any noise until you're sure it's safe," Jonah tried to whisper too. But he hadn't regained enough control of his body yet. The words just came out as a long, drawn-out "unnhhh . . ."

And, anyhow, wasn't there something else he should be worrying about too? Something that he or Katherine or JB almost always tried to do to prepare for landing in a new time? What was it?

Jonah's brain seemed to be going *unnbbb* . . . as well.

Maybe it would help to try to see where they were? To figure out what they might be facing?

Jonah blinked hard, willing his eyes to work properly again. Fuzzy shapes moved around him. He remembered arriving on Henry Hudson's sailing ship in James Bay in the year 1611: the way they'd been surrounded by fog, and the way the only sound he could hear was the *thump-thump, thump-thump* of wet rope against wet wood.

This wasn't like that.

These fuzzy shapes around him seemed to be swaying in and out of sunlight—blocking the sun, unblocking it, blocking it again. Jonah could feel the pattern of shadow and glare sweeping across his face.

So those shapes . . . are they maybe tree branches? Or . . . some other kind of plants? Are we in a park or garden? Or just someone's yard?

Jonah felt like a genius for figuring out that much. Now if only he could think of the important thing he needed to remember . . .

"You!" someone suddenly screamed nearby. "You aren't supposed to be out here now!"

Jonah remembered what he'd forgotten before: invisibility. It was always wise to get the *Elucidator* to make you invisible before you arrived in a new time period. Otherwise you never knew what you might end up having to deal with.

But it was obviously too late to scream out, *Elucidator! Make us all invisible! Right now!* Especially if the "You're not supposed to be out here now!" was aimed at one of them.

But it sounds like the "you" being yelled at is someone the yeller recognizes, Jonah told himself. Maybe . . . maybe we're all still safe? Maybe I'm just overhearing some other, unrelated conversation?

Jonah turned his head slowly toward the sound of the yelling. His vision was improving. He could see ~~thick green stalks around him now, and beyond that, Daniella lying sprawled in the middle of~~ the pathway.

And what was that above her? Connected to the big yellow M on her blue Michigan sweatshirt?

No, not connected, Jonah thought, blinking again and again, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. *More like . . . pointing toward her? Pushed against her?*

His vision cleared. His brain unscrambled, and he decoded the sight before him.

Daniella was indeed lying on the path, her face twisted with terror.

Above her, a man in a khaki uniform bent menacingly over her body.

And between the two of them . . .

Between them, the man had a gun jammed against Daniella's chest.

SIX

"What are you doing out here? Who gave you those bizarre costumes?" the man screamed at Daniella.

For a moment Jonah thought he was suffering from double vision as a side effect of the timesickness because now he could see two uniformed men holding two guns against two kids' chests, and both chests were rising and falling in panicky breaths. Then he realized there really were two of everything: two men, two guns, and two kids—both Gavin and Daniella were pinned to the ground by soldiers holding guns.

But—just those two? Jonah wondered.

He turned his head silently, looking all around for Katherine and Chip. He saw no sign of them. Maybe, if they were lucky, they were hidden from everyone's sight.

And—what about me? he asked himself. He guessed that the green stalks around him, whatever they were, had sheltered him from the uniformed men as well as the sunlight. But maybe that was just because the men hadn't looked his way yet.

He held his breath, not wanting to make the slightest sound to draw attention to himself.

"Answer me!" the man hovering over Daniella screamed in her face.

Was he a guard? A soldier? Jonah decided to think of the uniformed men as guards, because they seemed slightly less threatening.

"I—I'm sorry!" Daniella wailed. "I don't understand what you're saying! I don't know what you want!"

What language was the guard speaking?

Long ago, before one of their earliest trips through time, JB had made it possible for Jonah and Katherine to understand and speak any language they encountered in any foreign time. Jonah didn't fully understand how it worked, but he'd gotten so used to the help that he often didn't even bother paying attention to whether he and the people around him were speaking English or Serbian. (Which was the language he'd become very accustomed to on his last trip through time, to 1903.)

Obviously, Daniella had never gotten that language help—and neither had Gavin. He was also flailing about on the ground under the point of the gun, screaming, "Stop! Please! I don't understand!"

"Quit that foreign garble!" the guard above Gavin screamed. "Speak Russian!"

Okay, so I guess that's Russian, Jonah thought.

His body was hit with a wave of chills.

The guards are speaking Russian, and . . . those guns don't look like they're from the twenty-first century or the future and . . . where in time would Russian guards have worn uniforms like that? They look old-fashioned but not centuries-and-centuries-ago old-fashioned. . . .

With a jolt, Jonah remembered what he'd tried to get the Elucidator to do when they were floating through time: *Take us back where we were! Where we're supposed to be!* Those instructions might have worked fine if they had all been like Katherine, bona fide twenty-first-century Americans. But they weren't. Even though Jonah still didn't know who or where he was supposed to be, he knew Chip was really supposed to be Edward V in the 1400s.

And Daniella and Gavin are really supposed to be Anastasia and Alexei Romanov from the early twentieth century.

Jonah thought, horror breaking over him. *The Elucidator would know that too.*

~~Every Elucidator Jonah had ever used had had an annoying way of interpreting commands a little too~~ literally. Jonah could see perfectly well how the Elucidator might have decided that since two of the kids in their group "belonged" in the twentieth century, that's where it would send the entire group.

Beyond the protective green stalks around Jonah, Gavin was begging the guards, "Please! Stop hurting me! I don't know what you're saying!" And Daniella was pleading, "English? Can't you speak English?"

"Russian!" the guard above Daniella roared. "Speak Russian *now*, or we will shoot you both!"

It would be my fault, Jonah thought. It's all my fault we ended up here!

He shoved himself off the ground. His legs were still trembling from the timesickness, but they were sturdy enough to bring him upright. Now he towered over all the plants around him.

"Stop!" he screamed in Russian. "Don't shoot!"

SEVEN

Instantly both guards whipped their guns away from Gavin and Daniella. Instead they pointed the guns directly at Jonah.

"Uh, hi?" Jonah said weakly. He was pretty sure this also came out in Russian, but it was hard to analyze something like that with guns pointed his way.

So what year would the Elucidator think Alexei and Anastasia belonged in? Was it 1918? How accurate were guns in 1918? Jonah wondered.

He decided they were probably much too accurate to risk trying to run away.

Not that he had anywhere to run to.

And not that he would be capable of running right now. He was doing well just to be able to stand up.

He swayed a little dizzily.

"Who are you? Where did you come from? How did you get in?" one of the guards barked at Jonah.

In? Jonah thought confusedly. Maybe he was wrong about being in some park or garden or yard? He looked around. Trees, grass, sky . . . he was definitely outdoors. But was that a wooden fence off to his right, encircling this yard and a fancy-looking building nearby? Was "inside the fence" what the guards meant?

"Well, uh, you see . . .," Jonah began. "I was just . . ."

Just what? His brain stalled. How could he explain anything when he didn't know where he was or why the guards were so upset about him being there?

"He's bizarrely dressed too," the other guard pointed out. "Perhaps he brought them those clothes to help them escape."

The first guard took a step closer to Jonah. Jonah could see straight down the barrel of the gun.

"You were plotting an escape attempt?" the guard accused.

"N-no?" Jonah said. But his uncertainty came through in his voice. Even to his own ears, it sounded like he was lying.

The gun he was staring into inched even closer. How close would the guard have to be before he just decided to shoot without asking any more questions?

Suddenly, off to his left, Jonah saw Katherine pop up from behind a bush.

"Oh, there you are!" she cried.

She strolled toward Jonah, her motions as casual as if she walked in front of loaded guns all the time.

"Sorry," she said over her shoulder toward the two guards. "My brother's a bit simple. He doesn't understand."

Jonah understood perfectly well what happened next: Both guards now aimed their guns at Katherine.

"Don't shoot her!" he yelled.

Katherine laughed.

"See?" she said. "He just thinks we're all playing war."

The guns stayed trained on Katherine.

"What *are* you playing?" the first guard growled.

Katherine made a show of looking down at her sweatshirt and jeans.

"Duh," she said. "Dress-up."

The guns twitched a little. The guards seemed to be having trouble deciding if they wanted to aim at Katherine, Jonah, Daniella, or Gavin.

Okay, Katherine, Jonah thought. At least you've managed to confuse them.

But the guards still had horribly fierce expressions on their faces. They looked like, if they had the preference, they might just end up shooting all of them.

"No outsiders are allowed in here!" the first guard yelled.

"Relax," Katherine said. "My brother and I are from the convent. We just brought in the day's shipment of food."

Where did Katherine come up with this stuff? Maybe she was just making it all up, but at least the guards kept listening to her. Neither of them was squeezing the trigger yet.

"And the nuns sent these dress-up clothes, too, for the, um, grand duchesses and the tsarevitch use," Katherine continued. "We were just—"

Katherine must have said something wrong, because suddenly the closest guard swung his gun around and hit her with the butt of it. He must have hit hard—she immediately crumpled to the ground.

"They are no longer the grand duchesses and the tsarevitch!" the guard screamed at her. "They are nothing more than ordinary citizens! No better than anyone else!"

"Okay, okay—sorry!" Katherine protested, holding her hand up to head off any more blows. "I won't call them that again!"

Jonah realized that Daniella, still sprawled on the ground, had begun letting out frightened wails, and Gavin was crying, "What's going on? What's going on?"

"Just—keep calm," Jonah muttered. "Hold on."

But that was ridiculous advice, because he himself couldn't stay calm. Was there anything he could do to help Katherine? And—oh, yeah—where had Chip landed? Was he in danger of being discovered any moment now too?

Before Jonah had a chance to decide anything, the first guard grabbed Katherine by the back of her sweatshirt and pulled her to her feet. Then he reached out and grabbed Jonah by the arm.

"I'll take care of these two," the guard said.

"And I'll take the prisoners back to their rooms," the other guard agreed, pulling up Gavin and Daniella.

"No, stop!" Gavin cried. "Careful—I bruise easily!"

"Please! Somebody—help!" Daniella screamed.

She was looking right at Jonah. Jonah struggled against the guard's grip, but either the guard was extraordinarily strong or Jonah was still weak from the timesickness. There was no way for Jonah to break free.

"You'll be all right," Jonah said in English to Gavin and Daniella. "They're just taking you back to your rooms."

"What rooms?" Daniella demanded. "Where are we? Who are these people?"

But Jonah didn't have a chance to reply before the guard holding his arm yanked him away. And the first thing Jonah had a more immediate question to worry about:

What was the guard going to do with Jonah and Katherine?

EIGHT

"If we were plotting to help the prisoners escape, why would we bring them weird clothes that make them more noticeable, not less?" Katherine argued, even as the guard dragged her and Jonah toward the imposing white building behind them.

The guard took his hand off Jonah's arm just long enough to hit Katherine in the head again.

"Shut up!" he commanded.

"I'm just trying to make you see that we deserve a fair trial if you're going to—" Katherine kept arguing.

"Stop talking!" Jonah yelled at her.

He felt the guard lifting his hand again, and this time Jonah reached out and tried to pull back on the guard's arm, so at least he wouldn't hit Katherine so hard. Jonah was rewarded for this: The guard slammed the palm of his hand against Jonah's head instead of Katherine's.

Can you get a concussion just from someone hitting your head? Jonah wondered.

The force of the blow was so hard that Jonah couldn't see or hear for a full minute. When his vision recovered, he saw that the guard had brought them to the top of a staircase leading down into a dimly lit cellar. The guard gave them a shove.

"No, please . . .," Jonah cried.

But it was useless. He and Katherine tumbled forward—forward and down. There must have been two dozen stairs before them. Jonah tried to grab on to the edge of the steps or some railing along the wall or something—anything! But the best he could do was just slow his fall. He kept plunging down and down and down . . .

He landed on top of Katherine.

She didn't move.

"Kath?" he whispered. "Katherine?"

No answer.

Jonah rolled to the side—painfully—and grabbed Katherine's shoulders.

"Katherine? Are you awake?" he asked, shaking her gently.

Still no answer.

He realized there was something else he should be checking for. His hands shook as he moved one hand from her shoulder to the side of her neck.

Just find a pulse, he told himself. Stay calm and just find her pulse.

His fingertips felt so numb that he brought the other hand up to the other side of her neck. What was the pulse was there but he just couldn't feel it? He pressed down harder with both hands.

"Gah—now you're trying to strangle me?" Katherine moaned.

Jonah hugged his sister's shoulders. Then he scrambled back a little.

"I wasn't sure you were alive," he said, the relief making his voice tremble.

"I'm still not sure," Katherine groaned. "You're the Boy Scout—how do you tell if a bone's broken?"

"Does anything hurt?" Jonah asked.

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