Kalister’s Juvenile Prison for Young Offenders. That is the building I’ve been living in the past two months. It’s in the corner of our tiny town, just on the outskirts. There isn’t much to see here, honestly. Since we live at the very edge of the town, we’re all alone in here. If something bad ever happens, no one will notice until it’s too late.

And one night, that is exactly what happened.

It’s 6 o’ clock and I’m mopping up the floors in the dusty, echoing corridors. At 7 we have dinner in the hall, and at 8 we vacuum the lounge on the bottom floor. It’s like this all the time, all the usual work and crap. I’m a teen criminal, and we don’t exactly have the life of luxury.

When I was at school (which isn’t a place much better than here) this guy kept harassing and provoking me all the time, so I lost it and knifed him one day. I just missed his heart. I’m not an angry person, really. But I didn’t have any control then. He survived, and they’ve chucked me in here to rot away for 5 months. At least it got me away from school; I hated it there.

Here in the prison, some people glare at you and crack their knuckles, but once you show them you’re nothing to mess with, they leave you alone for good.

The nicest person I’ve met here is Tony. He’s smart, friendly, and doesn’t feel the need to glare at everyone every time he enters a room. He’s eighteen, a year older than me, and won’t tell me why he’s in here for. It’s the only thing about him that makes me slightly suspicious. But he can keep his secrets if he lets me keep mine.

“Gwen!” I hear a voice call. I snap my head around and see one of the guards standing at the end of the corridor. “You can finish up here,” he says. “The floor looks clean enough.”

That’s strange. They don’t usually give us free time out of the blue. I nod, and drag the cleaning gear to its closet, and shove it in.

Since there’s nothing much we’re allowed to do unless it’s the weekend, I head back to my cell. It’s eerily quiet here. The cells are on the two top floors of the building, 4 and 5. I’m on 4. I find my drawing pad under my bed, and sketch for a bit. After maybe half an hour, I’ve drawn a self portrait of how I looked a few years ago, long blonde hair wavy, inquisitive eyes glinting. Nowdays my hair is dull, but you can still see the glint of curiosity in my eyes.

The dinner bell rings suddenly, so I hide my sketchbook away again, and head for the first floor where the dining hall is. Guys from the cells around me head down the stairs and I shuffle through them. Dinner is never anything special, but tonight, there’s an air of anxiousness, and they seem to be gossiping.

“Hey, blondie!”

My vision goes black, and I bat Tony’s hands away from my eyes.

“You know I hate that,” I say sourly.  
“Which is why I do it,” he says, grinning down at me. I poke him in the ribs, and we enter the dining room, taking our seats.

It only takes a few seconds to realise everyone *is* gossiping.

“Conte’s gone missing!”  
“I swear I saw him lumbering around on the third floor, and his eyes were gone.”

I look around the dining hall – and they’re right, he isn’t there. I should have noticed at the absence of his throaty yelling and irritating speeches before eating. Conte is one of the most important people in charge of this place.

Everyone hates him for the cruel way he deals with problems, and how he acts like he’s so much better than everyone. He is one of the three people that can access the safety and calling rooms on the third floor. The safety room has all the building controls in it, like opening the gate that surrounds the whole building, and the calling room has all connections (phones, faxes, computers) to people beyond the gates. Us juvenile prisoners aren’t allowed in them, obviously. Only these three guards are.

I see Mr Thomas stand to the mini stage. He’s obviously another authority figure here. His voice is louder than all others as he says, “It is not a rumour. Mr Conte is missing, and we have a small search party looking for him.”

This just makes the chatting louder.

“QUIET!” he yells. The room falls silent. “Ms Kalister and I have checked the safety and calling rooms, and he wasn’t in there. If you see him, please notify us immediately.”

“He could have just got trapped in a cleaning closet or something,” Tony whispers, scoffing. “Why are they making such a deal outta this? It’s not like he’s a toddler or something.”

“Something might be going on,” I say quietly.

“You’re just paranoid.”

“Whatever.”

Suddenly, the room is plunged into darkness, and I hear people falling over chairs, confused.

“I’ll go and sort the power out,” Mr Thomas says, tapping the mic which wasn’t working along with the lights. “Don’t panic-“

His voice cuts off, and there’s a scream. A choked, gurgling noise, filled with astonishment, and pain. Even through the yells and tables being pushed out of the way, I can hear bones snapping sharply.

“Let’s get out of here,” Tony says. He doesn’t even sound scared, just slightly curious. He grabs my arm and we stumble through the darkness, trying to find our way out.

The lights turn back on, although dimmer than they should be.

Mr Thomas is lying on the stage, dead, eyes gouged out from his hollow colourless face, blood pooling around his neck.

Then we plunge into darkness again.

“It’s a bit funny, we’re a group of young offenders and we’re screaming because it’s dark, and a guy just got murdered when we’ve probably all seen that before,” I say, laughing humorously. Tony doesn’t say anything. We reach the end of the hall and try and figure out what happened.

“You do realise that he just died in the same room we were standing in?” Tony says, as we half walk half run down the corridor that leads to the third floor.

“And obviously that means we’re not safe,” he adds.  
“Like we were safe before,” I mutter.

“We need to find Ms Kal. She’s the only one that can get into the calling room to get the police or something,” he says, teeth gritted.

Tony is a strange person; either he’s really playful, or very serious.

“She should have been in the dining hall, but she wasn’t.. We should check her office, since according to Mr Thomas, they had checked the calling room and everything.” I run back down the corridor, towards Ms Kal’s office. I know it’s not safe since there’s a killer on the loose and the guards are having trouble controlling everyone, but I need to find her.

I search around for her office in the darkness, Tony behind me. Eventually we come across it, ‘Ms. Kalister’ printed in block letters on her door, hard to see in the darkness. I nudge the door handle. Surprisingly it wasn’t locked, and drifted right open.

I stepped inside. It was a lot darker in here, and I wasn’t familiar with her office. Suddenly something pushes me from behind, and I fall to the ground.

“Sorry,” Tony muttered, dusting himself off and standing up. But I didn’t move. Right in front of me was Ms Kal, curled up on the floor, eyes glassy and staring forward.

I scream.

Shuffling backwards and getting up off the linoleum, Ms Kal makes a noise.  
“I thought she was dead,” I whisper. Because I’m still frozen, Tony crouches to the ground, and tilts her head to face us.

It looks like she’s having trouble breathing. “Infected,” she croaks. She glances at Tony’s hand on her shoulder, and her milky eyes go wide. “Infected,” she repeats. Her head falls back again and she shudders, and then falls limp.

“Let’s get out of here,” I whisper. I’ve just seen two dead people in one night. Two dead, and one missing.

As Tony and I head back up the staircase to the third floor, I’m acutely aware of every shadow, strange noise, and shape in the darkness.

“What was she talking about?” I ask, rubbing my arms that are suddenly overcome with goose bumps.   
“Infected,” he says. “I didn’t see any marks on her, her eyes were just weird. It sounds like she was talking about a disease.”

I start to respond, but a scream drowns out my words. The guy screaming is running towards us, taking two steps at a time up the staircase we’re standing at the top of.

“What the hell is your problem, James?” Tony asks him as he reaches us. He stops in his tracks, terror in his eyes.

“Y’know Matt?” James was hyperventilating. Tony knew him better than me, but we’d shared a few words. “He touched Mr Thomas’ neck, y’know, where it was all bloody and torn, and then something happened, I don’t know!” He’s babbling. “He started convulsing and I think he was dying, I’m not sure-“

“James,” Tony says sharply, cutting him off. “Where’s Matt?”

“That’s why I’m running,” James answers, out of breath. “I don’t know, I don’t know what happened, but I think he died but he’s coming for us!” He sprints off again, out of sight in a few seconds.

Tony and I just look at each other, completely lost.

But in a second we’ve got our answer. There’s a crash from the bottom of the staircase, and a moan that echoes through our ears, full of hunger, bloodlust and longing. A man appears at the bottom of the stairwell, and the second his eyes focus on us we know we’re in trouble.

“Matt?” Tony gasps.

“RUN, TONY!” I scream, pulling his sleeve. I hear Matt stumbling and chasing along after us, growling deeply. He’s fast, and I can tell he’s dead. I don’t know how, because that’s not possible. Dead people don’t move. They can’t move. But I know Matt’s dead, and I know he’s trying to kill us.

There’s another staircase after this one, and we swing around the bend, still running. And then at the top of the staircase, there’s the corridor - the only corridor to the third floor, with one door at its end.

And that door’s been jammed shut with a mop from the other side.

We keep running straight to the door, but I feel the hope draining from us.  
“We’re screwed,” Tony is yelling at the door, kicking it. “Open it! OPEN IT!”

Matt is lumbering up the second staircase now; I can’t see him yet, but I can hear him. He’s getting so close, so quickly. The staircases may be long, but he isn’t going to stop.

I can see a fuzzy shadow of James at the other side of the door, trying to drag the mop out. But he isn’t dragging it out fast enough.

Matt is in the corridor now. He’s sprinting towards us, tripping over his heavy feet, but standing back up again, never giving up chase. I bang at the doors, which are swinging a little, but there’s not enough space to get through yet.

“Come on, James,” I’m pleading and I’m about to give the door another useless shove-

Something has latched onto my arm. I’m jerked off my feet, and I feel teeth grazing my shoulder. I’m screaming and flailing, and Tony is prying the insane Matt away from me. He drags me through the door where James is and slams it shut behind us.

It takes a few seconds to figure out what just happened. I kick on the ground with my feet to slide the other way, looking at the door. Tony is holding the door shut and James is shoving the mop back through the door handles. I feel my shoulder – there’s no blood. He didn’t puncture the skin. I stand up, shaky on my feet, wondering why the *hell* he would bite me.

“There’s only one word for that,” Tony says.

“Zombie,” James mutters.

I scoff. “What? He’s just a psycho, probably the one who murdered ol’ Thomas-“

“Matt is dead,” Tony says flatly. “I know you know. People that are alive don’t *look* like that.”

I don’t say anything. All I can hear is the roars and thuds coming from behind the doors. I can see the silhouette of Matt – if the dead thing deserves a name at all – thumping its hands on the window.

“That isn’t going to hold. I’m getting out of here,” I say, walking down the corridor. “Coming? We need to find everyone else. I have no idea where they’re gone, because I haven’t seen anyone since we were in Ms Kal’s office.”

Tony and James rush to my side. “Some are in the arcade,” James says. The arcade is at the other side of this floor, but I can’t hear anyone. “But most of them have gone to the cells to figure out what’s going on. They’ve locked all the doors, but we’ll be able to persuade the guards to open it for us if they see we aren’t insane.”

“I want to check the safety room,” I say suddenly, spotting the door to it at the end of the hall. I jog to it, and like always, the door is locked, with a small keypad to open it right there.

And of course, we don’t know the code. The only other way to get in is by using a key.

“DAMMIT!” I scream suddenly. “They all had a key each. Conte, Ms Kal and Mr Thomas. Maybe that’s why Matt touched Thomas’ neck, to try and see if the key was there. But we should have got Ms Kal’s key while we were in her office. And since Conte’s missing, that isn’t going to help!”

I feel like slamming my head against the walls. The guards can’t help. They have transmitters to keep in touch with each other, but they can’t enter the code in an emergency alarm box (there’s about one in every corridor) to call the police, since those are controlled by the main power room. I assume a guard has tried to fix the power, but failed, since we’re still doused in darkness.

“No, we *have* to find Conte,” James says. “Unless you want to be zombified, and after you screaming at the doors for me to let you in, I’m pretty sure you don’t want that.”

I just glare at him.

“So how are we going to do that then?” I growl. “Tell me, tell me how!”

“Shut up, Gwen,” says Tony, frowning at me. “Don’t be so pessimistic.”  
“Well, I didn’t realise this was such a time to be optimistic!” I spit sarcastically.

“Let’s just find all the others,” James mumbles, walking off. Tony follows him.

I trudge along behind them. We soon come across a group standing together in the middle of the arcade. All the flashing lights from the games are off, and it’s hard to tell faces apart in the darkness.

“Have you seen any zombies?” James asks.

Now they’re all just staring at him.

“This nerd’s got some problems,” one of them mutters to another.

“I’m serious!” James says in a high pitched voice, sounding desperate. They just laugh at him.

“There is a psycho out there,” I say, trying to help him a little. “He tried to kill us. We jammed the door shut so nothing below this floor can get in. You guys *did* jam the door shut on the other side, right..?”

“To stop the killer?” one of them questions. “Yeah, we told this guy to go off and jam it.”

Horror is settling into Tony’s face. “Waaait, you did check he shut it, right?”

They all just look at each other in silence.

In a second, Tony and I run off to the end of the room, speeding to the other side of the floor. We spot the other doors that are the only other entrance to this floor and above than the one we jammed.

They’re wide open.

Tony swears under his breath. There’s no way to tell what the safe side is, above the third floor, or below the third floor. That’s if it’s possible to be safe at all, anymore.

“There’s no point shutting it, the zombies could be below or above us,” says Tony, voicing my thoughts.

“I just hope there’s only one psycho, eh?”

“Pff, I wouldn’t think so. Matt couldn’t have killed Ms Kal, she was all the way over in her office. And it’s not likely he killed Mr Thomas, since he was alone on the stage.”

“That’s great to know!”

I turn to head back to the group, but I can hear a series of screams and yells echoing from the arcade. I start to run in that direction, but Tony grabs my arm, stopping me.  
“I wouldn’t go there,” he says in a dark voice. “You think it’s safe for us, if they’re screaming their heads off?”

He has a point. “Fourth floor then,” I say, and we sneak through the darkness to the staircase leading up. A few of the boys have already escaped the scene, and are running alongside us up the steps. I can’t see James with them. Everyone passes through the doors, but I stop for a second, seeing if anyone else is going to come. I decide that if anyone else *was* going to come, they’d be out to get us.

“Hey, you,” I say, jabbing one of the boys in the shoulder. “Take him” – pointing at the guy next to him – “and go and jam the doors in the other side of this floor, kay? It’s a risk that we’re stuck with some maniacs up here, but I’d like to be separated from the ones on the floors below.”

They just nod quickly, and scarper off. Since all our cells (it’s funny calling them that, since we’re only forced to stay in them at night time) are on this level and the one above, there aren’t many places somebody could hide without being discovered quickly.

“Plan?” I call it out to nobody in particular.

There’s no answer, just a couple of glares in my direction.

And then there’s a bang from the doors shut earlier.

I run to them, and I can see James on the other side. Scrabbling quickly, I pull the block of wood away from the door and he bursts through, almost knocking me over. And if my eyes aren’t lying – it’s Ms Kal and Mr Thomas chasing him. And the both look as dead as Matt did.

I scream. But James hasn’t lost his senses, and he’s reblocking the door with some other girl helping him.   
“That was – those two – they’re freakin’ DEAD!” Zombies. Really? It’s exactly what James said. But it *can’t* be real.

“I told you zombies exist!” James says in exasperation, throwing his hands up in the air. “You didn’t see Matt die, no, but you knew those two were dead. See. You’ve got to believe me.”

He was right. What other explanation is there? As far-fetched as it sounded.. it was what I was going to believe. It’s what I *have* to believe.

The story travels quickly, and a couple of people check out the zombies faces at the door-windows, confirming it for themselves.

Tony had been musing for a while, sitting cross-legged on the coffee table in the small lounge on this floor. “So that means Conte is probably a zombie too,” he murmurs. “And we don’t know where he is. We’ve checked the doors, and Thomas and Kal are the only guard zombies at the doors. And then there’s Matt and a couple of other guys turned zombie.”

“I think it spreads through bite,” James adds.

“Probably if they scratch your skin too,” a girl named Abby says.

“How do you know that?’ James questions, eyes narrowed.

“The boys behind the doors, I can’t see bite marks on one of them, but I see scratches all over his throat,” she says. “And he’s a zombie.”

“She’s got a point,” Tony says to James.

I realise we haven’t covered something. “So how did this zombie infection start?” I ask. “We were all zombie-free a few hours ago.”

James, the one with the brain, speaks. “Well the first weird event that happened tonight was Conte missing. He’s a main guard. Then Thomas died. He’s a main guard too. Tony and Gwen says Ms Kal died. Guess what, they’re all main guards. Two are now zombies. And Conte is bound to be, if we find him. What do they all have in common, other than being guards?”

“They can all go into the calling and safety room, but no one else can,” Abby guesses.

“Exactly,” James says, with a crafty expression. “So say this is an infection – it would have started there. But there must be some sort of delay, because Ms Kal was in her office, and Thomas was doing a speech. They weren’t zombified immediately. But I think Mr Thomas was murdered, I’m not sure why. And Ms Kal just looked sickly before dying.

“So the only way to escape from here is to get the key from one of the main guards. There are two at the door over there” – James points to the door we can all see from the corner of our eye – “and that risks getting the infection. Somebody can turn zombie in a few minutes, from the attack that happened just before when the zombies found us in the arcade.”

“But we need to go to the third floor,” Abby says. “And there are zombies swarming there. Plus, the calling and safety rooms are infected. That’s a suicide mission, so who’s going to risk that? I don’t care for anybody here *that* much, so count me out.”

“She’s got a point,” says Tony drily. “And I think Conte is on the loose too. I bet you he’s on the fifth floor. Most of the guards are up there, but they don’t know what’s going on.”

“But I think the infection passed to them by breathing,” James says. “Something wouldn’t have attacked them, or else Mr Thomas would have sent guards everywhere. Which means if we pick up some masks from the cleaners closet, we won’t get it.”

“That could possibly work,” Abby says sourly. “But what about the zombies? They’re going to want to get you.”

“Weapons, lots and lots of weapons. It’s our only choice,” James says. “Unless you just want to wait here and see how long it takes for them to break the doors and get inside, then this is our best option.”

Nobody was volunteering.

“I’ll go.”

The words are out of my mouth in a second. They all just stare at me.

“I am *so* not staying here waiting for them to get in,” I say, arms folded. “The enemies have surrounded the base. The only way to get out is by going to the enemies’ base. So I’m going to do that.”

“And I’m coming,” James says, smiling.

“Tony?” I ask.

“No way,” he says, shaking his head. “Yeah, sorry, but I’m not going to.”

I look at him sadly. “Fine.” But there’s no time to waste. I find some knifes hidden crudely between some mattresses, so I take them and slide them into my belt. There’s also some mops in the cleaner’s cupboard; I take one, and break the head off. I’ve learnt to fight before, and I have a chance here.

When James and I are ready, we face the door, Thomas and Kal watching us from the other side. Their dead faces are curled up in anger, teeth snapping.

“Whatever you do, grab the key,” James says through his mask, gesturing at his full hands. I nod. We break through the door, and instantly the zombies are trying to grab at us, but we’re fighting back, stabbing them, kicking them. Abby and Tony have shut the door behind us. They wave sadly, then turn back and walk away. I run down the stairs, and they follow me, teeth snapping manically. I hope that my scent doesn’t attract the zombies on the other side, if real-life zombies can do that. James follows after, still stabbing them. “The key!” he hisses. I run towards Ms Kal, sad to see her ravaging like this when she was a completely normal person hours earlier. I swipe at her neck but pull back my hand as she almost bites it, and alarm courses through me. James tries to distract Mr Thomas, and I lunge at Ms Kal again. This time my hand connects with the chain, and I pull hard. It snaps, and the key is in my hand.

I’m too lucky; she hadn’t bitten me at all. I run out of the room with James on my heels, sliding into a corridor. It’s hard to find my way around in the dark, and I tumble over. James drops lower to the ground as he passes, but not to help me up. He swipes the key, and he’s running off again.

He’s betrayed me.

The seconds I sit there on the ground cost me too much. My stomach sinks as I see the figures of the other zombies coming from the corner James had just run around. They’re moaning, roaring, snarling at me. It seems that one of them has broken their leg, but they’re coming anyway. Mr Thomas and Ms Kal are coming as well. I push myself off the ground, backtracking through the corridor. I almost slide right into Ms Kal, and instead I crash into Mr Thomas.

It’s horrifying. All I can sense is the darkness and zombie hands and possibly teeth but I don’t know if they’ve got me yet but if they haven’t then I’ve still got a chance but my heart is pumping and I shouldn’t be wasting time anymore and I’ve got to move-

I force my legs up, stabbing Mr Thomas with the mop stick. Ms Kal is about to claw at my arm – I chuck a knife into her chest, and she staggers backwards, snarling, and choking. Can zombies die? I don’t care to find out. My legs start working again and I take the long route through the corridors to the safety room. That’s the only place I want to reach.

I can see it in the distance, and the door is wide open. The zombies are coming in from all sides, and if this is the last thing I ever do, I’ll kill James.

I’ve reached it. I storm through and slam the door shut behind me, and I hear it lock. No more zombies. But there’s James. He comes out of nowhere, shoving me to the ground. My head hits something hard, and I can’t see anything. Then he pulls my hands from behind, and I think he’s tying them to the table leg.

My vision comes back to me. There’s James, actually looking menacing, and evil. He isn’t glaring at me, but laughing cruelly, which is worse. I noticed he isn’t wearing his mask anymore. Mine was long ago ripped off in the chase.

I open my mouth to speak, but I don’t know what to say.

“Confused?” he sneers. “Simple story, really. I hate this place. I hate you all. Who wants to stay here? They put me in here because they think I killed a guy by accident, and it was bad enough to send me here. Funny thing is, I should be in a worse place. It wasn’t an accident. I killed him on purpose.”

I still don’t know what to say, but I don’t know why what he is talking about is relevant.

“I’ve always been great at science. I came up with a plan that could get me out. We all know that the walls surrounding this place are escape-proof, unless you’ve got entrance to the safety room. So I needed to find a way in there. I came up with an infection. I made one. I actually made it. It took a while, and that’s why I kept getting sick. But I’m immune to it now, the only one who’s immune. I don’t need a mask. It turns humans into creatures that are pretty much dead, that hunger for taking the life out of others. So, they are pretty much what you’d call zombies. But these guys should only last a week before they die properly I suppose, it’s not like I had ages to figure out how this works properly. I infected some stolen files that the guards were looking for, and slid them under the doors to the calling and safety room. The infection could start from there-“

“Why did you choose to start it there?” I asked, confused. “You could have started it anywhere.”

He scoffed. “Isn’t it obvious? With the main guards in my way, they’d ruin the plan. If people got infected they’re let everyone out, yeah, but then we’d be questioned. And that would get me arrested. So that’s why I started the infection there. “

“And why did you bring me along? You could have got the key yourself, you said you’re immune to the virus?” I still didn’t get it.

“I noticed something else. I thought I was immune to it. But not exactly as I should have been. The zombies don’t want to infect me because I appear infected to them. But I can’t touch them. That activates my infection, and then I’d only be a zombie too. That’s why I needed to bring you along to grab the key for me. Oh, and Conte is on the fifth floor, infecting all the guards. They’ll pass it to everyone else, and you’ll all be dead within a week of zombification. Nobody ever checks on this place unless you call them, and who’s going to do that?”

“You’re sick!” I spit. I try to kick him with my legs, but I can’t reach.

He laughs. “I know. And I was going to kill you. In case you escaped, and told the cops my story. But there’s a much more interesting way the story ends, Gwen.” He glances at the locked door. “Time for me to escape now.”

He unlocks the door, but jumps away from it before the zombies can touch him. They crash into the room, sniffing for my flesh, and spot me instantly. I’m their target. James cackles again before sliding out through the door, never to be seen again. And I know there’s nothing I can do now, nothing at all. The zombies are biting me, attacking me and I’m dead before I can even blink.

That’s if, I could blink.

But zombies don’t blink.