Carmen Blackwood stands in the afternoon light of Phoenix, Arizona, the wind whipping her blonde curls into her face. She pushes her hair back and readjusts the bags slung over her shoulders. She waits on the porch outside a light brick, one-story house, her house. The wind kicks up the top layer of dust on the ground and settles it on her Converse. Some dust granules make their way into her tattered jeans and rest on her grey hoodie. After knocking the dust off she looks up to see the front door open, revealing Aida standing in the doorframe, wearing a green sundress, and matching sandals. She smiles at Carmen and looks over to Graham, still on the phone. He is talking in an urgent whisper and glances at Carmen as if just noticing her. Carmen freezes at the sight of him; something about the way he looks at her vexes her. He quickly ends the call and puts his cellphone in his trouser pocket.

These are the Blackwood's, Carmen's parents.

"Well, come on in, er-um, Honey, make yourself at home." Aida says, smiling, showing off her pearly whites. Carmen gazes at her mother and notes how her olive complexion compliments her brown eyes and flowing black hair. She rubs her own olive-toned arm.

Carmen's dad strides out of the house to collect her belongings and says, "Hello, Earth to Carmen. You there? Come on, I'll put your stuff in your room while you get settled."

Aida takes Carmen's hand and leads her inside. "Come, I'm making lunch. We have a lot of time to make up for."

Home. Carmen usually talks to herself because she… Well, she doesn't know *why* she talks to herself. She can't remember what happened in the last nine years, except that she got an excellent education, lived in a nice place, and hasn't seen her parents since she was four.

Aida blocks Carmen's view as they walk in, then moves to the side to show off a colorful banner hanging above the television that says, Welcome Home Carmen, in bubble letters. She

smiles brightly and motions for Carmen to sit on the lumpy beige couch while she goes back to

the kitchen to finish preparing lunch. While the living room walls are a light eggshell color, the

lighting, paintings, and colorful throw pillows make up for it in spades.

Graham enters the room and settles on the couch, one seat away from Carmen. His body

taking its natural place amongst the decorative throw pillows. A ding sounds and Graham pulls

out his phone. His relaxed expression is replaced by a serious one as he types out a message.

After a whoosh sound, he shoves his phone back into his pocket. He opens and closes his mouth,

trying to strike up a conversation with Carmen. She notices that he has hazel eyes like hers,

minus the golden flecks. He rubs a hand over his red stubbled jaw, which matches his stylish

auburn hair. She twirls a short blonde curl between her fingers, wondering where it came from, if

not her parents.

Graham finds his words. "So, how do you feel? You're probably glad to be back home,

huh? I know it might be a little scary, not knowing what happened for nine years of your life, but

it's nothing to be worried about." He looks at Carmen, searching for something, but his search is

cut off when Aida enters the room with a food platter.

"Graham," she says emphatically, "don't pester her just yet; she's just come back to us."

Aida cracks a smile before setting the platter down on the coffee table. She moves her attention

to Carmen. "He is right about one thing, though. Honey, are you okay?" She sits in one of the

dark teal armchairs across from the couch, crossing her ankles and placing her well-manicured

hands on her knees. She leans toward Carmen, "You haven't said a word since you've arrived. Is

something wrong?"

Carmen is unnerved by Aida's soul-piercing stare. She fidgets on the couch, wiggling her

way into a well-worn indentation. Without lifting her eyes to Aida, Carmen says, "No, no, I-I'm

fine. Just a little… disoriented is all." She grabs a few things off the platter and gets up. "I think I'll just go to my room."

Graham stands up, "You want me to show you where it is?" Carmen cracks a smile as she passes him. She backs out of the room, "No, I think I'll be fine. It's a small house, I doubt I'll get lost. I'll call for you if I get stuck in a coat closet."

Carmen walks out of the living room and down a wood-laden hall situated next to the front door. She finds a half-opened door with her name scrawled on it in green stick-on letters. When she walks in, she finds her bags on the bed. She places the food on a desk, takes off her hoodie and shoes, and places them in one of her bags.

She takes the time to look around the room. The floor is carpeted, with piles of toys in every corner. The walls are pale green, with large dragonfly stickers flying up the wall on either side of the window that views the neighbor's brick wall. "Guess they didn't think to update the toys," she says as she looks from a toy lion, unicorn, dragonfly, and picks up a brown stuffed bunny and rubs its soft ears between her fingers. The silky ears spurring a memory.

She begins to reminisce on a long-ago memory, dulled by time on Christmas Eve when her mom presented her with the brown bunny that she named… *Mr. Bun*. Excited that she remembers something, Carmen goes to pick up another toy, a puppy resembling a Beagle. *Spot! Ah, I remember you.*

She looks around the room some more. The desk and a wooden dresser are situated to the wall left of the window. A framed picture of Aida, Graham, and a little Carmen dressed up, sitting on the couch in the living room, is set atop the dresser. Above the dresser is a hanging mirror trimmed in white. There is only one other photo in the room, which sits on the wooden nightstand next to the bed. Carmen kneels in front of it to get a closer look. Pictured is Aida in a

hospital gown, smiling down at Baby Carmen in her arms, with Graham hovering over her left shoulder looking down as well.

She spends the rest of the afternoon in her room, picking up each toy, in turn, to unlock memories from her past. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes a scary memory would appear, which confused Carmen. *My childhood wasn't frightening. What was that?* It only happened twice but didn't scare her enough to question it.

Someone knocks on the door, and Carmen turns around to see Aida standing there looking awkward. "You should get ready for bed." Aida smiles, but her eyes do not. Aida opens the top drawer of Carmen's dresser, and Carmen walks over and peeks in. "It may be too big on you, but that's the point," Aida pulls out an oversized blue nightgown, holding it up to Carmen's shoulders, "we can go shopping this weekend, okay? But, for now, my old pajamas will have to do."

Carmen changes into the nightgown before dinner, then gets tucked into bed by her parents. It takes her mere moments to fall asleep, with Mr. Bun in her arms.

…

In the dead of night, Carmen wakes up screaming and drenched in sweat. Graham rushes into her room to find her sobbing.

"Carmen, what happened? Are you okay?" He takes a seat on the edge of her bed as sobs take over her screams and sweat with cold mottled skin. He helps her lean against the side of the bed.

Carmen whispers to herself between heavy, ragged breaths. "I was alone, so alone. Alone and hurting everywhere. I couldn't do anything about it."

Aida walks in the room wearing a robe over her pajamas with a serious, calculated expression. She makes a quick exit, before returning with a wet washcloth and places it on Carmen's forehead. "What happened? You're shivering."

Graham starts to explain when Aida cuts him off. "Graham, I was talking to Carmen. Carmen, honey, was it a bad dream?" When she doesn't answer right away, Aida says, "What happened? You can tell me," with a persistent undertone to her voice, and those eyes staring into her soul again.

What's her problem? Carmen backs away from Aida and looks to Graham for comfort. Graham looks at her with soft, caring eyes, which puts her at ease. She answers, "It's just— it was a, uh… yeah, it was a dream. Just a really bad dream." She eventually stops shivering, and the rest of her tears dry on her cheeks. She pulls her legs up to her chest, covering them with her nightgown.

Graham tucks Carmen back into bed, "Remember, it's only a dream. Dreams can't hurt you," and kisses her forehead.

As he passes Aida, Graham starts to say something, but Aida holds up her hand and motions toward Carmen. Graham gives Carmen a quick glance and leaves. Aida turns around but stops with her hand on the door frame. She takes a deep breath and leaves the room without saying another word.

The night continues without a sound.

…

Carmen wakes up the next day at nine o'clock to a light tapping at her door. "I'm awake."

Graham opens her door, holding a plate stacked with breakfast foods. "Hey sleepyhead, I'm glad you're awake. We just finished breakfast, and before putting it up, I thought I'd let you have some. I'm not sure what you'd like, so I just covered all the bases. I'll just set this on your desk." After he sets the plate down, his phone dings. He pulls it out and frowns. He says a quick "I love you" to Carmen before closing the door behind him.

Well, that was odd. Carmen brushes it off and stares at the piled plate. She walks to the desk and picks up the fork hovering it over the assortment of food, going from the chocolate chip pancakes to the waffles to the eggs. Her fork lingers over an omelet before stabbing into it. She pulls back the desk's chair and takes a seat. While she eats, she goes through the drawers of the desk.

Half an hour and a whole stack of pancakes later, Carmen's search comes up empty, with nothing but school supplies in mass. After scarfing down all that food, she starts to feel sleepy and crawls back in bed for a quick nap.

Her quick nap turns into seven hours of sleep filled with weird dreams and strange mutterings. "Government… program… Weapons program… Weapon. Weapon." She jolts awake, "I'm the weapon!" She looks to her closed door as Graham and Aida come rushing in.

"We heard a scream," Graham kneels next to Carmen's bed, "Is everything okay?"

She nods, not mentioning what she discovered, in the hopes that they didn't hear her.

Graham gets up, "Well, okay then. You pretty much slept the day away, so you might as well stay in bed. I'll bring you something to eat before you go back to sleep."

He and Aida exit Carmen's room and have a whispered argument in the hallway. Aida passes in front of her door, heading to their bedroom. Carmen hears Graham's retreating footsteps into the kitchen.

She pulls her knees up to her chest. *Time to worry.* Carmen realizes now that the scary memories she dismissed yesterday were real. What she thought were terrible dreams were actually memories. *I'm a weapon for the government!* Her mind whirls as she comes to grips with her new reality.

Graham comes in holding a plate and a steaming mug of something. "I've got a PB and J with a side of tea. The box says it's supposed to relax you. I figured after last night, and just now, you might have a hard time getting back to sleep, so this should help." He places the mug and plate on the nightstand and leaves, closing the door behind him.

Carmen takes a bite of the sandwich before taking the mug in her cold hands. She lets the mug warm them before lifting it to her nose for a sniff. *Earl Grey.* She smiles and takes a sip, swirling it around in her mouth before swallowing. She scrunches up her nose as the too-sweet aftertaste lingers. She takes another sip, downing the tea quickly this time. She gets up and starts to pace around her room. *This is real. It's real now, not just strange dreams and scary memories. It's all real.*

She does this for a bit before she hears faint voices coming from the living room. She lays on the floor and puts her ear to the sliver of light coming from under the door.

"Oh Graham, we should tell her; she seems distant. Maybe knowing what happened to her—"

"No, Aida, and keep your voice down; she could be asleep by now. We can't. We aren't allowed to."

Carmen sits up, intrigued. Her head starts to feel fuzzy, so she shakes it, and the fuzziness goes away. She lays back down to listen.

"You obviously didn't see what I saw last night. The fear in her eyes. That is the fear of a child who is scared and alone. What if she talks about her experience with another kid? What will we tell her then? Graham, we are in dangerous waters here." Her voice was coated in unease.

"I know, I know, but things are different now. America is not like it was back in 2050. If we defy the law that has withstood the test of time for fifteen years, then what do you think would happen to us? What would happen to Carmen?"

Carmen moves her ear from the door and sits up in disbelief. She shakes the fuzziness from her head again, along with the pins and needles that have appeared in her fingertips. *They know what happened to me. They're my parents, they welcomed me back home with open arms and all this time they have known what happened to me and they didn't do a thing to stop it!* She ducks her head back down to hear what else they were hiding from her.

"I know the risk that we would be taking, Graham. And I'm willing to take that risk."

Graham lets out an exasperated sigh, and Carmen hears him slump onto the couch. The fuzziness comes back, stronger this time, and Carmen realizes what's wrong. *They drugged me! My parents drugged me!* She pulls her clothes and shoes out of her bag. She starts to put them on and stops when she notices the picture of her, Aida, and Graham sitting in front of the mirror. She looks at herself in the mirror for a long time before she shakes her head.

I can't be sympathetic. They do not *deserve my sympathy. They drugged me, for Christ's sake! What kind of messed up world has to exist for my parents to have willingly given me up to the government, knowing what they were giving me up* for*?*

Carmen finishes packing. She looks out the crack at the bottom of the door to see if she can spot Aida or Graham. When the coast is clear, she gets up, grabs her bags, and walks over to

the window, trying to open it. "Come on, stupid window! Move…up!" She says in an attempt to coax the window into moving. She kneels on the carpet and puts her right shoulder and palm against the window's edge, pushing. The fuzziness and tingling come back, and when she shakes her head and hands to clear them, it doesn't go away. She fights through it and feels the window budge.

"Carmen, what are you doing?" Graham says, his voice filled with fear.

Carmen jumps at the sound of his voice. Her eyes widen. "Um… uh… just trying to get fresh air, is all." She continues to push against the window.

Graham's voice gets low. "I don't think that's what you're trying to do."

Aida walks into the room, looking from Carmen to Graham. "What is our lovely daughter doing, Graham?" A strained smile etches across her face.

Carmen throws her hands into the air. She points an accusatory finger at Graham, then Aida, "I know what happened to me, and you've *always* known what happened to me. You didn't do anything to stop them from taking me! So cut the crap!" She goes back to opening the window and feels the fogginess spread in her head.

Aida looks taken aback, "Okay young lady, that is no way to speak to your mother. It doesn't matter that you haven't been living under our roof for years; you are now, which means you will be living by our rules. We didn't have a choice when it came to giving you up. It was either you, or all of us." Aida lowers her voice, "I had to make the tough decision and hope beyond hope that you would be returned to us safe and sound."

Carmen looks back at her mother, "Well, I'm back, but not for long." She turns back to the window, struggling to push it up through the haze in her brain.

Graham rests a hand on Aida's shoulder. "We were promised that you wouldn't have any memory of what happened to you. This was never supposed to happen. You are stronger than they realized. Stronger than I realized." He mutters to himself, "Should have put a higher dose in the tea."

Aida and Carmen turn to Graham. Aida with a shocked expression, Carmen with rage and pain wracking her features.

"You. You drugged me. I knew it! But I thought,… you're my parents, you're supposed to protect me." Tears start to make their way down Carmen's face as she looks between Graham and Aida.

Aida takes a step toward Carmen. "I'm so sorry, honey, I had no idea. I should have… I shouldn't have…." Her shoulders slump, "I should have done a lot of things."

Graham speaks up again, his voice filled with defeat. "Sadly, the government can't use what they can't control, and since the tea didn't work… Aida, darling, call General Talbot. Tell him we have a… malfunction."

Aida stands her ground, unmoving, and puts on a brave face.

Graham steps in front of her, taking her face in his hands. "Aida, you must do as I say. If you don't do this, it will put *our* lives at risk, not just Carmen's."

Aida blinks. "No."

Graham sighs. "Do I have to do everything myself?" He walks past Aida and out of the room to call General Talbot.

Aida rushes after Graham, screaming and trying to pull him back. "No, no, Graham, she's ours! She's our blood; she's ours now. They had their time with her. She's supposed to be ours!"

Graham responds in a cold tone. "No child is ever just the parents'. You know that as well as I do. When that law went into effect, every child became a child of the government."

Carmen pulls the window the rest of the way up and tosses her bags out. She calls out to Graham and Aida, "Well, too bad I won't be around to greet 'em." She props herself on the windowsill, ducks her head, and hops out into the chilling night air.

Graham dashes back into the room and reaches out the window, trying to grab for Carmen but seconds too late. "Damn it!" He seethes for a second before rushing out of the house to chase after Carmen.

Carmen runs down the eerily quiet neighborhood street, hearing nothing put three sets of feet running. She yells back, "You are crazy if you think I'm going to willingly stay with you after you just threatened me and are now *actively* chasing me!"

Aida appears moments later, running after Graham and Carmen. She calls out, "Graham, please stop. There must be another way!"

Carmen thinks to herself. *It's sweet that she genuinely believes that, but Graham sure doesn't. I am* not *having my mind wiped.*

The direction she's running gets blocked by four army trucks spilling out with soldiers in uniform, holding plastic shields. She stops before she gets too close to them. Graham and Aida block her from behind, a few paces back.

Carmen yells to the soldiers, "You're going to regret this!" She feels something ignite inside her.

General Talbot steps through the barricade of soldiers. "You don't know what you are capable of, Carmen. So why don't you just surrender now, and no harm will come to you or your parents."

Carmen scoffs, curling her tingling fingers into fists, "No harm?" She lifts an eyebrow at the line of armed soldiers in front of her. "No harm, huh? Well, I'd like to see what harm is then, because *no harm* is such a walk in the park, right? Oh, but I wouldn't know what that feels like because you stole me away from my parents after only four years!" Her fists and golden flecked eyes begin to glow. "Just like you did with countless other children. Well, that stops now."

General Talbot steps back behind the wall of soldiers. "Everybody, go for cover!" A bright burst of light emanates from where Carmen stands. The light vanished as soon as it came. Everyone slowly gets up, blinking light out of their eyes in a daze.

Aida looks around as Graham helps her up. "Where—where is she? Where did Carmen go?"

The General ignores Aida and Graham as he speaks into his com.

 "Carmen Blackwood has activated. I repeat, Flare is awake."