

THE
DARKEST
MINDS



ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

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[PROLOGUE](#)

the darkest minds

the darkest minds [1]

alexandra bracken

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Rating: ★★★★★

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When Ruby woke up on her tenth

birthday, something about her had changed. Something alarming enough to make her parents lock her in the garage and call the police. Something that gets her sent to Thurmond, a brutal government “rehabilitation camp.” She might have survived the mysterious disease that’s killed most of America’s children, but she and the others have emerged with something far worse: frightening abilities they cannot control.

Now sixteen, Ruby is one of the dangerous ones.

When the truth comes out, Ruby barely escapes Thurmond with her life. Now she’s on the run, desperate to find the one safe haven left for kids like her—

East River. She joins a group of kids who escaped their own camp. Liam, their brave leader, is falling hard for Ruby. But no matter how much she aches for him, Ruby can't risk getting close. Not after what happened to her parents.

When they arrive at East River, nothing is as it seems, least of all its mysterious leader. But there are other forces at work, people who will stop at nothing to use Ruby in their fight against the government. Ruby will be faced with a terrible choice, one that may mean giving up her only chance at a life worth living.

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MINDS



ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

Hyperion

New York



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*For Stephanie and Daniel,
who were in every minivan with me*





PROLOGUE

When the White Noise went off, we
were in the

Garden, pulling weeds.

I always reacted badly to it. It didn't
matter if I was outside,

eating in the Mess Hall, or locked in my
cabin. When it came,

the shrieking tones blew up like a pipe
bomb between my ears.

Other girls at Thurmond could pick
themselves up after a few

minutes, shaking off the nausea and disorientation like the loose

grass clinging to their camp uniforms. But me? Hours would pass

before I was able to piece myself back together.

This time should have been no different.

But it was.

I didn't see what had happened to provoke the punishment.

We were working so close to the camp's electric fence that I

could smell the singed air and feel the
voltage it shed vibrating in

my teeth. Maybe someone got brave and
decided to step out of

the Garden's bounds. Or maybe,
dreaming big, someone fulfilled

all of our fantasies and threw a rock at
the head of the nearest Psi

Special Forces soldier. That would have
been worth it.

The only thing I knew for certain was
that the overhead

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speakers spurted out two warning
blares: one short, one long.

The skin on my neck crawled as I leaned
forward into the damp

dirt, hands pressed tightly against my
ears, shoulders tensed to

take the hit.

The sound that came over the speakers
wasn't really white

noise. It wasn't that weird buzz that the
air sometimes takes

on when you're sitting alone in silence,
or the faint hum of a

computer monitor. To the United States
government and its

Department of Psi Youth, it was the
lovechild of a car alarm and

a dental drill, turned up high enough to
make your ears bleed.

Literally.

The sound ripped out of the speakers and
shredded every

nerve in my body. It forced its way past
my hands, roaring over

the screams of a hundred teenage freaks,
and settled at the cen-

ter of my brain where I couldn't reach in
and rip it out.

My eyes flooded with tears. I tried to
ram my face into the

ground—all I could taste in my mouth
was blood and dirt. A girl

fell forward next to me, her mouth open
in a cry I couldn't hear.

Everything else faded out of focus.

My body shook in time with the bursts of
static, curling in on

itself like an old, yellowing piece of paper. Someone's hands were

shaking my shoulders; I heard someone say my name—Ruby—

but I was too far gone to respond. Gone, gone, gone, sinking

until there was nothing, like the earth had swallowed me up in a

single, deep breath. Then darkness.

And silence.





ONE

Grace Somerfield was the first to die.

The first in my fourth grade class, at least. I'm sure that by

then, thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands, of kids had

already up and gone the same way she had. People were slow to

piece it all together—or, at least, they had figured out the right

way to keep us in the dark long after kids started dying.

When the deaths finally came to light, my elementary school

put a strict ban on teachers and staff talking to us about what

was then called Everhart's Disease, after Michael Everhart, the

first kid known to have died of it. Soon, someone somewhere

decided to give it a proper name: Idiopathic Adolescent Acute

Neurodegeneration—IAAN for short. And then it wasn't just

Michael's disease. It was all of ours.

All the adults I knew buried the
knowledge beneath lying

smiles and hugs. I was still stuck in my
own world of sunshine,

ponies, and my race car collection.
Looking back, I couldn't

believe how naive I was, just how many
clues I missed. Even big

things like when my dad, a cop, started
working longer hours

and could barely stand to look at me
when he finally did come

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home. My mom started me on a strict vitamin regimen and

refused to let me be alone, even for a few minutes.

On the other hand, my parents were both only children. I

didn't have any dead cousins to send up red flags, and my mom's

refusal to let my dad install a "soul-sucking vortex of trash and

mindless entertainment"—that thing commonly known as a

television—meant that no scary news broadcasts rocked my

world. This, combined with the CIA-grade parental controls set

up on our Internet access, pretty much ensured I'd be far more

concerned with how my stuffed animals were arranged on my

bed than the possibility of dying before my tenth birthday.

I was also completely unprepared for what happened on the

fifteenth of September.

It had rained the night before, so my
parents sent me to

school wearing red galoshes. In class,
we talked about dinosaurs

and practiced cursive before Mrs. Port
dismissed us for lunch

with her usual look of relief.

I remember every detail of lunch that day
clearly, not because

I was sitting across from Grace at the
table, but because she was

the first, and because it wasn't supposed
to happen. She wasn't

old like Grandpops had been. She didn't have cancer like Mom's

friend Sara. No allergies, no cough, no head injury—nothing.

When she died, it came completely out of the blue, and none of

us understood what it meant until it was too late.

Grace was locked in deep debate about whether a fly was

trapped inside her Jell-O cup. The red mass shivered as she waved

it around, inching out over the edge of

the container when she

squeezed it a bit too tight. Naturally, everyone wanted to give

their opinion on whether it was a fly or a piece of candy Grace

had pushed in there. Including me.

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“I’m not a liar,” Grace said. “I just—”

She stopped. The plastic cup slipped from her fingers, hitting

the table. Her mouth was open, eyes fixed on something just

beyond my head. Grace's brow was furrowed, almost as if she

was listening to someone explain something very difficult.

“Grace?” I remember saying. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes rolled back, flashing white in the second it took for

her eyelids to droop down. Grace let out a small sigh, not even

strong enough to blow away the strands

of brown hair stuck to

her lips.

All of us sitting nearby froze, though we must have had the

same exact thought: she's fainted. A week or two before, Josh

Preston had passed out on the playground because, as Mrs. Port

explained, he didn't have enough sugar in his system—something

stupid like that.

A noon aide rushed over to the table.

She was one of four

old ladies with white visors and
whistles who rotated lunch and

playground duty during the week. I have
no idea if she had

any medical certifications beyond a
vague idea of CPR, but she

pulled Grace's sagging body to the
ground all the same.

She had a rapt audience as she pressed
her ear to Grace's hot

pink T-shirt, listening for a heartbeat that
wasn't there. I don't

know what the old lady thought, but she started yelling, and

suddenly white visors and curious faces circled in on us. It wasn't

until Ben Cho nudged Grace's limp hand with his sneaker that

any of us realized she was dead.

The other kids started screaming. One girl, Tess, was crying

so hard she couldn't breathe. Small feet stampeded toward the

cafeteria door.

I just sat, surrounded by abandoned lunches, staring at the

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cup of Jell-O and letting terror crawl through me until my arms

and legs felt like they would be frozen to the table forever. If the

school's security officer hadn't come and carried me outside, I

don't know how long I would've stayed there.

Grace is dead, I was thinking. *Grace is dead? Grace is dead.*

And it got worse.

A month later, after the first big waves of deaths, the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention released a five-step list of

symptoms to help parents identify whether their kid was at risk

for IAAN. By then half my class was dead.

My mom hid the list so well that I only found it by accident,

when I climbed on top of the kitchen counter to look for the

chocolate she kept hidden behind her baking supplies.

How to identify if your child is at risk, the flyer read. I recog-

nized the flaming orange shade of the paper: it was the sheet

Mrs. Port had sent home with her few remaining students days

before. She had folded it twice and fastened it with three staples

to prevent our reading it. to the parents

of ruby only was writ-

ten on the outside and underlined three times. Three times was

serious. My parents would have grounded me for opening it.

Luckily for me, it was already open.

1. Your child suddenly becomes sullen and withdrawn, and/

or loses interest in activities they previously enjoyed.

2. S/he begins to have abnormal difficulty in concentrating

or suddenly becomes hyper-focused on tasks, resulting in

s/he losing track of time and/or neglecting him/herself or

others.

3. S/he experiences hallucinations, vomiting, chronic

migraines, memory loss, and/or fainting spells.

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4. S/he becomes prone to violent

outbursts, unusually

reckless behavior, or self-injury (burns, bruising, and cuts

that cannot be explained).

5. S/he develops behaviors or abilities that are inexplicable,

dangerous, or cause you or others physical harm.

IF YOUR CHILD DEMONSTRATES ANY OF

THE ABOVE SYMPTOMS,
REGISTER HIM/HER

AT IAAN.GOV AND WAIT TO BE
CONTACTED

ABOUT THE LOCAL HOSPITAL TO
WHICH S/HE

SHOULD BE TAKEN.

When I finished reading the flyer, I
folded it back up neatly,

put it exactly where I found it, and threw
up in the sink.

Grams phoned later that week, and in her
usual to-the-point-

Grams way explained everything to me.
Kids were dying left and

right, all about my age. But the doctors were working on it, and

I wasn't supposed to be afraid, because I was *her* granddaughter,

and I would be fine. I should be good and tell my parents if I felt

anything weird, understand?

Things turned from bad to terrifying very fast. A week after

three of the four kids in my neighborhood were buried the

president made a formal address to the nation. Mom and Dad

watched the live stream on the computer,
and I listened from

outside the office door.

“My fellow Americans,” President Gray
began, “today we

face a devastating crisis, one that
threatens not only our children’s

lives, but the very future of our great
nation. May it comfort you

to know that in our time of need, we in
Washington are develop-

ing programs, both to support the
families affected by this horrid

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affliction and the children blessed enough to survive it.”

I wish I could have seen his face as he spoke, because I think

he knew—he must have—that this threat, the crimp in our sup-

posedly glorious future, had nothing to do with the kids who

died. Buried underground or burned into ash, they couldn't do

anything but haunt the memories of the people who had loved

them. They were gone. Forever.

And that symptoms list, the one that was sent home folded

and stapled by teachers, which was aired a hundred times over

on the news as the faces of the dead scrolled along the bottom of

the screen? They were never scared of the kids who might die,

or the empty spaces they would leave behind.

They were afraid of us—the ones who lived.

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TWO

It rained the day they brought us to
Thurmond,

and it went on to rain straight through the
week, and the week

after that. Freezing rain, the kind that
would have been snow if

it had been five degrees colder. I
remember watching the drops

trace frantic paths down the length of the
school bus window.

If I had been back at home, inside one of
my parents' cars, I

would have followed their swerving
routes across the cold glass

with my fingertips. Now, my hands were
tied together behind

my back, and the men in the black
uniforms had packed four

of us to a seat. There was barely room to
breathe.

The heat from a hundred-odd bodies
fogged the bus win-

dows, and it acted like a screen to the
outside world. Later, the

windows of the bright yellow buses they

used to bring kids in

would be smeared with black paint.

They just hadn't thought

of it yet.

I was closest to the window on the five-hour drive, so I could

make out slivers of the passing landscape whenever the rain let

up for a bit. It all looked exactly the same to me—green farms,

thick expanses of trees. We could have still been in Virginia, for

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all I knew. The girl sitting next to me, the one that would later be

classified Blue, seemed to recognize a sign at one point because

she leaned over me to get a better look. She looked a little famil-

iar to me, like I had seen her face from around my town, or she

was from the next one over. I think all of the kids with me were

from Virginia, but there was no way to be sure, because there

was only one big rule: and that was *Silence*.

After they had picked me up from my house the day before,

they'd kept me, along with the rest of the kids, in some kind

of warehouse overnight. The room was washed in unnatural

brightness; they sat us in a cluster on the dirty cement floor, and

pointed three floodlights toward us. We

weren't allowed to sleep.

My eyes were watering so badly from the dust that I couldn't see

the clammy, pale faces around me, let alone the faces of the sol-

diers had stood just beyond the ring of lights, watching. In some

weird way, they ceased to be whole, simple men and women. In

the gray haze of half-sleep, I processed them in small, terrifying

pieces: the gasoline-reek of shoe polish, the creak of stiff leather,

the twist of disgust on their lips. The tip of a boot as it dug into

my side, forcing me back awake.

The next morning, the drive was completely silent except

for the soldiers' radios and the kids that were crying toward the

back of the bus. The kid sitting at the other end of our seat wet

his pants, but he wasn't about to tell that to the red-haired PSF

standing beside him. She had slapped him when he complained

he hadn't eaten anything all day.

I flexed my bare feet against the ground,
trying to keep my

legs still. Hunger was making my head
feel funny, too, bubbling

up every once in a while to overwhelm
even the spikes of ter-

ror shooting through me. It was hard to
focus, and harder to sit

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still; I felt like I was shrinking, trying to

fade back into the seat

and disappear completely. My hands were starting to lose feel-

ing after being bound in the same position for so long. Trying to

stretch the plastic band they'd tightened around them did noth-

ing but force it to cut deeper into the soft skin there.

Psi Special Forces—that's what the driver of the bus had

called himself and the others when they collected us from the

warehouse. *You are to come with us on authority of the Psi Special*

Forces commander, Joseph Traylor. He held up a paper to prove

it, so I guess it was true. I had been taught not to argue with

adults, anyway.

The bus took a deep dip as it pulled off the narrow road and

onto a smaller dirt one. The new vibrations woke whoever had

been lucky or exhausted enough to fall asleep. They also sent the

black uniforms into action. The men and women stood straighter,

and their attention snapped toward the front windshield.

I saw the towering fence first. The darkening gray sky cast

everything in a moody, deep blue, but not that. It was glowing

silver as the wind whistled through its open pockets. Just below

my window were dozens of men and women in full uniform,

escorting the bus in at a brisk jog. The

PSFs in the control booth

at the gate stood and saluted the driver
as he navigated past

them.

The bus lurched to a stop, and we were
all forced to stay

deathly still as the camp's gate slid shut
behind us. The locks on

it cracked through the silence like
thunder as they came together

again. We were not the first bus through
it—that had come a

year before. We were not the last bus through it, either. That

would come in three more years, when the camp's occupancy

maxed out.

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There was a single breath of stillness before a soldier in a

black rain poncho rapped on the bus door. The driver reached

over and pulled the lever—and ended

anyone's hope that this
was a short pit stop.

He was an enormous man, the kind you'd
expect to play an

evil giant in a movie, or a villain in
cartoon. The PSF kept his

hood up, masking his face, hair, and
anything that would have

let me recognize him later. I guess it
didn't matter. He wasn't

speaking for himself. He was speaking
for the camp.

“You will stand and exit the bus in an orderly fashion,” he

yelled. The driver tried to hand him the microphone, but the

soldier knocked it away with his hand.

“You will be divided into

groups of ten, and you will be brought in for testing. Do not

try to run. Do not speak. Do not do *anything* other than what

is asked of you. Failure to follow these instructions will be met

with punishment.”

At ten, I was one of the younger kids on the bus, though

there were certainly a few kids younger. Most seemed to be

twelve, even thirteen. The hate and mistrust burning in the sol-

diers' eyes might have shrunk my spine, but it only sparked

rebellion in the older kids.

“Go screw yourself!” someone yelled from the back of the

bus.

We all turned at once, just in time to see the PSF with the

flaming red hair launch the butt of her rifle into the teenage

boy's mouth. He let out a shriek of pain and surprise as the

soldier did it again, and I saw a faint spray of blood burst from

his mouth when he took his next, angry breath. With his hands

behind his back, there was no way he could block the attack. He

just had to take it.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

They began moving kids off the bus, one seat of four at a

time. But I was still watching that kid, the way he seemed to

cloud the air around him with silent, toxic fury. I don't know if

he felt me staring, or what, but the boy turned around and met

my gaze. He nodded at me, like an encouragement. And when

he smiled, it was around a mouthful of
bloody teeth. I felt myself

being hauled up and out of my seat, and,
almost before I realized

what was happening, I was slipping
down the wet bus steps and

tumbling into the pouring rain. A
different PSF lifted me off my

knees and guided me in the direction of
two other girls about

my age. Their clothes clung to them like
old skin, translucent

and drooping.

There were nearly twenty PSFs on the ground, swarming

the neat small lines of kids. My feet had been completely swal-

lowed by the mud and I was shivering in my pajamas, but no one

took notice, and no one came up to cut the plastic binding our

hands. We waited, silently, tongues clamped between our teeth.

I looked up to the clouds, turning my face to the pounding rain.

It looked like the sky was falling, piece

by piece.

The last groups of four were being lifted off the bus and

dropped onto the ground, including the boy with the broken

face. He was the last one off, just behind a tall blond girl with a

blank stare. I could barely make them out through the sheet of

rain and the foggy bus windows, but I was sure I saw the boy

lean forward and whisper something into the girl's ear, just as

she took the first step off the bus. She nodded, a quick jerk of her

chin. The second her shoes touched the mud, she bolted to the

right, ducking around the nearest PSF's hands. One of the PSFs

barked out a terrifying "*Stop!*" but she kept running, straight for

the gates. With everyone's attention turned toward her, no one

thought to look back at the boy still on the bus—no one but me.

He came slinking down the steps, the front of his white hooded

sweatshirt stained with his own blood. The same PSF who had

hit him before was now helping him down to the ground, as she

had done for the rest of us. I watched her fingers close around

his elbow and felt the echo of her grip on my own newly bruised

skin; I watched him turn and say

something to her, his face a

mask of perfect calm.

I watched the PSF let go of his arm, take her gun out of its

holster, and, without a word—without even blinking—stick the

barrel inside of her mouth and pull the trigger.

I don't know if I screamed aloud, or if the strangled sound

had come from the woman waking up to what she was doing,

two seconds too late to stop it. The
image of her face—her slack

jaw, her eyes bulging out of her skull,
the ripple of suddenly

loose skin—stayed burned into the air
like a photonegative far

longer than explosion of pink, misty
blood and clumps of hair

against the bus.

The kid standing next to me dropped into
a dead faint, and

then there wasn't a single one of us that
wasn't screaming.

The PSF hit the ground the exact same
moment the girl was

tackled into the mud. The rain washed
the soldier's blood down

off the bus windows and yellow panels,
stretching the bloated

dark lines, drawing them out they
disappeared completely. It

was that fast.

The boy was looking only at us. “*Run!*”
he yelled through his

broken teeth. “What are you doing? *Run*
—*run!*”

And the first thing that went through my
mind wasn't *What*

are you? or even *Why?*

It was *But I have nowhere else to go.*

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

He might as well have blown the entire
bus up for the panic

it caused. Some kids listened and tried
to bolt for the fence,

only to have their path blocked by the
line of soldiers in black

that seemed to pour out of the air. Most just stood there and

screamed, and screamed, and screamed, the rain falling all

around, the mud sucking their feet down firmly in place. A girl

knocked me down to the ground with her shoulder as the other

PSFs rushed for the boy, still standing in the bus doorway. The

other soldiers were yelling at us to sit on the ground, to stay

frozen there. I did exactly as I was told.

“Orange!” I heard one of them yell into his walkie-talkie.

“We have a situation at the main gate. I need restraints for an

Orange—”

It wasn’t until after they had rounded us back up and had

the boy with the broken face on the ground that I dared to look

up. And that I began to wonder, dread tickling up my spine, if he

was the only one who could do something like that. Or if every-

one around me was there because they
could cause someone to

hurt themselves that way, too.

Not me—the words blazed through my
head— *not me, they*

made a mistake, a mistake—

I watched with a feeling of hollowness
at the center of my

chest as one of the soldiers took a can of
spray paint in hand and

painted an enormous orange X over the
boy's back. The boy

had only stopped yelling because two
PSFs had pulled a strange

black mask down over the lower part of
his face—like they were

muzzling a dog.

Tension beaded on my skin like sweat.
They marched our

lines through the camp toward the
Infirmary for sorting. As we

walked, we saw kids heading in the
opposite direction, from a

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row of pathetic wood cabins. All of them were wearing white

uniforms, with a different colored X marked on each of their

backs and a number written in black above it. I saw five different

colors in all—green, blue, yellow, orange, and red.

The kids with the green and blue X's were allowed to walk

freely, their hands swinging at their sides. Those with a faint

yellow X, or an orange or red one, were forced to fight through

the mud with their hands and feet in metal cuffs, a long chain

connecting them in a line. The ones marked with orange smears

had the muzzlelike masks over their faces.

We were hurried into the bright lights and dry air of what

a torn paper sign had labeled infirmary. The doctors and nurses

lined the long hallway, watching us with

frowns and shaking

heads. The checkered tile floor became slick with rain and mud,

and it took all of my concentration not to slip. My nose was filled

with the smell of rubbing alcohol and fake lemon.

We filed one by one up a dark cement staircase at the back of

the first floor, which was filled with empty beds and limp white

curtains. *Not an Orange. Not a Red.*

I could feel my guts churning deep in the pit of my stomach.

I couldn't stop seeing that woman's face, right when she pulled

the trigger, or the mass of her bloody hair that had landed near

my feet. I couldn't stop seeing my mom's face, when she had

locked me out in the garage. I couldn't stop seeing Grams's face.

She'll come, I thought. She'll come. She'll fix Mom and Dad

and she will come to get me. She'll

come, she'll come, she'll come . . .

Upstairs, they finally cut the plastic binding our hands and

divided us again, sending half down to the right end of the freez-

ing hallway and half to the left. Both sides looked exactly the

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

same—no more than a few closed doors, and a small window at

the very end. For a moment, I did nothing

but watch the rain

pelt that tiny, foggy pane of glass. Then,
the door on the left

swung open with a low whine, and the
face of a plump, middle-

aged man appeared. He cast one look in
our direction before

whispering something to the PSF at the
head of the group. One

by one, more doors opened, and more
adults appeared. The only

thing they had in common aside from
their white coats was a

shared look of suspicion.

Without a single word of explanation, the PSFs began pull-

ing and pushing kids toward each white coat and its associated

office. The outburst of confused, distressed noises that erupted

from the lines was shushed with a piercing buzzer. I fell back

onto my heels, watching the doors shut one by one, wondering

if I would ever see those kids again.

What's wrong with us? My head felt like it was full of wet

sand as I looked over my shoulder. The boy with the broken

face was nowhere, but his memory had chased me all the way

through the camp. Did they bring us here because they thought

we had Everhart's Disease? Did they think we were going to die?

How had that boy made the PSF do what she had done?

What had he said to her?

I felt a hand slide into mine as I stood there, trembling hard

enough for my joints to hurt. The girl—the same one that had

pulled me down to the mud outside—gave me a fierce look. Her

dark blond hair was plastered against her skull, framing a pink

scar that curved between her top lip and nose. Her dark eyes

flashed, and when she spoke, I saw that they had cut the wires on

her braces, but had left the metal nubs

glued to her front teeth.

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The Darkest Minds

“Don’t be scared,” she whispered.
“Don’t let them see.”

The handwritten label on the tag of her jacket said samantha

dahl. It stuck up against the back of her neck like an after-

thought.

We stood shoulder-to-shoulder, close enough that our linked

fingers were hidden between the fabric of my pajama pants and

her purple puffer jacket. They had picked her up on the way

to school the same morning they had come for me. That had

been a day ago, but I remembered seeing her dark eyes burning

bright with hate at the back of the van they had locked us in. She

hadn't screamed as the others had.

The kids who had disappeared through the doors now came

back through them, clutching gray sweaters and shorts in their

hands. Instead of falling back into our line, they were marched

downstairs before anyone could think to get a word or question-

ing look in.

They don't look hurt. I could smell permanent marker and

something that might have been rubbing alcohol, but no one was

bleeding or crying.

When it was finally the girl's turn, the PSF at the head of

the line forced us apart with a sharp jerk. I wanted to go in with

her, to face whatever was behind the door. Anything had to be

better than being alone again without anyone or anything to

anchor myself to.

My hands were shaking so badly that I had to cross my arms

and grip my elbows to get them to stop. I stood at the front of

the line, looking at the gleaming span of
checkered tile between

the PSF's black boots and my mud-
splattered toes. I was already

tired down to my bones from the
sleepless night before, and the

scent of the soldier's boot polish sent my
head deeper into a fog.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

And then they called for me.

I found myself in a dimly lit office, half

the size of my

cramped bedroom at home, with no
memory of ever having

walked into it.

“Name?”

I was looking at a cot and the strange,
halo-shaped gray

machine hanging over it.

The white coat's face appeared from
behind the laptop on

the table. He was a frail-looking man,
whose thin silver glasses

seemed to be in serious danger of sliding off his nose with every

quick movement. His voice was unnaturally high, and he didn't

so much as say the word as squeak it. I pressed my back against

the closed door, trying to put space between me, the stranger,

and the machine.

The white coat followed my gaze to the cot. "That's a scan-

ner. There's nothing to be afraid of."

I must not have looked convinced,
because he continued,

“Have you ever broken a bone or
bumped your head? Do you

know what a CT scan is?”

It was the patience in his voice that drew
me forward a step.

I shook my head.

“In a minute I’m going to have you lie
down, and I’ll use that

machine to check to make sure your head
is all right. But first,

you need to tell me your name.”

Make sure your head is all right. How did he know—?

“*Your name,*” he said, the words taking on a sudden edge.

“Ruby,” I answered, and had to spell my last name for him.

He began typing on the laptop, distracted for a moment.

My eyes drifted back over to the machine, wondering how pain-

ful it would be for me to have the inside of my head inspected.

The Darkest Minds

Wondering if he could somehow see what I had done.

“Damn, they’re getting lazy,” the white coat groused, more to

himself than to me. “Didn’t they pre-classify you?”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“When they picked you up, did they ask you questions?” he

asked, standing. The room wasn’t large

by any means. He was by

my side in two steps, and I was in a full panic in two heartbeats.

“Did your parents report your symptoms to the soldiers?”

“Symptoms?” I squeezed out. “I don’t have any symptoms—I

don’t have the—”

He shook his head, looking more annoyed than anything

else. “Calm down; you’re safe here. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The white coat kept talking, his voice flat, something flickering

in his eyes. The lines sounded practiced.

“There are many different kinds of symptoms,” he explained,

leaning down to look at me eye-to-eye. All I could see were his

crooked front teeth and the dark circles rimming his eyes. His

breath smelled like coffee and spearmint. “Many different kinds

of . . . children. I’m going to take a picture of your brain, and it’ll

help us put you with the others who are like you.”

I shook my head. “I don’t have any symptoms! Grams is

coming, she is, I swear—she’ll tell you, please!”

“Tell me, sweetheart, are you very good at math and puzzles?

Greens are incredibly smart and have astonishing memories.”

My mind jumped back to the kids outside, to the colored X’s

on the back of their shirts. *Green*, I

thought. What had the other

colors been? *Red, Blue, Yellow, and—*

And Orange. Like the boy with the bloody mouth.

“All right,” he said, taking a deep breath, “just lie back on

that cot and we’ll get started. Now, please.”

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I didn’t move. Thoughts were rushing too quickly to my

head. It was a struggle to even look at him.

“*Now,*” he repeated, moving toward the machine. “Don’t

make me call in one of the soldiers. They won’t be nearly as

nice, believe me.” A screen on the side panel came alive with a

single touch, and then the machine itself lit up. At the center of

the gray circle was a bright white light, blinking as it set itself

up for another test. It was breathing out

hot air in sputters and

whines that seemed to prick every pore
on my body.

All I could think was, *He'll know. He'll
know what I did to*

them.

My back was flat against the door again,
my hand blindly

searching for the handle. Every single
lecture my dad had ever

given me about strangers seemed to be
coming true. This was

not a safe place. This man was not nice.

I was shaking so hard, he might have thought I was going to

faint. That, or he was going to force me onto the cot himself and

hold me there until the machine came down and locked over me.

I hadn't been ready to run before, but I was now. As my fin-

gers tightened on the door handle, I felt his hand push through

my unruly mass of dark hair and seize the back of my neck. The

shock of his freezing hands on my
flushed skin made me flinch,

but it was the explosion of pain at the
base of my skull that made

me cry out.

He stared at me, unblinking, his eyes
suddenly unfocused.

But I was seeing everything—
impossible things. Hands drum-

ming on a car's steering wheel, a woman
in a black dress leaning

forward to kiss me, a baseball flying
toward my face out on a dia-

mond, an endless stretch of green field, a
hand running through

a little girl's hair . . . The images played
out behind my closed

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

eyes like an old home movie. The shapes
of people and objects

burned themselves into my retinas and
stayed there, floating

around behind my eyelids like hungry
ghosts.

Not mine, my mind screamed. These don't belong to me.

But how could they have been his? Each image—were they

memories? Thoughts?

Then I saw more. A boy, the same scanner machine above

him flickering and smoking. *Yellow*. I felt my lips form the words,

as if I had been there to say them. I saw a small red-haired girl

from across a room much like this one; saw her lift a finger,

and the table and laptop in front of her
rise several inches from

the ground. *Blue*—again, the man's
voice in my head. A boy

holding a pencil between his hands,
studying it with a terrify-

ing intensity—the pencil bursting into
flames. *Red*. Cards with

pictures and numbers on them held up in
front of a child's face.

Green.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but I couldn't
pull back from the

images that came next—the lines of marching, muzzled monsters.

I was standing high above, looking down through rain-spattered

glass, but I saw the handcuffs and the chains. I saw everything.

I'm not one of them. Please, please, please . . .

I fell, dropping to my knees, bracing my hands against the

tile, trying to keep from being sick all over myself and the floor.

The white coat's hand still gripped the

back of my neck. “I’m

Green,” I sobbed, the words half-lost to the machine’s buzzing.

The light had been bright before, but now it only amplified the

pounding behind my eyes. I stared into his blank eyes, willing

him to believe me. “I’m Green . . . please, *please* . . . ”

But I saw my mother’s face, the smile the boy with the

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broken mouth had given me, like he had
recognized something

of himself in me. I knew what I was.

“Green . . .”

I looked up at the sound of the voice that
floated down to

me. I stared, and he stared right back, his
eyes unfocused. He

was mumbling something now, his mouth
full of mush, like he

was chewing on the words.

“I’m—”

“Green,” he said, shaking his head. His voice sounded stron-

ger. I was still on the floor when he went to shut down the

machine, and so shocked when he sat back down at the desk

that I actually forgot to cry. But it wasn’t until he picked up the

green spray paint and drew that enormous X over the back of

the uniform shirt and handed it to me that I remembered to start

breathing.

It'll be okay, I told myself as I walked
back down the cold

hallway, down the steps, to the girls and
men in uniforms wait-

ing for me below. It wasn't until that
night, as I laid awake in

my bunk, that I realized I would only
ever have one chance to

run—and I hadn't taken it.





THREE

Samantha—Sam—and I were both assigned to

Cabin 27, along with the rest of the girls from our bus that were

classified as Green. Fourteen in all, though by the next day, there

were twenty more. They capped the number at thirty a week

later, and moved on to filling the next wooden structure along

the camp's perpetually soggy and trampled main trail.

Bunks were assigned based on alphabetical order, which

put Sam directly above me—a small mercy, seeing as the rest of

the girls were nothing like her. They spent the first night either

stunned into silence or sobbing. I didn't have time for tears any-

more. I had questions.

“What are they going to do with us?” I whispered up to her.

We were at the far left end of the cabin, our bunk wedged in

the corner. The walls of the structure had been thrown together

so quickly that they weren't completely sealed. Every now and

then a freezing draft or a snowflake whistled in from the silent

outdoors.

"I dunno," she said quietly. A few beds over, one of the

girls had finally dropped off into the oblivion of sleep, and her

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snore were helping to cover our conversation. When a PSF

had escorted us to our new residence, it had been with several

warnings: no talking after lights-out, no leaving, no use of freak

abilities—intentional or accidental. It was the first time I had

ever heard anyone refer to what we could do as “freak abilities”

instead of the polite alternative, “symptoms.”

“I guess keep us here, until they figure out a cure,” Sam

continued. “That’s what my dad said, at least, when the soldiers

came to get me. What did your parents say?”

My hands hadn’t stopped shaking from earlier, and every

time I tried shutting my eyes all I could see were the scientist’s

blank ones staring right back into mine. The mention of my par-

ents only made the pounding in my head

that much worse.

I don't know why I lied. It was easier, I guess, than the

truth—or maybe because some small part of it felt like it *was* the

actual truth. “My parents are dead.”

She sucked in a sharp breath between her teeth. “I wish mine

were, too.”

“You don't mean that!”

“They're the ones that sent me here, weren't they?” It was

dangerous, how fast her voice was rising. “Obviously they wanted to get rid of *me*.”

“I don’t think—” I began, only to stop myself. Hadn’t my parents wanted to get rid of me, too?

“Whatever; it’s fine,” she said, though it clearly wasn’t and it wasn’t ever going to be. “We’ll stay here and stick together, and when we get out, we can go wherever we want, and no one

will stop us.”

My mom used to say that sometimes just saying something

aloud was enough to make it true. I wasn't so sure about that,

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but the way Sam said it, the low burn beneath her words, made

me reconsider. It suddenly seemed possible that it could work

out that way—that if I couldn't go home,

I would still be all

right in the end if I could just stick with her. It was like wher-

ever Sam went, a path opened up behind her; all I had to do was

stay in her shadow, out of the PSFs' line of sight, avoid doing

anything that would call attention to me.

It worked that way for five years.

Five years feels like a lifetime when one day bleeds into

the next, and your world doesn't stretch

any farther than the

gray electric fence surrounding two
miles of shoddy buildings

and mud. I was never happy at
Thurmond, but it was bearable

because Sam was there to make it that
way. She was there with

the eye roll when Vanessa, one of our
cabinmates, tried to cut her

own hair with garden shears to look
more “stylish” (“For who?”

Sam had muttered, “Her reflection in the
wash room mirror?”);

the silly cross-eyed face behind the back
of the PSF lecturing her

for speaking out of turn yet again; and the
firm—but gentle—

reality check when girls' imaginations
started running too wild

or rumors sprung up about the PSFs
letting us go.

Sam and I—we were realists. We knew
we weren't getting

out. Dreaming led to disappointment and
disappointment to a

kind of depressed funk that wasn't easy

to shake. Better to stay

in the gray than get eaten by the dark.

Two years into life at Thurmond, the camp controllers started

work on the Factory. They had failed at rehabilitating the dan-

gerous ones and hauled them off in the night, but the so-called

“improvements” didn’t stop there. It dawned on them that the

camp needed to be entirely “self-sufficient.” From that point on,

we’d be growing and cooking our own food to eat, mucking out

the Wash Rooms, making our uniforms, and even making theirs.

The brick structure was all the way at the far west side of

camp, cupped in one end of Thurmond’s long rectangle. They

had us dig out the foundation for the Factory, but the camp

controllers didn’t trust us with the actual

building of it. We

watched it go up floor by floor,
wondering what it was for, and

what they would do to us there. That was
back when all sorts of

rumors were floating around like
dandelions in the wind—some

thought the scientists were coming back
for more experiments;

some thought the new building was
where they were going to

move the Reds, Oranges, and Yellows if
and when they returned;

and some thought it was where they
were going to get rid of us,

once and for all.

“We’ll be fine,” Sam had told me one
night, just before they

turned the lights out. “No matter what—
you hear me?”

But it wasn’t fine. It wasn’t fine then,
and it wasn’t fine now.

There was no talking in the Factory, but
there were ways

around it. Actually, the only time we
were allowed to speak to

one another was in our cabin, before
lights-out. Everywhere

else, it was all work, obedience,
silence. But you can't go on for

years together without developing a
different kind of language,

one that was all sly grins and quick
glances. Today, they had

us polishing and relacing the PSFs'
boots and tightening their

uniform buttons, but a single wiggle of a
loose black shoelace

and a look toward the girl standing

across from you—the same

one that had called you an awful word
the night before—spoke

volumes.

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The Darkest Minds

The Factory wasn't much of a factory. A
better name probably

would have been the Warehouse, only
because the building con-

sisted of just one huge room, with a
pathway suspended over the

work floor. The builders had enough thought to install four large

windows on the west and east walls, but because there was no

heat in the winter or AC in the summer, they tended to let more

bad weather in than sunlight.

The camp controllers tried to keep things as simple as pos-

sible; they set up rows and rows of tables lengthwise across the

dusty concrete floor. There were hundreds of us working in the

Factory that morning, all in Green uniforms. Ten PSFs patrolled

the walkways above us, each with his or her own black rifle.

Another ten were on the ground with us.

It was no more unnerving than usual to feel the press of their

eyes coming from every direction. But I hadn't slept well the

night before, even after a full day of work in the Garden. I had

gone to bed with a headache and woken up with a glossy fever

fog over my brain, and a sore throat to match. Even my hands

seemed lethargic, my fingers stiff as pencils.

I knew I wasn't keeping up, but it was like drowning, in a

way. The harder I tried to work, to keep my head above water,

the more tired I felt and the slower I became. After a while, even

standing upright was taking too much effort, and I had to brace

myself against the table to keep from

swan-diving straight into it.

On most days, I could get away with a snail's pace. It wasn't like

they had us doing important work, or that we had deadlines to

meet. Every task we were assigned was just glorified busywork

to keep our hands moving, our bodies occupied, and our minds

dead with boredom. Sam called it "forced recess"—they let us

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out of our cabins, and the work wasn't difficult or tiring like it

was in the Garden, but no one wanted to be there.

Especially when bullies came to the playground.

I knew he was standing behind me long before I heard

him start counting the finished, shiny shoes in front of me. He

smelled like spiced meat and car oil, which already was an unset-

ting combination before a whiff of
cigarette smoke was added

to the mix. I tried to straighten my back
under the weight of his

gaze, but it felt like he had taken two
fists and dug the knuckles

deep between my shoulder blades.

“Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen . . .” How
was it that they could

make even numbers sound sharp?

At Thurmond, we weren’t allow to touch
one another, and

we were beyond forbidden to touch one of the PSFs, but it didn't

mean that they couldn't touch us. The man took two steps for-

ward; his boots—exactly like the ones on the table—nudged

the back of my standard white slip-ons. When I didn't respond,

he snuck an arm past my shoulder, on the pretense of sorting

through my work, and pressed me into his chest. *Shrink*, I told

myself, curling my spine down, bending

my face to the task in

front of me, *shrink and disappear*.

“Worthless,” I heard the PSF grunt behind me. His body

was letting off enough heat to warm the entire building. “You’re

doing this all wrong. Look—*watch*, girl!”

I got my first real glance at him out of the corner of my eye

as he ripped the polish-stained cloth out of my hand and moved

to my side He was short, only an inch or two taller than me,

with a stubby nose and cheeks that seemed to flap every time he

took a breath.

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The Darkest Minds

“Like *this*,” he was saying, swiping at the boot he had taken.

“*Look* at me!”

A trick. We weren’t supposed to look them directly in the

eyes, either.

I heard a few chuckles around me—not from the girls, but

more PSFs gathered at his back.

It felt like I was boiling from the inside out. It was December,

and the Factory couldn't have been warmer than forty degrees,

but lines of sweat were racing down the curves of my cheeks, and

I felt a hard, stiff cough welling up in my throat.

There was a light touch at my side. Sam
couldn't look up

from her own work, but I saw her eyes
slide over to me, trying to

assess the situation. A wave of furious
red was making its way up

from her throat to her face, and I could
only imagine the kinds

of words she was holding back. Her
bony elbow brushed against

mine again, as if to remind me that she
was still there.

Then, with agonizing slowness, I felt the

same PSF move

behind me again, brushing my shoulder
and arm with his own

as he gently deposited the boot back on
the table in front of me.

“These boots,” he said in a low, purring
voice as he tapped

the plastic bin containing all of my
finished work. “Did you lace

them?”

If I hadn't known what kind of
punishment I'd get for it, I

would have burst out into tears. I felt more stupid and ashamed

the longer I stood there, but I couldn't say anything. I couldn't

move. My tongue had swelled up to twice its usual size behind

my clenched teeth. The thoughts buzzing around my head were

light and edged with a strange milky quality. My eyes could

barely focus now.

More snickers from behind us.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“The laces are all wrong.” His other arm wrapped around

my left side, until there wasn’t an inch of his body that wasn’t

pressed up against mine. Something new rose in my throat, and

it tasted strongly of acid.

The tables around us had gone completely quiet and still.

My silence only egged him on. With no

warning, he picked

up the bin of boots and flipped it over,
so dozens of boots scat-

tered across the length of the table with a
terrible amount of

noise. Now everyone in the Factory was
looking. Everyone saw

me, thrust out into the light.

“Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, *wrong!*”
he sang out, knock-

ing the boots around. But they weren’t.
They were perfect. They

were just boots, but I knew whose feet would slide into them.

I knew better than to screw it up. “Are you as deaf as you are dumb, Green?”

And then, clear as day, low as thunder, I heard Sam say,

“That was my bin.”

And all I could think was *No. Oh no.*

I felt the PSF shift behind me, pull back in surprise. They

always acted this way—surprised that

we remembered how to

use words, and use them against them.

“What did you say?” he barked.

I could see the insult rising to her lips.
She was rolling it

around on her tongue like a piece of hard
lemon candy. “You

heard me. Or did inhaling that polish kill
whatever helpless brain

cells you had left?”

I knew what she wanted when she
looked over at me. I knew

what she was waiting for. It was exactly
what she had just given

me: backup.

I hung back a step, crossing my arms
over my stomach. *Don't*

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

*do it, I told myself, don't. She can
handle it.* Sam had nothing to

hide, and she was brave—but every time
she did this, every time

she stood up for me and I shrunk back in

fear, it felt like I was

betraying her. Once again, my voice was locked away behind

layers of caution and fear. If they were to look into my file,

if they were to see the blanks there and start looking into fill-

ing them, no punishment they'd give Sam would *ever* compare

to the one they'd give me.

That was what I told myself, at least.

The right side of the guy's lips inched

up, turning a grim line

into a mocking smirk. “We’ve got a live one.”

Come on, come on, Ruby. It was all in the tilt of her head and

the tightness of her shoulders. She didn’t understand what would

happen to me. I wasn’t brave like she was.

But I wanted to be. I so, so wanted to be.

I can’t. I didn’t have to say the words aloud. She read it easily

enough on my face. I saw the realization come together behind

her eyes, even before the PSF stepped forward and took her arm,

yanking her away from table, and from me.

Turn around, I begged. Her blond ponytail was swinging with

each step, rising above the shoulders of the PSFs escorting her

out. *Turn around*. I needed her to see how sorry I was, to under-

stand the clenching in my chest and the

nausea in my stomach

had nothing to do with the fever. Every
single desperate thought

that ran through my head made me feel
sick with disgust. The

eyes that had been on me lifted two-by-
two, and the soldier never

came back to finish his personal brand
of torment. There was no

one left to see me cry; I had learned to
do it silently, without any

fuss, years ago. They had no reason to so
much as look my way

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

again. I was back in the long shadow
Sam had left behind.

The punishment for speaking out of turn
was a day's worth

of isolation, handcuffed to one of the
gateposts in the Garden

regardless of the temperature or the
weather. I'd seen kids sit-

ting in a mound of snow, blue in the face,
and without a single

blanket to cover them. Even more sunburned, covered in mud,

or trying to scratch patches of bug bites with their free hand.

Unsurprisingly, the punishment for talking back to a PSF or

camp controller was the same, only you also weren't given food

and, sometimes, not even water.

The punishment for a repeat offense was something so ter-

rible, Sam wouldn't or couldn't talk about it when she finally

returned to our cabin two days later. She came in, wet and shak-

ing from the winter rain, looking like she had slept no more than

I had. I slid off my bunk and was on my feet, rushing to her side,

before she had even made it halfway across the cabin.

My hand slipped around her arm, but she pulled away, her

jaw clenched in a way that made her look almost ferocious. Her

cheeks and nose had been wind-whipped

to a bright red, but she

didn't have any bruises or cuts. Her eyes weren't even swollen

from crying, like mine were. There was a subtle limp to her walk,

maybe, but if I hadn't known what had happened, I would have

just assumed she was coming in from a long afternoon of work-

ing in the Garden.

"Sam," I said, hating the way my voice shook. She didn't

stop or deign to look at me until we were by our bunks, and she

had one fist curled in her bedsheets, ready to pull herself up to

the top bed.

“Say something, please,” I begged.

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

“You stood there.” Sam’s voice was low and rough, like she

hadn’t used it for days.

“You shouldn’t have—”

Her chin came down to rest against her chest. Long, tangled

masses of hair fell over her shoulders and cheeks, hiding her

expression. I felt it then—the way that the hold I had on her

had suddenly sprung free. I had the strangest sensation of float-

ing, of drifting farther and farther away with nothing and no

one to cling to. I was standing right beside her, but the distance

between us had split into the kind of
canyon I couldn't jump

across.

“You're right,” Sam said, finally, “I
shouldn't have.” She drew

in a shuddering breath. “But then, what
would have happened to

you? You would have just stood there,
and let him do *that*, and

you wouldn't have defended yourself at
all.”

And then she was looking at me, and all
I wanted was for

her to turn away again. Her eyes flashed,
darker than I had ever

seen before.

“They can say horrible things, hurt you,
but you never fight

back—and I know, Ruby, *I know*, that’s
just how you are, but

sometimes I wonder if you even care.
Why can’t you stand up

for yourself, just once?”

Her voice was barely above a whisper,
but the ragged quality

to it made me think she was either going to scream or burst out

into hysterical tears. I glanced down to where her hands were

tugging at the edges of her shorts, moving so fast and frantic

that I almost didn't see the angry red marks that circled her

wrists.

“Sam—Samantha—”

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“I want—” She swallowed, hard. Her tears caught in her eye-

lashes, but didn’t fall. “I want to be alone now. Just for a while.”

I shouldn’t have reached for her, then, not with fever and

exhaustion pressing down on me. Not while I was trembling with

a bone-deep hate for myself. But I thought, then, that if I could

tell her the truth, if I could explain, she wouldn’t look at me that

way again. She would know that the last

thing—the absolute *last*

thing—I ever wanted was for her to be hurt because of me. She

was the only thing I had here.

But the second my fingers touched her shoulder, the world

dropped out from under me. I felt a fire start at the ends of my

hair, and burn its way through my skull. The fever I thought I

had kicked suddenly painted the world a fuzzy shade of gray.

I was seeing Sam's blank face, and she
was gone, replaced by

white-hot memories that didn't belong to
me—a whiteboard at

school filled with math problems, a
golden retriever digging in

a garden, the world rising and falling
from the perspective of a

swing, the roots of the vegetables in the
Garden being pulled

free, the brick wall at the back of the
Mess Hall against my face

as another fist swing down toward me—

a quick assault from

every side, like a series of camera flashes.

And when I finally came back to myself, we were still staring

at each other. For a second, I thought I saw my horrified face

reflected in her dark, glassy eyes. Sam wasn't looking at me; she

didn't seem to be looking at anything beyond the dust floating

lazy and free through the air to my right. I knew that blank look.

I'd seen my mother wear it years before.

“Are you new here?” she demanded,
suddenly defensive and

startled. Her eyes flicked down from my
face to my bony knees,

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then back up again. She sucked in a deep
breath, as if coming

up for air after a long time beneath dark
waters. “Do you have

a name at least?”

“Ruby,” I whispered. It was the last
word I spoke for nearly
a year.

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FOUR

I woke to cold water and a woman's soft voice.

"You're all right," she was saying.
"You'll be fine." I'm not sure

who she thought she was fooling with
her sweet little B.S., but

it wasn't me.

I let her bring the wet towel up to my
face again, savoring

her warmth as she leaned in closer. She
smelled of rosemary and

past things. For a second, just one, her hand came to rest against

mine and it was almost more than I could take.

I wasn't at home, and this woman wasn't my mother. I started

gasping, desperate to keep everything inside me. I couldn't cry,

not in front of her, or any of the other adults. I wouldn't give

them the pleasure.

“Are you still in pain?”

The only reason I opened my eyes was because she pulled

them open herself. One at a time, shining an intense light in

each. I tried to throw my hands up to shield them, but they had

strapped me down in Velcro cuffs. Fighting against the restraints

was pointless.

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The woman clucked her tongue and

stepped back, taking her

flowery fragrance with her. The smell of antiseptic and peroxide

flooded the air, and I knew exactly where I was.

The sounds of Thurmond's infirmary faded in and out in

uneven waves. Some kid crying out in pain, boots clipping

against the white tile floors, the creak of wheelchair wheels . . . I

felt like I was standing above a tunnel with my ear to the ground,

listening to the hum of cars passing beneath me.

“Ruby?”

The woman was wearing blue scrubs and a white coat. With

her pale skin and white-blond hair she all but disappeared into

the thin curtain that had been pulled around my bed. She caught

me staring and smiled, so wide and so pretty.

The woman was the youngest doctor I'd ever seen in

Thurmond—though admittedly I could
count my trips to the

Infirmery on one hand. I went once for
the stomach flu and

dehydration after what Sam called my
Gut Puking Spectacular,

and once for a sprained wrist. Both
times I felt far worse after

being groped by a pair of wrinkled
hands than I had before

I'd come in. Nothing cures a cold faster
than the thought of

an old perv wearing a cologne of

alcohol and lemon hand

soap.

This woman—she was unreal.
Everything about her.

“My name is Dr. Begbie. I’m a volunteer
with the Leda

Corporation.”

I nodded, glancing at the gold swan
insignia on her coat

pocket.

She leaned in closer. “We’re a big
medical company that

does research and sends doctors in to help care for you guys at

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the camps. If it makes you feel more comfortable, you're more

than welcome to call me Cate and leave off the doctor business."

Sure I was. I stared at the hand she extended toward me.

Silence hung between us, punctuated by the pounding in my

head. After an awkward moment, Dr. Begbie stuffed her hand

back into the pocket of her lab coat, but not before letting

it stray over the restraint securing my left hand to the bed's

guardrail.

“Do you know why you're here, Ruby? Do you remember

what happened?”

Before or after the Tower tried to fry my brain? But I couldn't

say it out loud. When it came to the adults, it was better not to

talk. They had a way of hearing one thing and processing it as

something else. No reason to give them an excuse to hurt you.

It had been eight months since I'd last used my voice. I

wasn't sure I even remembered how.

The doctor somehow guessed the question I was barely hold-

ing back at the tip of my tongue. "They turned on the Calm

Control after a fight broke out in the Mess Hall. It seems that

things got . . . a bit out of hand.”

That was an understatement. The White Noise—Calm

Control, the higher powers called it—was used to settle us down,

so to speak, while it did absolutely nothing to them. It was like

a dog whistle, the pitch tuned perfectly so only our freak brains

could pick it up and process it.

They turned it on for a whole host of reasons, sometimes

for things as small as a kid accidentally using their ability, or to

stamp out unruliness in one of the cabins. But in both of those

instances, they would have piped the noise directly into whatever

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building the kids were in. If they used it across the camp, blasting

it over the speakers for us all to hear,
then things must have got-

ten *really* out of hand. They must have
been worried that there

was a spark that would have set the rest
of us ablaze.

There was no hint of hesitation on Dr.
Begbie's face as she

unstrapped my wrists and ankles. The
towel she had been using

to clean my face hung limp on the
guardrail, dripping water.

Bright red splotches soaked through its

white fabric.

I reached up and touched my mouth, my cheeks, my nose.

When I pulled my fingers away, I was only half-surprised to see

that they were coated with dark blood. It was crusted between

my nostrils and lips, as if someone had clocked me right in the

honker.

Trying to sit up was the worst idea that crossed my mind.

My chest screamed in pain, and I was flat on my back again

before I even registered falling. Dr. Begbie was beside me in an

instant, cranking the metal bed into an upright position.

“You have some bruised ribs,” she said.

I tried to take a deep breath, but my chest was too tight to

inhale anything more than a choked gasp. She must not have

noticed because she was looking at me with those kind eyes

again, saying, “May I ask a few questions?”

The fact that she asked my permission was amazing in and

of itself. I studied her, searching for the hatred buried beneath

the layer of pleasantness on her face, the fear hovering in her soft

eyes, the disgust caught in the corner of her smile. Nothing. Not

even annoyance.

Some poor kid started to throw up in the stall to my right;

I could see his dark outline like a shadow against the curtain.

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There was no one sitting with *him*, no one holding *his* hand. Just

him and his bowl of puke. And here I was, my heart skipping

beats out of fear that the fairytale princess sitting next to me was

going to have me put down like a rabid dog. She didn't know

what I was—she couldn't have known.

You're being paranoid, I told myself.
Get a grip.

Dr. Begbie pulled a pen out of her messy bun. “Ruby, when

they turned on the Calm Control, do you remember falling for-

ward and hitting your face?”

“No,” I said, “I was . . . already on the ground.” I didn't know

how much to tell her. The smile on her face stretched, and there

was something . . . smug about it.

“Do you usually experience this much pain and bleeding

from the Calm Control?”

Suddenly, the pain in my chest had nothing to do with my

ribs.

“I’ll take that as a no . . .” I couldn’t see what she was writ-

ing, only that her hand and pen were flying across the paper,

scribbling as though her life depended

on it.

I always took the White Noise harder
than the other girls in

my cabin. But blood? Never.

Dr. Begbie was humming lightly under
her breath as she

wrote, some song that I thought might
have been the Rolling

Stones.

She's with the camp controllers, I
reminded myself. She is

one of them.

But . . . in another world, she might not have been. Even

though she was wearing the scrubs and white coat, Dr. Begbie

didn't look much older than I was. She had a young face, and it

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was probably a curse to her in the outside world.

I had always thought that people born before Generation

Freak were the lucky ones. They lived without fear of what

would happen when they stepped over the border between child-

hood and adolescence. As far as I knew, if you were older than

thirteen when they started rounding kids up, you were home

free—you got to pass Freak Camp on the board game of life

and head straight on to Normalville. But looking at Dr. Begbie

now, seeing the deep lines carved in her

face that no one in their

twenties should have had, I wasn't so sure they had gotten off

scot-free. They'd gotten a better deal than what we ended up

with, though.

Abilities. Powers that defied explanation, mental talents so

freakish doctors and scientists reclassified our entire generation

as *Psi*. We were no longer human. Our brains broke that mold.

“I see from your chart that you were classified as ‘abnor-

mal intelligence’ in sorting,” Dr. Begbie said after a while. “The

scientist that sorted you—did he run you through all of the

tests?”

Something very cold coiled in my stomach. I might not have

understood a great many things about the world, I might have

only had a fourth grader’s education, but I could tell when some-

one was trying to fish around for information. The PSFs had

switched over to outright scare tactics years ago, but there was a

time when all of their questioning had been done in soft voices.

Fake sympathy reeked like bad breath.

Does she know? Maybe she ran a few tests while I was uncon-

scious and scanned my brain, or tested my blood, or something.

My fingers curled one by one until both hands were tight fists.

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I tried to work the line of thought
through, but I kept getting

caught on the possibility. Fear made
things hazy and light.

Her question hung in the air, suspended
somewhere between

truth and lie.

The clip of boots against the pristine tile
forced my eyes up

away from the doctor's face. Each step

was a warning, and I

knew they were coming before Dr. Begbie turned her head. She

moved to push herself off the gurney, but I didn't let her. I don't

know what possessed me, but I grabbed her wrist, the list of

punishments for touching an authority figure running through

my head like a skipping CD, each scratch sharper than the next.

We weren't supposed to touch anyone, not even each other.

“It was different this time,” I whispered,
the words aching in

my throat. My voice sounded different to
my ears. Weak.

Dr. Begbie only had enough time to nod.
The slightest

movement, almost imperceptible, before
a hand ripped back the

curtain.

I had seen this Psi Special Forces
officer before—Sam called

him the Grinch, because he looked like
he had stepped straight

out of the movie, save for no green skin.

The Grinch cast one look at me, his top lip peeling back in

annoyance, before waving the doctor forward. She blew out a

sigh and set her clipboard down on my lap.

“Thank you, Ruby,” she said. “If your pain gets any worse,

call for help, okay?”

Was she on drugs? Who was going to help—the kid throw-

ing up his stomach lining next door?

I nodded anyway, watching her turn to go. The last glimpse

I had of her was her hand dragging the curtain back around. It

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was nice of her to give me privacy, but a little naive, given the

black cameras hanging down between the beds.

The bulbs were installed all over

Thurmond, lidless eyes

always watching, never blinking. There were two cameras in our

cabin alone, one on each end of the room, as well as one outside

the door. It seemed like overkill, but when I was first brought

to camp, there were so few of us that they really could watch

us all day, every day, until their own brains were ready to burst

from boredom.

You had to squint to see it, but a tiny red light inside the

black eye was the only clue that the camera had zeroed in on

you. Over the years, as more and more kids were brought into

Thurmond on the old school buses, Sam and I began to notice

that the cameras in our cabin no longer had the blinking red

lights—not every day. Same went for the cameras in the laun-

dry, the Wash Rooms, and the Mess

Hall. I guess with three

thousand kids spread out over a square mile, it was impossible to

watch everyone all the time.

Still, they watched enough to put the fear of God in us. You

had a better-than-average chance of being busted if you prac-

ticed your abilities, even under the cover of darkness.

Those blinking lights were the exact same shade as the

blood-red band the PSFs wore around the upper part of their

right arm. The Ψ symbol was stitched on the crimson fabric,

indicating their unfortunate role as caretakers of the country's

freak children.

The camera above my bed had no red light. The relief that

came over me at the realization actually made the air taste sweet.

For just a moment, I was alone and unobserved. At Thurmond,

that was an almost unheard-of luxury.

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Dr. Begbie—Cate—hadn't completely closed the curtain.

When another doctor hurried past the thin white fabric pulled

back further, allowing a familiar flash of blue to catch my eye.

The portrait of a young boy, no more than twelve years old,

stared back at me. His hair was the same

shade as mine—deep

brown, nearly black—but where my eyes were pale green, his

were dark enough to burn from a distance. He was smiling, as

always, his hands clasped in his lap, his dark school uniform

without a wrinkle. Clancy Gray, Thurmond's first inmate.

There were at least two framed pictures of him in the Mess

Hall, one in the kitchen, several nailed outside of the Green

outhouses. It was easier to remember his face than it was to

remember my mom's.

I forced myself to look away from his proud, unwavering

grin. He may have gotten out, but the rest of us were still here.

As I tried to readjust my body, I knocked Dr. Begbie's clip-

board off my lap and into the crook of my left arm.

I knew there was a chance that they were watching, but I

didn't care. Not then, when I had
answers inches away from my

fingertips. Why had she left it there, right
below my nose, if she

hadn't wanted me to see it? Why hadn't
she taken it with her,

like all of the other doctors would have
done?

What was different about the White
Noise?

What did they figure out?

The fluorescent lights above me were
exposed, glowing in

the shape of long, angry bones. They gave off a hum, sounding

more and more like a cloud of flies swirling around my ears. It

only got worse as I flipped the clipboard over.

It wasn't my medical history.

It wasn't my current injuries, or lack thereof.

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It wasn't my answers to Dr. Begbie's

questions.

It was a note, and it read: *New CC was testing for undetected*

Ys, Os, Rs. Your bad reaction means that they know you aren't G.

Unless you do exactly as I say, they will kill you tomorrow.

My hands were shaking. I had to set the clipboard down in

my lap to read the rest.

I can get you out. Take the two pills under this note before bed,

but don't let the PSFs see you. If you don't, will keep your secret, but

I can't protect you while you're in here. Destroy this.

It was signed, *A friend, if you'd like.*

I read the note one more time before I ripped it out from under

the metal clip and shoved it in my mouth. It tasted like the bread

they served us for lunch.

The pills were in a tiny clear bag clipped on top of my real

medical chart. Scrawled in Dr. Begbie's
dismal handwriting was

the note, *Subject 3285 hit her head
against the ground and lost*

*consciousness. Nose was fractured
when Subject 3286 elbowed her.*

Possible concussion.

My eyes were itching to look up, to peer
into the black eye

of the camera, but I didn't let myself. I
took the pills and shoved

them into the standard-issue sports bra
the camp controllers had

bestowed on us when they realized
fifteen hundred teenage girls

weren't going to stay twelve and flat
forever. I didn't know what

I was doing; I really didn't. My heart
was racing so fast that for

a moment I couldn't get any air.

Why had Dr. Begbie done this to me?
She knew I wasn't

Green, but she had covered it up, lied on
the report—was this

just a trick? To see if I would
incriminate myself?

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I pressed my face into my hands. The
packet of pills burned

against my skin.

... they will kill you tomorrow.

Why did they even bother to wait? Why
not take me out

to the buses and shoot me now? Isn't that
what they did with

the others? The Yellows, Oranges, and
Reds? They killed them,

because they were too dangerous.

I am too dangerous.

I didn't know how to use my abilities. I wasn't like the other

Oranges, who could spout off commands or slip nasty little

thoughts into other people's minds. I had all of the power, and

none of the control—all of the pain, and none of benefits.

From what I'd been able to figure out, I had to touch some-

one for my abilities to take hold, and
even then . . . it was more

like I was *glimpsing* their thoughts,
rather than screwing with

them. I'd never tried to push a thought
into someone else's head,

and it wasn't like I'd had the opportunity
or the desire to try.

Every slip of the mind, intentional or
not, left my head a jumble

of thoughts and images, words and pain.
It took hours to feel

like myself again.

Imagine someone reaching straight into
your chest, past the

bones and blood and guts, and taking a
nice firm hold on your

spinal cord. Now imagine that they start
shaking you so fast the

world starts bulging and buckling under
you. Imagine not being

able to figure out later if the thought in
your head is really yours

or an unintentional keepsake from
someone else's mind. Imagine

the guilt of knowing you saw someone's

deepest, darkest fear or

secret; imagine having to face them the next morning and pre-

tend you didn't see how their father used to hit them, the bright

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pink dress they wore to their fifth birthday party, their fantasies

about this boy or that girl, and the neighborhood animals they

used to kill for fun.

And then, imagine the soul-crushing migraine that always

follows, lasting anywhere between a few hours and a few days.

That was what it was like. *That* was why I tried to avoid my

mind so much as brushing up against someone else's at all costs.

I knew the consequences. All of them.

And now I knew for certain what would happen if they

found me out.

I flipped the clipboard over on my lap, and just in time. The

same PSF soldier was back at my curtain again, ripping it aside.

“You’ll be returning to your cabin now,” he said. “Come

with me.”

My cabin? I searched his face for any sign of a lie, but saw

nothing except the usual annoyance. A nod was the only thing

I could muster. My entire body was one earthquake of dread,

and the moment my feet touched the ground the back of my

head uncorked. Everything spilled out, every thought, fear, and

image. I collapsed against the guardrail, holding on tight to

consciousness.

The black spots were still gliding in front of my eyes when

the PSF barked out, “Hurry it up! Don’t think you get to stay

another night here just by putting on an act.”

Despite the harsh words, I saw the slightest flicker of fear in his face. That moment, the shift from fear to fury, could have summed up the feelings of every soldier at Thurmond. We'd heard rumors that service in the military was no longer voluntary, that everyone between the ages of twenty-two and forty

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had to serve—most of them in the army's new Psi branch.

I gritted my teeth. The whole wide world spun under me,

trying to pull me back down to its dark center. The PSF's words

returned to me.

Another night? I thought. How long have I been here?

Still woozy, I followed the soldier into the hallway. The

Infirmary was only two stories, small ones. The ceiling crept

down so low that even I felt like I was in danger of scraping the

top of my head on the doorframes. The treatment beds were on

the first floor, but the second was reserved for kids needing to

go into what we called Time Out. Sometimes they had some-

thing the rest of us could catch, but mostly it was for kids that

went completely off their rocker, broken brains broken further

by Thurmond.

I tried to stay focused on the movement
of the PSF's shoul-

der blades beneath his black uniform,
but it was difficult when

most of the curtains had been left open
for anyone to peer inside.

Most I could ignore, or cast only a brief
glance their way, but the

second to last stall before the exit doors
...

My feet slowed of their own accord,
giving my lungs time to

breathe in the scent of rosemary.

I could hear Dr. Begbie's gentle voice as she spoke to another

kid in Green. I recognized him—his cabin was directly across

from mine. Matthew? Maybe Max? All I knew was that there

was blood on his face, too. Crusted around his nose and eyes,

smearing across his checks. A stone dropped in my stomach.

Had this Green been marked too? Was Dr. Begbie cutting him

the same deal? I couldn't have been the

only one to figure out

how to dodge the sorting system—who to influence, when to lie.

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Maybe he and I were the same color beneath our skin.

And maybe we would both be dead by tomorrow.

“Keep up!” the PSF snapped. He didn’t try to hide his annoyance

as I hobbled after him, but he didn’t need

to worry; you couldn't

have paid me to stay in the Infirmary, not while I was conscious.

Not even with the new threat hanging over my head. I knew

what they used to do there.

I knew what was under the layers of white paint.

The earliest kids they had brought in, the first guinea pigs,

had been subjected to a whole array of electroshock and brain

chop shop terrors. Stories were passed around camp with sick,

almost holy reverence. The scientists were looking for ways

to strip the kids' abilities —“rehabilitate” them—but they had

mostly just stripped their will to live. The ones who made it out

were given warden positions when the first small wave of kids

was brought to camp. It was a strange bit of luck and timing that

I had come in during the second wave.

Each wave grew larger

and larger as the camp expanded, until,
three years ago, they'd

run out of space completely. There were
no new buses after

that.

I still wasn't moving fast enough for the
soldier. He pushed

me forward into the hall of mirrors. The
exit sign cast its gory

light over us; the PSF shoved me again,
harder, and smiled when

I fell. Anger flooded through me, cutting through the lingering

pain in my limbs and any fear I had that he was taking me out

somewhere in order to finish the job.

Soon we were standing outside, breathing in the damp spring

air. I took a lungful of misty rain, and swallowed the bitterness

down. I needed to think. Assess. If he was taking me outside to

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be shot, and was on his own, , I could easily overpower him.

That wasn't the issue. But in fact, I had no way of slipping past

the electric fence—and no idea where the hell I was.

When they had brought me to Thurmond, the familiarity of

the scenery had been more a comfort than a painful reminder.

West Virginia and Virginia aren't all that different, even though

Virginians would have you believe otherwise. Same trees, same

sky, same awful weather—I was either drenched in rain or sticky

with humidity. Anyway, it might not have been West Virginia at

all. But a girl in my cabin swore up and down that she had seen

a welcome to west virginia sign on her ride in, so that was the

theory we were working with.

The PSF had slowed considerably, matching my pathetic

pace. He fumbled once or twice against the muddy grass, nearly

tripping over himself in full view of the soldiers high above on

the Control Tower.

The moment the Tower came into view, a whole new weight

added itself to the ball and chain of terror I was dragging behind

me. The building itself wasn't that imposing; it was only called

the Tower because it stuck up like a broken finger in a sea of

one-story wooden shacks arranged up in rings. The electric fence

was the outer ring, protecting the world from us freaks. Cabins

of Greens made up the next two rings. Blues, the next two rings.

Before they were taken away, the few Reds and Oranges lived

in the next rings. They'd been closest to the Tower—better, the

controllers thought, to keep an eye on them. But after a Red had

blown up his cabin, they moved the Reds

farther away, using the

Greens as a buffer in case any of the real threats tried to make a

run for the fence.

Number of escape attempts?

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Five.

Number of *successful* escape attempts?

Zero.

I don't know of one Blue or Green who had ever tried to

make a run for it. When kids did stage desperate, pathetic break-

outs, it had been in small groups of Reds, Oranges, and Yellows.

Once caught, they never came back.

But that was in the early days, when we had had more inter-

action with the other colors, and before they shuffled us around.

The empty Red, Orange, and Yellow cabins became Blue cabins,

and newly arriving Greens, the biggest group of all, filled the old

Blue ones. The camp grew so large that the controllers staggered

our schedules, so we ate by color and gender—and even then,

it was still a tight squeeze fitting everyone at the tables. I hadn't

seen a boy my own age up close in years.

I didn't start breathing again until the Tower was at our

backs and it was clear, beyond a shadow

of a doubt, where we
were headed.

Thank you, I thought, to no one in
particular. The relief

lodged in my throat like a stone.

We reached Cabin 27 a few minutes
later. The PSF walked

me to the door and pointed to the spigot
just to the left of it.

I nodded, and used the cold water to
wash the blood off my

face. He waited silently, but not

patiently. After a few seconds,

I felt his hand grab the back of my shirt and yank me up. Using

his other hand, he slid his access card through the lock on our

door.

Ashley, one of the older girls in my cabin, shoved the door

open the rest of the way with her shoulder. She took my arm in

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one hand and nodded in the direction of the PSF. That seemed

to be enough for him. Without another word, he took off down

the path.

“Jesus Christ!” she hissed as she dragged me inside. “They

couldn’t have kept you another night? Oh no, they have to send

you back early—is that *blood*?”

I waved her hands away, but Ashley pushed past them and

brushed my long, dark hair over my shoulder. At first I didn't

understand why she was looking me like that—with wide eyes,

rimmed with a raw pink. She sucked her bottom lip in between

her teeth.

“I really . . . thought you were . . .” We were still standing by

the door, but I could feel the chill that had taken over the cabin.

It settled over my skin like cold silk.

Ashley had been around these parts for far too long to really

crack, but I was still surprised to see her so frazzled and at a loss

for what to say. She and a few other girls were honorary lead-

ers of our sad, mismatched group, nominated mostly because

they hit certain bodily milestones before the rest of us, and

could explain what was happening to us without laughing in our

faces.

I offered a weak smile and a shrug,
suddenly without words

again. But she didn't look convinced,
and she didn't let go of

my arm. The cabin was dark and damp,
the usual smell of mold

clung to every surface, but I would have
taken that over the

Infirmary's clean, sterile stench any day.

"Let me . . ." Ashley took a deep breath.

"Let me know if

you're not, got it?"

And what would you be able to do about it? I wanted to ask.

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Instead, I turned to the back left corner of our cramped cabin.

Whispers and stares followed my zigzagging path around the

rows of bunk beds. The pills tucked tight against my chest felt

like they were on fire.

“—she was gone,” I heard someone say.

Vanessa, who slept on the bottom bunk
to the right of mine,

had snuck up to Sam's bed. When I came
into view, they stopped

mid-conversation to stare down at me.
Eyes wide, mouths wider.

The sight of them together was still
sickening to me, even

after a year. How many days and nights
had I spent perched up

there with Sam, steadfastly ignoring
Vanessa's attempts to drag

us into some stupid, pointless

conversation?

Sam's best friend slot had been vacant for less than two hours

when Vanessa had slithered in—and not a day went by that

Vanessa didn't remind me of that.

“What . . .” Sam leaned over the edge of her bed. She didn't

look haughty or hostile, the way she usually did. She looked . . .

concerned? Curious? “What happened to you?”

I shook my head, my chest tight with all the things I wanted

to say.

Vanessa let out a sharp laugh. “Nice, real nice. And you

wonder why she doesn’t want to be your friend anymore?”

“I don’t . . .” Sam mumbled.
“Whatever.”

Sometimes I wondered if there was a part of Sam that

remembered not just me, but the person she used to be before

I ruined her. Amazing how I had managed to erase every good

part of Sam—or at least, all the parts I loved. One touch, and

she was gone.

A few girls asked me what had happened between the two

of us. Most, I think, assumed Sam was being cruel when she

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claimed that we had never, ever been

friends and never would

be. I tried to play it off with shrugs—but
Sam was the only thing

that had made Thurmond bearable.
Without her, it was no life

at all.

No life at all.

I fingered the packet of pills.

Our cabin was brown on brown on
brown. The only color

was the white of our sheets, and most of
those had aged to an

ugly yellow. There were no shelves of books, no posters, no pictures. Just us.

I crawled onto my low bunk, dropping face-first into the

worn sheets. I breathed in their familiar scent—bleach, sweat,

and something distinctly earthy—and tried not to listen to the

conversation above me.

A part of me had been waiting, I think—desperate to see if I

could fix what I had done to my friend.
But it was done. It was

over, and she was gone, and the only one
to blame was me. The

best thing I could do for her was
disappear; even if Dr. Begbie

was playing me and they really were
going to get rid of me, they

wouldn't connect us. They wouldn't
question or punish Sam

because they thought she had helped me
hide, like they would if

we had still been friends. There were

over three thousand of us

at Thurmond, and I was the last Orange
—maybe in the entire

world. Or one of two, if the boy in the
Infirmary was like me. It

had only been a matter of time before
they found out the truth.

I was dangerous, and I knew what they
did to the dangerous

ones.

The camp routine ran itself through, as it
always did, churn-

ing us through the Mess Hall for dinner,
to the Wash Rooms

back to the cabin for the night. The light
was dim and fading

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outside, clinging to the first fringes of
night.

“All right, kittens.” Ashley’s voice.
“Ten minutes till lights-

out. Whose turn is it?”

“Mine—should I just pick up from

where we left off?” Rachel

was on the other side of the room, but her squeaky voice carried

well.

I could practically hear Ashley’s eyes rolling. “Yes, Rachel.

Isn’t that what we always do?”

“Okay . . . so . . . so the princess? She was in her tower, and

she was still really sad.”

“Girl,” Ashley cut in, “you’re going to have to spice this up,

or I'm skipping your boring ass and going to the next person.”

“Okay,” Rachel squeaked. I rolled over onto my side, trying

to get a glimpse of her through the rows of bunk beds. “The

princess was in terrible pain—terrible, terrible pain—”

“Oh God,” was Ashley’s only comment. “Next?”

Macey picked up the loose story threads the best she could.

“While the princess was locked away in

her tower, all she could
think about was the prince.”

I missed how the story ended, my
eyelids too heavy to keep
them open.

*If there is a single thing I'll miss about
Thurmond*, I thought as

I edged toward sleep, *it's this*. The quiet
moments, when we were
allowed to talk about forbidden things.

We had to find a way to amuse ourselves
because we had no

stories—no dreams, no future—other the
ones we created for
ourselves.

I swallowed the two pills one at a time,
the taste of chicken broth
still on my tongue.

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The cabin lights had been off for three
hours, and Sam had
been snoring for two. I unsealed the bag
and dropped the little

pills into my hand. The clear bag went back into my bra, and the

first pill went into my mouth. It was warm from being so close to

my skin for so long, which didn't make it any easier to swallow.

I popped the next one in before I lost the nerve, and winced as

it clawed its way down my throat.

And then, I waited.





FIVE

I didn't remember falling asleep, only waking. Of

course I did—my body was shaking so hard that I rolled right

out of bed and hit my face against the next bunk over.

Vanessa must have jumped out of her skin with the sudden

bang and movement of her bed, because I heard her say, "What

the hell—*Ruby*? Is that you?"

I couldn't get up. I felt her hands on my face, and registered

she was now screaming my name, not just whispering it.

“Oh my *God!*” someone said. It sounded like Sam, but I

couldn't open my eyes.

“—emergency button!” Ashley's weight settled over my legs;

I knew it was her, even as my brain came in and out of con-

sciousness, and a white hot light was burning behind my eyelids.

Someone shoved something in my mouth
—rubber and hard.

I could taste blood but I wasn't sure if it
had come from my

tongue or my lips or . . .

Two pairs of hands lifted me from the
ground, dropping me

on some other surface. I still couldn't
open my eyes; my chest

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was on fire. I couldn't stop shaking, and

limbs felt like they were
caving in on themselves.

And then I smelled rosemary. I felt soft,
cool hands pressing
against my chest, then nothing at all.

Life came back to me in the form of a
hard slap across the face.

“Ruby,” someone said. “Come on, I
know you can hear me.

You have to wake up.”

I cracked my eyes open, trying not to
cringe as the light

flooded in. A door opened and creaked shut somewhere nearby.

“Is that her?” a new voice asked. “Are you going to sedate her?”

“No, not this one,” the first voice returned. I knew that

voice. It was as sweet as it had been before, only this time it had

a sharper edge. Dr. Begbie’s hands came up beneath my arms

and propped me up. “She’s tough. She can handle it.”

Something smelled *horrible*. Acidic and rotten all at once. My

eyes flew open.

Dr. Begbie was kneeling beside me, waving something

beneath my nose.

“What—?”

The other voice I had heard belonged to another young

woman. She had dark brown hair and pale skin, but that was all

that was remarkable about her. Not

realizing I was watching her,

she stripped her blue scrubs off and threw them at Dr. Begbie.

I didn't know where we were. The room was small, filled

with shelves of bottles and boxes, and I couldn't smell anything

over whatever it was Dr. Begbie had used to wake me.

“Put these on,” Dr. Begbie said, pulling me to my feet

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whether my legs were ready or not.
“Come *on*, Ruby, we’ve got
to hurry.”

My body felt heavy, cracking at all my
joints. But I did as I

was told, and pulled the scrubs over my
uniform. While I was

dressing, the other woman put her hands
behind her back and

waited as Dr. Begbie wrapped them
together with thick silver

duct tape. That finished, the doctor moved to tying the other

woman's feet together.

“You're meeting them in Harvey. Make sure you take

Route 215.”

“I know, I know,” Dr. Begbie said, as she chewed off another

piece of tape and placed it over the other woman's mouth. “Good

luck.”

“What are you doing?” I asked. My

throat was scratchy and

the skin around my mouth seemed to crack as I spoke. The doc-

tor pulled my hair back, twisting it up into a messy bun that she

secured with a rubber band. The other woman watched as her ID

tags were dropped over my neck, and Dr. Begbie put a surgical

mask over my face.

“I’ll explain everything once we’re out, but we can’t waste

time. They'll be doing rounds in twenty minutes," she said. "You

can't say anything, understand? Play along."

I nodded and let her push me outside of the dark room and

into the dimmed hallway of the Infirmary. Once again, my legs

seemed to be failing me, but the doctor took it all in stride. She

looped one of my arms over her shoulder, and supported most

of my weight.

“We’re moving,” she muttered, “return the cameras to their normal feeds.”

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I looked over, but she wasn’t talking to me. She was

whispering to her gold swan pin.

“Not a word,” she reminded me as we turned down another

long hallway. We were moving so fast that we rustled the white

curtains of the examination stalls we passed them. The PSFs we

passed were black blurs as they stepped out of our way.

“Sorry, sorry!” Dr. Begbie called after us. “I’ve got to get this

one home.”

I kept my eyes on the straight lines of tile passing under my

feet. My head was still spinning so badly that I didn’t realize we

were heading outside until I heard the beep of her card passing

through the lock swipe and felt the first
drops of cool rain hit

my scalp.

They kept the camp's enormous stadium
lights on at all hours

of the night; the lights stood like giants
across the camp, but all

they reminded me of were night football
games, the smell of

fresh cut grass, and the back of my dad's
red Spartan sweater as

he yelled for his old high school's team
to *run some damn offense*

at the top of his lungs.

It was a short walk and stumble from the back of the

Infirmery to the rocky parking lot. I actually wasn't sure if I was

hallucinating or not—my sight went in and out of focus, but it

was impossible to miss the sound of crunching gravel and the

voice that yelled, “Everything okay over there?”

I felt, rather than saw, Dr. Begbie tense. I tried to keep mov-

ing, to use her shoulder to prop myself up, but my legs just

weren't working anymore.

When I opened my eyes again, I was sitting up, staring at the

standard-issue boots of a PSF soldier. He knelt down in front of

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me. Dr. Begbie was saying something to him, her voice as calm

as the first time I had spoken to her.

“—so sick, I offered to drive her home. I put the mask on her

to make sure she didn't give the bug to anyone else.”

The soldier's voice came into focus. “I hate that we always

get sick from these kids.”

“Would you mind helping me walk her over to my Jeep?”

Dr. Begbie asked.

“If she's sick . . .”

“It'll just take a minute,” the doctor

interrupted. “And I

promise that if you have so much as even
the sniffles tomorrow,

I’ll nurse you back to health myself.”

That was the voice I recognized—so
sweet that it sounded

like little bells. The soldier chuckled,
but I felt him lift me up all

the same. I tried not to lean against him,
to grit my teeth against

the jarring motion, but I could barely
keep my head from rolling

back.

“Front seat?” he asked.

Dr. Begbie was about to respond when the PSF’s radio crack-

led to life. “*Control has you on camera. Do you need assistance?*”

He waited until Dr. Begbie had opened the front passenger

side door and he had set me down on the seat before replying.

“Everything clear. Doctor . . .” He took my tags in hand, lifting

them off my chest. “Dr. Rogers has the virus that’s been going

around. Doctor . . .”

“Begbie,” came the quick reply. She slid into the driver’s seat

and slammed the door shut behind her. I glanced over, watching

as she fumbled to get the key in the ignition. It was the first time

I noticed her hands shaking.

“Dr. Begbie is driving her home for the night. Dr. Rogers’s

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car will be here overnight—please
inform the morning guards

when they do their tally.”

*“Roger that. Tell them to head straight
for the gate, I’ll notify the*

watch patrol to wave them through.”

The Jeep sputtered to life in a series of
grinding protests. I

looked out through the windshield, to the
electric fence and the

dark, familiar forest behind it. Dr. Begbie reached over to fasten my seat belt.

“Man, she’s *out* of it.” The PSF was back, leaning against Dr.

Begbie’s window.

“I did give her some pretty strong stuff.” Dr. Begbie laughed.

I felt my chest clench.

“So about tomorrow—”

“Come by and say hello, okay?” Dr. Begbie said. “I have a

break around three.”

She didn't give him a chance to reply.
The tires spun against

the gravel and the windshield wipers
squealed to life. Dr. Begbie

rolled up her window with a friendly
wave, using her other hand

to steer the car back and pull out of the
parking space. The little

green numbers on the dashboard read
2:45 a.m.

“Try to cover your face as much as
possible,” she muttered

before flicking on the radio. I didn't recognize the song, but I

recognized David Gilmour's voice, and the ebb and flow of Pink

Floyd's synthesizers.

She turned the volume down, taking a deep breath as she

turned out of the lot. Her fingers tapped out a nervous rhythm

on the steering wheel.

"Come on, come on," she whispered, glancing down at the

clock again. There was a line of two cars in front of us, each

waved forward with agonizing slowness. I thought she was going

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to crawl out of her skin by the time the last car pulled forward

into the night.

Dr. Begbie hit the gas too hard and the Jeep lurched forward.

The seat belt snapped into a locked position when she slammed

on the brakes, knocking the air out of my

chest.

She rolled the window down, but I was too tired to be afraid.

I pressed my hand over my eyes, and sucked in a deep breath.

The surgical mask brushed against my lips.

“I’m taking Dr. Rogers home. Let me just get her passes—”

“It’s fine. I have you on the schedule for tomorrow at three

p.m., is that correct?”

“Yes. Thank you. Please indicate Dr. Rogers will not be in.”

“Understood.”

I was too tired to try to control my brain's wandering fingers.

When Dr. Begbie touched me again, brushing the hair out of my

face, an image bloomed to life behind my eyes. A dark-haired

man, smiling broadly, with his arms around Dr. Begbie, spinning

her, and spinning her, and spinning her, until I could hear her

delighted laughter in my ears.

Cate cracked our windows, and the air
rushing by brought in

the scent of rain and carried me quickly
into sleep.

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SIX

It was still dark out when I opened my eyes.

The AC blew through the vents, batting at the little yel-

low cardboard tree hanging down from the rearview mirror. Its

vanilla fragrance was sickeningly sweet, and so overwhelming

that it turned my empty stomach. Mick Jagger crooned next to

my ear, singing about war and peace and shelter—those kinds

of lies. I tried to turn my face away from
wherever the song was

escaping from, but I only managed to
smack my nose against the

window and strain my neck.

I sat straight up and almost hanged
myself on the gray seat

belt.

We weren't in the Jeep anymore.

The night came back like a deep breath,
complete and over-

whelming all at once. The glow of the

green dashboard lit the

scrubs I wore, and that was enough to flood my mind with the

reality of what had happened.

Smears of trees and undergrowth lined a road that was com-

pletely dark, save for the small car's weak yellow headlights. For

the first time in years, I could see the stars that Thurmond's

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monstrous lights had faded into nonexistence. They were so

bright, so clear that they couldn't have been real. I didn't know

what was more shocking—the endless stretch of road or the sky.

Tears pricked at the back of my eyes.

“Don't forget to breathe, Ruby,” came the voice beside me.

I pulled the surgical mask down from over my mouth as I

looked over. Dr. Begbie's blond hair was around her face, sweep-

ing against her shoulders. In the time it had taken us to get from

Thurmond to . . . wherever we were, she had stripped off her

scrubs, and changed into a black T-shirt and jeans. The night

stained the skin under her eyes like bruises. I hadn't noticed the

sharp angles that made up her nose and chin.

“You haven't been in a car for some time, huh?” She laughed,

but she was right. I was more aware of

the forward lurch of the

car than I was of my own heartbeat.

“Dr. Begbie—”

“Call me Cate,” she interrupted, a bit harsher than before. I

don’t know if I reacted to the abrupt change of tone or not, but

she immediately followed with, “I’m sorry, it’s been a very long

night and I could use a cup of coffee.”

According to the dashboard, it was 4:30 a.m. I had only had

two hours of sleep, but I felt more alert than I had all day. All

week. All my life.

Cate waited until the Rolling Stones had finished out their

song before turning down the radio. “All they play are Oldies

now. I thought it was a joke at first, or something Washington

wanted, but apparently that’s all that gets requested these days.”

She snuck a look at me out of the corner of her eye. “I can’t

imagine why.”

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“Dr.—Cate,” I said. Even my voice was stronger. “*Where are*

we? What’s going on?”

Before she could answer, there was a cough from the back-

seat. I twisted around despite the pain in my neck and chest.

Curled up there in a protective little ball was another kid,

about my age, or maybe a year younger.
That other kid. Max—

Matthew—Whatever—from the
Infirmary, and he was looking
far better than I felt as he slept on.

“We just left Harvey, West Virginia,”
Cate said. “That’s
where we met with some friends that
helped me switch cars and
remove Martin back there from the
medical trunk we had to
smuggle him out in.”

“Wait . . .”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Cate said quickly.

“We made sure it had

air holes.”

Like that was my biggest concern?

“They just let you take it out to the car?”

I asked. “Without

even checking it?”

She glanced at me again, and I was proud of the look of

surprise there. “The doctors at
Thurmond use those trunks to

transport medical waste. The camp controllers started forcing

the doctors to dump the waste themselves when the budget got

cut. Sarah and I had duty for this week.”

“Sarah?” I interrupted. “Dr. Rogers?”

She hesitated a split second before nodding.

“Why did you tie her up—why did she—why are *you* help-

ing us?”

She answered my question with one of

her own.

“Have you ever heard of the Children’s League?”

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“Bits and pieces,” I said. And only in whispers. If the rumors

were true, they were an antigovernment group. They were the

ones the younger kids—the later arrivals to Thurmond—claimed

were trying to take down the camp

system. The ones that sup-

posedly hid kids so they couldn't be taken. I had always assumed

they were our generation's version of a fairy tale. Nothing that

good could ever be true.

"We," Cate said, letting that word sink in before continu-

ing, "are an organization dedicated to helping children affected

by the government's new laws. John Alban—have you heard of

him? He was formerly an intelligence adviser to Gray.”

“He started the Children’s League?”

She nodded. “After his daughter died and he realized what

was going to happen to the kids who survived, he left D.C.

and tried to expose all of the testing that was happening at the

camps. The *New York Times*, the *Post*, you name it—none of

them would run the story, because, by then, things were bad

enough that Gray had them under his thumb for ‘national secu-

rity’ reasons, and the smaller papers folded with the economy.”

“So . . .” I was trying to wrap my mind around this, wonder-

ing if I had misheard her. “So he created the Children’s League

to . . . help us?”

Cate’s face lit up in a smile. “Yes, that’s exactly right.”

Then why did you help only me?

The question sprung up like a lone weed;
ugly, and deeply

rooted. I rubbed a hand over my face,
trying to clear the rum-

blings in my brain, but I couldn't tear it
out. There was a strange

feeling of rising in my chest that
followed—like something heavy

was trying to work its way up from my
center. It might have

been a scream.

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“What about the others?” I didn’t recognize my own voice.

“The others? You mean the other children?” Cate’s eyes were

focused only on the road in front of us.

“They can wait. Their

situation wasn’t as pressing as yours was. When the time is right,

I’m sure we’ll go back for them, but in the meantime, don’t

worry. They’ll live.”

I recoiled almost instantly at her tone more than her words.

The way she said that— *they'll live*— was so dismissive, I half

expected to see a hand come up into the air to wave me off.

Don't worry. Don't worry at the way they've been mistreated,

don't worry about their punishments, don't worry about

the guns constantly trained on their backs. God, I wanted to

throw up.

I had left them behind, all of them. I had left Sam, even after

I promised we'd get out together. After everything she had done

to protect me, I had just *left* her there. . .

“Oh—no, Ruby. I'm sorry, I didn't even realize how that

would sound,” she said, turning back and forth between me and

the road. “I just meant . . . I don't even know what I'm saying.

I was there for weeks, and I still can't

begin to imagine what it

must have been like. I shouldn't act like I know what you went

through.”

“I just—I left them,” I told her, and it didn't matter that my

voice was breaking, or that my hands had come up to clutch my

elbows to keep from grabbing her. “Why did you only take me?

Why couldn't you save the others? Why?”

“I told you before,” she said softly, “it had to be you. They

would have killed you otherwise. The others aren’t in danger.”

“They’re *always* in danger,” I said, and wondered if she had

stepped a single foot beyond the Infirmary. How could she not

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have seen? How could she not have heard it, felt it, breathed it

in? The air at Thurmond was so coated
in fear that you could

taste it like vomit at the back of your
throat.

It had \ taken me less than a day in that
place to see that

hatred and terror come in circles, and
that they fed off each

other. The PSFs hated us, so they had to
make us fear them.

And we feared them, which only made
us hate them even

more. There was an unspoken

understanding that we were at

Thurmond because of each other.
Without the PSFs there would

be no camp, but without the Psi freaks
there would be no need

for PSFs.

So whose fault was it? Everyone's? No
one's? Ours?

“You should have just left me—you
should have taken some-

one else, someone who was better—
they'll be punished because

of this, I know it, they'll hurt them and it's my fault for going,

for leaving them behind—" I knew I wasn't making sense, but I

couldn't seem to connect my thoughts to my tongue. That feel-

ing, the heart-swallowing guilt, the sadness that took hold and

never let itself be shaken free—how did you tell someone that?

How did you put that into words?

Cate's lips parted, but no sound came out for several

moments. She took a firm hold of the wheel and guided the car

over to the side of the road. When her foot came off the gas she

allowed the car to roll to a hesitant stop. When the wheels finally

ceased spinning, I reached for the door handle, a spike of total

and complete grief cutting through me.

“What are you doing?” Cate asked.

She had pulled over because she wanted me to get out,

hadn't she? I would have done the same thing if our situations

had been flipped. I understood.

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I leaned back away from her arm as she reached over, but

instead of pushing the door open, she slammed it shut and let her

fingers linger over my shoulder. I cringed, pressing back against

the seat as hard as I could, trying to

avoid her touch. This was

the worst I'd felt in years—my head was humming, a sure sign

I was dangerously close to losing control of it. If she had any

thoughts about hugging me, or stroking my arm, or anything

my mom would have done, my reaction was more than enough

to convince her not to try.

“Listen to me very carefully,” she said, and it didn't seem to

matter to her that at any moment a car or a PSF could come

charging up the road. She waited until I was looking her in the

eye. “The most important thing you ever did was learn how

to survive. Do not let *anyone* make you feel like you shouldn’t

have—like you deserved to be in that camp. You are important,

and you matter. You matter to me, you matter to the League,

and you matter to the future—” Her

voice caught. “I will never

hurt you, or yell at you, or let you go hungry. I will protect you

for the rest of my life. I will never fully understand what you’ve

been through, but I will always listen when you need to get

something out. Do you understand?”

Something warm bloomed in my chest, even as my breath

hitched in my throat. I wanted to say something to that, to thank

her, to ask her to repeat it again just to be sure I hadn't mis-

under stood or misheard her.

“I can't pretend like it never happened,” I told her. I still felt

the vibrations of the fence under my skin.

“You shouldn't—you should never forget. But part of surviv-

ing is being able to move on. There's this word,” she continued,

turning to study her fingers gripping the wheel. “Nothing like it

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exists in the English language. It's Portuguese. *Saudade*. Do you

know that one?"

I shook my head. I didn't know half of the words in my own

language.

"It's more . . . there's no perfect definition. It's more of an

expression of feeling—of terrible sadness. It's the feeling you

get when you realize something you once lost is lost forever,

and you can never get it back again.”
Cate took a deep breath.

“I thought of that word often at
Thurmond. Because the lives

you had before—that we all had before
—we can never get them

back. But there’s a beginning in an end,
you know? It’s true that

you can’t reclaim what you had, but you
can lock it up behind

you. Start fresh.”

I did understand what she was saying,
and I understood that

her words were coming from a true,
caring place, but after hav-

ing my life broken down into rotations
for so long, the thought

of dividing it up even further was
unimaginable.

“Here,” she said, reaching inside of the
collar of her shirt. She

pulled a long silver chain up over her
head, and the last thing to

reveal itself was the black circular

pendant, a little bigger than

the size of my thumb, hanging from it.

I held out my hand and she dropped the necklace into it.

The chain was still warm from where it had been kept against

her skin, but I was surprised to find that the pendant wasn't

anything more than plastic.

"We call that a panic button," she said.

"If you squeeze it for

twenty seconds, it'd activate and any

agents nearby will respond.

I don't imagine you'll ever need to use it, but I'd like you to keep

it. If you ever feel scared, or if we get separated, I want you to

press it.”

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“It'll track me?” Something about that idea made me vaguely

uncomfortable, but I slipped the chain on anyway.

“Not unless you activate it,” Cate promised. “We designed

them that way so that the PSFs wouldn’t be able to acciden-

tally pick up on a signal being transmitted from them. I promise,

you’re in control, here, Ruby.”

I plucked the pendant up and held it between my thumb and

index finger. When I realized how dirty my fingers were, and

how much dirt was still packed under my nails, I dropped it. Me

and nice things didn't go well together.

“Can I ask you another question?” I waited until she had

finally nudged the car back onto the road, and even then it had

taken me a few tries to get the words out.

“If the Children's

League was formed to end the camps, why did you even bother

getting me and Martin? Why didn't you just blow up the Control

Tower while you were there?”

Cate ran a hand over her lips. "I'm not interested in those

kinds of operations," she said. "I'd much rather be focused on the

real issue, which is helping you kids. You can destroy a factory,

and they'll just build another. But once you destroy a life, that's

it. You never get that person back."

"Do people have any idea?" I squeezed out. "Do the people

know that they're not reforming us at all?"

“I’m not sure,” Cate said. “Some will always live in denial

about them, and they’ll believe what they want to believe about

the camps. I think most people know there’s something off, but

they’re in too deep with their own problems to call into question

how the government is handling things at the camp. I think they

want to trust that you’re all being treated well. Honestly, there

are . . . there are so few of you left

now.”

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I sat straight up again. “What?”

This time, Cate couldn’t look at me. “I didn’t want to have

to be the one to tell you this, but things are much worse now

than they were before. The last estimate the League put together

said that two percent of the country’s population of ten- to

seventeen-year-olds were in reform camps.”

“What about the rest?” I said, but I already knew the answer.

“The ninety-eight percent?”

“Most of them fell victim to IAAN.”

“They died,” I corrected. “All the kids? Everywhere?”

“No, not everywhere. There have been a few cases of it

reported in other countries, but here in America . . .” Cate took

a deep breath. “I don’t know how much to tell you now, because

I don’t want to overwhelm you, but it seems like the onset of

IAAN or Psi powers is linked to puberty ____”

“How many?” They really hadn’t learned anything new in

all the years I was trapped in Thurmond?

“How many of us are

left?”

“According to the government, there are approximately a

quarter of a million children under the age of eighteen, but our

estimate is closer to a tenth of that.”

I was going to be sick. I unbuckled my seat belt and leaned

forward, putting my head between my legs. Out of the corner

of my eye, I saw Cate’s hand come down, as if she was going to

rest it on my back, but I twisted away again. For a long time, the

only sound between us was the tires turning against the old road.

I kept my face down and eyes shut long enough for Cate

to worry. “Are you still feeling queasy? We had to give you a

high enough dosage of penicillin to induce seizurelike symptoms.

Trust me, if we could have done it any other way we would

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have, but we needed something serious enough for the PSFs to

actually bring you back to the Infirmary.”

Martin snored behind us until eventually even that faded

into the sound of the tires rolling down the old road. My stom-

ach twisted at the thought of asking exactly how many miles we

were from Thurmond, how far away the past really was.

“I know,” I said after a while. “Thank you—I mean it.”

Cate reached over, and before I could think to stop her, her

hand ran a smooth path from my shoulder
down my arm. I felt

something warm tickle at the back of my
mind, and recognized

its warning trill. The first white-hot flash
from her mind came

and went so fast, I saw the scene like a
photo negative. A young

girl with white-blond hair in a high
chair, her mouth frozen in a

toothless grin. The next stayed, lingered
long enough for me to

recognize I was seeing fire. *Fire—*

everywhere, climbing the walls

of the room, burning with all the intensity of the sun. This—

memory? It trembled, shuddered hard enough that I had to clench

my teeth to keep from getting nauseated. Inside Cate's memory,

a silver door with 456B stamped over it in black lettering slid

into view. A hand flashed out, reaching for the handle—Cate's,

pale, slender fingers, outstretched—only to pull away at its mol-

ten hot touch. A hand lashed out against the wood, then a foot.

The image wavered, curling at the edges as the door disappeared

behind the dark smoke that spewed through its cracks and joints.

The same dark door shut, and I jolted back, pulling my arm

out from under hers.

What the hell? I thought, my heart racing in my ears. I

squeezed my eyes shut.

“Still?” Cate said. “Oh, Ruby, I’m so sorry. When we switch

cars, I’ll be sure to ask for something to help ease your stomach.”

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She, like all the others, was oblivious.

“You know . . .” Cate said after a while. She kept her eyes out

on the dark road, to where it met the brightening sky. “It was

brave of you to take the pills and come

with me. I knew there

was more to you than the quiet girl I met
in the Infirmary.”

I'm not brave. If I had been, I would
have owned up to what

I really was, no matter how terrible. I
would have worked, eaten,

and slept alongside the other Oranges, or
at least stepped out of

the shadow of the Yellows and Reds.

Those kids had been so proud of their
powers. They made a

point of harassing the camp controllers at every turn, hurting the

PSFs, setting their cabins and the Wash Rooms on fire, trying

to talk their way out of the gate or driving the adults insane by

putting images of murdered families or cheating wives in their

heads.

It was impossible to miss them, to not step aside and turn

away when they passed. I had let myself sit like a coward in the

dull, endless stream of gray and green,
never drawing attention,

never once letting myself believe that I
could or should escape.

I think that all they wanted was to find a
way out, and to do it

themselves. They had burned so bright,
and fought so hard to

get free.

But none of them had made it to sixteen.

There are a thousand ways to tell if
someone is lying to you. You

don't need to be able to glimpse into
their mind to catch all of

the little signs of insecurity and
discomfort. More often than not,

all you have to do is look at them. If they
glance to the left while

they're talking to you, if they add too
many details to a story, if

they answer a question with another
question. My dad, a cop,

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taught me and twenty-four other kids about it in second grade,

when he gave his presentation on Stranger Danger.

But Cate had no tells. She told me things about the world

that didn't seem possible, not until we were able to pick up a

radio station and a solemn voice bled through the speakers to

confirm it all.

“Yes!” she cried, slapping her palm against the wheel.

“Finally!”

“The President has reportedly refused an invitation from Britain’s

Prime Minister to discuss possible relief measures for the world eco-

nomic crisis and how to pump life back into the sagging global stock

markets. When asked to explain his decision, the president cited the

United Kingdom’s role in the UN’s economic sanctions against the

United States.”

Cate fiddled with the tuning again. The newscaster's voice

faded in and out. At the first burst of static, I jumped.

“ . . . forty-five women were arrested in Austin, Texas, yesterday

for attempting to evade the birth registry. The women will be detained

in a corrections facility until their children are born, after which the

infants will be removed for the safety of their mothers and the state

of Texas. The Attorney General had this

to say . . .” Another voice

came through, this one deep and raspy.

“In accordance with New

Order 15, President Gray issued an arrest warrant for all persons

involved with this dangerous activity . .

.”

“Gray?” I said, glancing over to Cate.

“He’s still the president?”

He had only just been elected when the first cases of IAAN

appeared, and I couldn’t really remember anything about him,

other than that he had dark eyes and dark hair. And even that I

only knew because the camp controllers had strung up pictures

of his son, Clancy, all over camp as proof to us that we, too,

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could be reformed. I had a sudden, sharp memory of the last

time I had been in the Infirmary, and the way his picture had

seemed to watch me.

She shook her head, visibly disgusted.

“He granted himself

a term extension until the Psi situation is,
and I quote, *resolved*

*so as to make sure the United States is
safe from telekinetic acts of*

terror and violence. He even suspended
Congress.”

“How did he manage that?” I asked.

“With his so-called wartime powers,”
Cate said. “Maybe a

year or two after you were taken, some Psi kids nearly succeeded

in blowing up the Capitol.”

“Nearly? What does that mean?”

Cate glanced over again, studying my face. “It means that

they only succeeded in blowing up the Senate portion of it.

President Gray’s control of the government was only supposed

to last until new congressional elections could be held, but then

the riots started when the PSF started pulling kids from schools

without their parents' permission. And then, of course, the

economy tanked and the country defaulted on its debt. You'd be

surprised how little voice you have when you lose everything."

"And everyone just let him?" The thought turned my stomach.

"No, no one just *let* him. It's chaos out here right now, Ruby.

Gray keeps trying to tighten his control,

and every day more and

more people are rioting or breaking
whatever laws we have left

just to get food on the table.”

“My dad was killed in a riot.”

Cate turned around to face the backseat
so quickly the car

actually swerved into the other lane. I
had known Martin was

awake for at least ten minutes; his
breathing had become much

lighter, and he had stopped doing his

weird little lip licking and

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grunts. I just hadn't wanted to talk to him, or to interrupt Cate.

“The people in our neighborhood robbed his store for food,

and he couldn't even defend himself.”

“How are you feeling?” Sugar coated Cate's words, almost as

sweet as the vanilla air freshener twirling around in front of us.

“Okay, I guess.” He sat up, trying to pat down his floppy

brown hair into something presentable. Martin was round all

over; his cheeks drooped and his uniform shirt might have been

a size too small, but he hadn’t started growing like the other kids

in his cabin. I had maybe an inch or two on him, and I was short,

average build. He couldn’t have been more than a year younger

than I was.

“I’m glad,” Cate said. “There’s a water bottle back there for

you if you need it. We’ll be stopping in about an hour to switch

cars again.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re meeting with a friend in Marlinton, West Virginia.

He’ll have a change of clothes and identification papers for both

of you. We’re almost there now.”

I thought for sure Martin had dropped

right back off into

sleep until he asked, “Where are we going after that?”

The radio flashed to life, snatching up bits and pieces of Led

Zeppelin, before losing it again to static and silence.

I could feel Martin’s eyes burning holes into the back of

my neck. I tried not to turn around to stare right back, but it

was the closest I had been to a boy my age since we had been

sorted. After years of living on opposite sides of the main trail

in Thurmond, it was unnerving to suddenly be presented with

all his little details. The freckles I hadn't noticed on his face, for

instance, or the way his eyebrows seemed to merge into one.

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What was I supposed to say to him? *I'm so glad I found you?*

We're the last of us? One was the truth,
and one couldn't be fur-

ther from it.

“We’re going to regroup with the League
at their southern

headquarters. After we get there, you can
decide on if you want

to stay,” she said. “I know you’ve been
through a lot, so you don’t

have to make any choices now. Just
know that you’ll be safe if

you stay with me.”

The feeling of freedom rose in me so fast
that I had to chase

it down to squash it along with my
swelling heart. It was still

too dangerous. There was a chance that
the PSFs could catch

up to us. That I'd be back in camp or
dead before we even got

to Virginia.

Martin watched me, his dark eyes
narrowed. I watched as

his pupils seemed to shrink, and I felt a
tickle in the back of my

mind. The same one I always felt when my abilities wanted to

be let out and used.

What the hell? My fingers dug into the armrests, but I didn't

turn back around to see if he was still at it. I glanced up into the

rearview mirror only once, watching as he leaned back against

the seat and crossed his arms over his chest with a huff. A sore at

the corner of his mouth looked angry and red, like he had been

scratching at the scab.

“I want to go where I can do what I couldn’t do at Thurmond,”

Martin said, finally.

I didn’t want to know what he meant by that.

“I’m a lot more powerful than you think,” he continued.

“You won’t need anyone else after you see what I can do.”

Cate smiled. “That’s what I’m counting on. I knew you’d

understand.”

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“What about you, Ruby?” she asked,
turning to me. “Are you

willing to make a difference?”

If I said I no, would they let me go? If I
asked to go to my

parents’ house in Salem, would they take
me there—no questions

asked? To Virginia Beach, if I wanted to
see my grandmother?

Out of the country, if that's what I really wanted?

They were both looking at me, wearing mirrored looks of

urgency and excitement. I wish I could have felt it. I wish I could

have shared in the security they were feeling about their choice,

but I wasn't absolutely certain of what I wanted. I only knew

what I didn't want.

"Take me anywhere," I said. "Anywhere but home."

Martin picked at the sore with grubby nails until blood

appeared and he licked it off his lips and the tip of his fingers.

Watching me, like he expected me to ask for a taste.

I turned back to Cate, a question dying on my lips. Because

for a second, just one, all I could think about was the sight of fire

and smoke rising from the sharp lines of her shoulders, and the

door she couldn't open.





SEVEN

We reached Marlinton's city limits at
seven

o'clock in the morning, just as the sun
decided to reappear from

behind the thick layer of clouds. It
colored the nearby trees a

faint violet and glinted off the wall of
mist that had gathered over

the asphalt. By then, we had driven past
several highway exits

that were barricaded with junk, rails, or
deserted cars—done up

either by the National Guard to contain hostile towns and cities,

or by the residents themselves, to keep unwanted looters and

visitors out of already hard-hit areas. The road itself, however,

had been silent for hours on end, which meant that we were

due for some sort of human interaction sooner or later.

It came sooner, in the form of a red semitruck. I scooted

down in my seat as it whipped past us,

taking its growling engines

and wheels with it. It was headed clear
in the opposite direction,

but I had a perfect view of the gold swan
painted on its side.

“They’re everywhere,” Cate said,
following my line of sight.

“That was probably a shipment to
Thurmond.”

It was the first true sign of life we’d
seen in all of our

driving—most likely because we were
cruising down Dead Man’s

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Highway in the middle of the Butt-Freaking Nowhere—but that

single truck was enough to scare Cate.

“Get in the backseat,” she said, “and stay down.”

I did as I was told. Unbuckling my seat belt, I twisted between

the front seats and threaded my legs through them.

Martin watched me with glassy eyes. At

one point, I felt

his hand slip against my arm, like he was trying to help me. I

recoiled, slipping down in the space between the backseat and

the passenger seat. My back was against the door and my knees

were against my chest, but we were still too close. When he

grinned it was enough to make my skin crawl.

There were boys at Thurmond. Plenty of them, in fact.

But any activity that involved the commingling of the sexes—

whether that was eating together, sharing cabins, or even passing

one another on the way to the Wash Rooms—was strictly for-

bidden. The PSFs and camp controllers enforced the rule with

the same level of severity they did with the kids who—however

intentionally or unintentionally—used their abilities. Which, of

course, only drove everyone's already

hormone-drunk brains

crazier and turned some of my
cabinmates into an elite breed of

covert stalkers.

Maybe I didn't remember the "right"
way to interact with

someone of the opposite gender, but I'm
pretty sure Martin

didn't, either.

"Fun, huh?" he said. I thought he was
kidding, until I saw

the too-eager look in his eyes. The

itching came again, the tin-

gling sensation of yet another attempt to peer inside my head,

dread trailing down the length of my spine like a freezing finger-

tip. I pressed up against the door and kept my eyes on Cate, but

it wasn't far enough.

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We are nothing alike, I realized. We had been brought to the

same place, lived in the same kind of terror, but he . . . he was

so . . .

I needed to change the subject and distract him from what-

ever it was he was trying to do. The AC was on, but you never

would have known by the heat he was giving off.

“Do you think Thurmond has noticed we’re gone?” I asked,

breaking the silence.

Cate switched off her headlights. “I would think so. The PSFs

don’t have the manpower to launch a full hunt for us, but I’m

positive they’ve put two and two together about what you are.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “That we’re Orange? I thought

you said they already knew. That was why we had to leave so

quickly.”

“They were on the verge of finding out,” Cate explained.

“They were testing the Orange and Red frequencies in that Calm

Control. I don’t think any of them expected it to work that

quickly— *that’s* why we had to get you out, and fast.”

“Frequencies,” Martin repeated. “You mean they added

something to it?”

“That’s exactly right.” Cate smiled at him in the rearview

mirror. “The League got wind of their new method of trying to

weed out kids who had been labeled incorrectly when they were

brought into camp. You know that adults can't hear the Calm

Control, I'm sure."

We both nodded.

"The scientists there have been working on frequencies that

only certain kinds of Psi youth can pick up and process. There

are some wavelengths you all can hear, and others that only

Greens, or Blues, or—in this instance—Oranges can detect.”

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

It made sense, but it didn't make it any less horrifying.

“You know, I've been wondering,” Cate began. “How *did* you

two do it? You especially, Ruby. You went into that camp so

young. How did you get around their sorting?”

“I . . . just did,” I said. “I told the man who was supposed to

run my tests that I was Green. He listened.”

“That’s weak,” Martin interrupted, looking right at me. “You

probably didn’t even have to use your powers.”

I didn’t like to think of them as *powers*—that seemed to

imply they were something to celebrate. And they were most

definitely not.

“I told someone to trade places with me when they started

separating all the O’s and R’s out. Didn’t want to go down with

them, you know?” Martin leaned forward. “So I took one of the

new Greens aside who was about my age, and made him and

that warden think he was me. Same for anyone who asked. One

by one. Cool, huh?”

The disgust coiled in my gut. He didn’t feel sorry about

doing any of this, that was clear. Maybe I had lied about what I

was, but I hadn't damned another kid to do so. Was that what

having control over your Orange abilities turned you into? Some

kind of monster—someone who could do whatever you wanted,

because no one was capable of stopping you?

Was that what being powerful was like?

“So you can make people believe they're someone they're

not?” Cate said. “I thought Oranges could only command some-

one to do something. Sort of like hypnosis?”

“Nah,” Martin said. “I can do much more than that. I get

people to do what I want by making them feel what I want them

to feel. Like that kid I switched places with? I made him feel too

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scared to stay in his cabin, made him feel like it would be a good

idea to pretend to be me. Anyone who questioned me—I made

them feel crazy for doing it. So I can sort of command people

to do stuff, but it's more like, if I want someone to hurt some-

one else, I have to make him feel really, really angry and pissed

toward the person I want him to attack.”

“Huh,” Cate said. “Is it the same for you, Ruby?”

No. Not at all, in fact. I looked down at my hands, to the

dark mud still caked under my fingernails. The thought of reveal-

ing exactly what I could do made them shake in a way I hadn't

expected. "I don't throw feelings into someone, I just see things."

At least, as far as I knew.

"Wow . . . I just . . . wow. I know I keep saying this, but

you two are really something amazing. I keep thinking of all the

things you could do—how much help you'll be to us. Incredible.”

Twisting around, I lifted my head just enough to look out to

the road. Behind me, I felt Martin grab a few loose strands of my

hair, and begin to twirl them around his fingers. I could see the

reflection of my round face in the rearview mirror—the big eyes

that seemed almost sleepy, thick, dark brows, full lips—I could

see the revulsion slide over it.

I shouldn't have, but I took the bait.
Martin barely had

time to brace himself before I whirled
around slapped that same

clammy hand back down into his lap. My
next breath caught in

my throat. *Do not touch me*, I wanted to
say; *don't think I won't*

break every single finger on that hand.
But he was grinning at

me, his tongue on his cold sore, his hand
rising again. Only this

time, he wagged his fingers in my

direction, taunting. I leaned

forward, ready to grab that same wrist,
to shut the pig down

cold, hard, and fast.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

But that was exactly what he wanted.
The realization flowed

thick and slow through me, inching its
way to my guts. He

wanted me to show him what I could do,
to be willing to fuel

my abilities with the same kind of viciousness pumping through him.

I turned my back on him again, my fists tightening with his triumphant chuckles.

Had the anger even been mine, or had he pushed it into me?

“Everything okay back there?” Cate called over her shoulder.

“Hang on tight, we’re almost there.”

Whatever Marlinton normally looked

like, it was that much

worse under the cover of gray clouds
and a layer of misty rain.

Strange and terrible enough to distract
even Martin from the

games he was playing with my head.

The deserted shopping centers with
broken storefronts were

disturbing enough before we cut into the
first neighborhood of

little brown and gray and white houses.
We passed a number of

empty cars along the street and in driveways, some with bright

orange FOR SALE signs still stuck in the back window, but all

of them covered in a thick skin of brown, rotting leaves. The cars

were surrounded by piles of junk and boxes—furniture, rugs,

computers. Entire rooms full of rusting, useless electronics.

“What happened here?” I asked.

“It’s a little hard to explain, but do you remember what

I told you about the economy? After the attack in D.C., the

government was thrown into a tailspin, and one thing led to

another. We couldn't pay off our national debt, we couldn't

provide money to the states, we couldn't provide benefits, we

couldn't pay government employees. Even small towns like this

one didn't escape. People lost their jobs when companies failed,

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and then they lost their homes because they could no longer pay

for them. The whole thing is terrible.”

“But where is everyone?”

“In tent cities, outside of the big cities like Richmond and

D.C., trying to find work. I know a lot of people are trying to go

west because they think there’s going to be more work and food

available, but . . . well, I imagine it’ll be

safer. There's a lot of

looting and vigilante groups roaming about here.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “What about the police? Why

didn't they stop them?”

Cate bit her bottom lip. “It's like I just told you—the states

couldn't afford to pay their salaries, so they were let go. Most

of the police work is done by volunteers now, or the National

Guard. That's why you need to stay close to me, okay?"

It only got worse when we passed the elementary school.

The pastel jungle gym, or whatever was left of it, was stained

black and twisting toward the ground. Clusters of birds were

perched along its broken backbone, watching us as we blew past

the stop sign and turned the corner.

We passed what must have once been the cafeteria, but the

entire right side of the building had crumbled in on itself. The

rainbow mural of faces and suns painted on the other side of

the building was visible just beyond the tangled web of yellow

police tape blocking off the wreckage.

“Someone planted a bomb in the cafeteria, just before the

first Collection,” Cate said. “Set it off during lunchtime.”

“The government?” Martin pressed, but Cate didn’t have an

answer for him. She switched her blinker on as she made another

right, signaling her turn to no one in particular.

A city with no people.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

My breath fogged up the window as we left that neighborhood

behind and sped toward another strip mall. We passed a

Starbucks, a nail salon, a McDonald's,

and another nail salon

before Cate finally pulled into a gas station.

I saw the other car immediately—a tan SUV, a kind I had

never seen before. The man leaning against it wasn't pumping

gas. That would have been impossible. All of the pumping sta-

tions were beaten in, their hoses and nozzles strewn across the

concrete.

Cate honked, but the man had already spotted us and was

waving. He was young, too, at least as young as Cate, with a

small build and dark brown hair that fell over his forehead. As we

got closer, the smile on his face bloomed into something brilliant,

and I recognized him then as the man from Cate's thoughts.

The one she had pictured in dazzling colors and lights as we left

Thurmond.

Cate barely had the car in park before she threw her door

open and bolted straight for him. I heard her let out a sharp

laugh as she threw her arms around his neck, knocking into him

with so much force that the sunglasses flew off his face.

Martin's sweaty palm touched the spot where my neck met

my shirt collar, giving me a light squeeze, and that was it for me.

I pushed the car door open and stepped

outside, whether Cate

wanted me to or not.

The air was damp with a thin mist of rain, brightening the

trees and grass into an electric green. It clung to my cheeks and

hair, a welcome relief after spending the last few hours confined

with Martin the Mouth Breather, who seemed to be coated with

something perpetually sticky.

“—they found Norah about a half hour

after you left,” the

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man said as I walked up. “They sent two units after you. Did you

run into any trouble?”

“None.” Cate had an arm around his middle. “But I’m not

surprised. They’re stretched so thin right now. But where are

your—”

Rob shook his head sharply, a shadow passing over his face.

“I couldn’t get them out.”

All of Cate’s body seemed to slump.
“Oh . . . I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Looks like you had more success than I did—is she

all right?” Both of them turned to look at me.

“Ah—Rob, this is Ruby,” she said.

“Ruby, this is my . . . this

is Rob.”

“Such a boring introduction!” Rob clucked his tongue.

“They’ve been hiding the pretty ones at Thurmond, I see.”

He held out his hand to me. A large palm, five fingers,

hairy knuckles. Normal. By the way I stared, you would have

thought his skin was covered in scales. My hand stayed pressed

flat against my thigh. I took a step closer to Cate.

There wasn’t a gun in his hand, or a

knife, or a White Noise

machine, but I could see cuts and bruises, some fresh, criss-

crossing the back of his hand, all the way down to his wrist,

where the angry red lines disappeared beneath the sleeves of

his white shirt. It was only when he pulled his hand back that I

noticed a spray of small red spots on his right shirt cuff.

Rob's face tightened when he saw where I was looking. That

same hand disappeared behind Cate's back, tightening around

her waist.

“Total heartbreaker, right?” Cate glanced up at him. “She’ll

be perfect for inside jobs. Who could say no to that face? An

Orange.”

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Rob let out an appreciative whistle. “Damn.”

People who valued Oranges. Imagine that.

“Is Sarah all right?” I pressed.

Rob only looked confused.

“She means Norah Jenkins,” Cate said.

“The name Sarah was

just her cover.”

“She’s fine,” Rob said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “As

far as I know they’re still questioning her. I’m sure our eyes in

Thurmond will update us if anything

changes.”

My hands suddenly felt numb. “Is Cate *your* name?”

She laughed. “Yes, but my last name is Conner, not Begbie.”

I nodded, only because I didn’t know what else to do or say.

“Didn’t you say there were two of them?” Rob was staring

over my shoulder. On cue, I heard a door open and slam shut

behind me.

“There he is,” Cate said, clucking like a proud mother hen.

“Martin, get over here! I want you to meet your new comrade.

He’ll be driving with us to Georgia.”

Martin strode up and took the man’s hand before Rob had

the chance to offer it.

“Now,” Cate said, clapping her hands together. “We don’t

have much time, but we need you to wash up and change into

something a little less conspicuous.”

The SUV let out a steady chime as Rob opened one of the its

rear doors. As he turned, a few scattered rays of sunlight caught

the metal handle of the gun tucked into the waistband of his

jeans. I took a step back as he reached for something inside that

I couldn't see.

It was stupid of me not to have expected one or both of

them to be packing some kind of heat,
but my stomach tightened

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all the same. I turned away, looking at
the splotches of old oil

tattooed on the pavement and waited for
the car door to slam

shut again.

“Here you go,” Rob said, passing us
each a black backpack.

My fellow freak snatched his, checking

its contents like it was a

party favor bag.

“It looks like the bathrooms in the station still have some

running water. I wouldn’t try drinking it though,” Rob contin-

ued. “There’s a change of clothes and some necessities in there.

Don’t take a million years, but feel free to wash that camp off

you.”

Wash Thurmond off me? Rub it off like a

splatter of mud?

I may have been able to erase everyone else's memories, but I

couldn't scrub away my own.

I took my bag without a word, the beginnings of a head-

ache rumbling at the base of my skull. I knew what that meant,

well enough to take a step back. My heel caught on the uneven

cement, sending me stumbling toward the hard ground. I threw

out my arms in a lame attempt to reclaim my balance, but the

only solid thing I found was Rob's arm.

He may have thought he was being chivalrous by catching

me, but he should have let me fall. My brain released a blissful

little sigh as it went tumbling into Rob's thoughts. All at once,

the pressure that had been building in the back of my mind

released, sending a tingle racing down my spine. I gritted my

teeth at the sinking sensation, anger
flooding my system as I

tried to yank myself away.

Unlike Cate's memories, which came
and went like fluttering

eyelashes, Rob's thoughts seemed
almost lethargic . . . velvety

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and murky. They didn't piece themselves
together so much as

seep into one another—like ink dropped

into a glass of water,

the dark mass stretching and slithering
until it finally polluted

everything that had once been clean.

I was Rob, and Rob was staring down at
two dark shapes—

two dark sacks covered their heads, but
it was obvious that one

was a man and the other a woman. It was
the latter that had my

heart thrumming in my ears. The strength
of her sobbing shook

her entire body, but she never stopped struggling against the

plastic ties binding her hands and feet.

Rain came down around us like an afterthought, running

down through the gutters of the nearby buildings. Through the

filter of Rob's mind, it sounded like static. Two enormous black

Dumpsters came into focus out of the corner of my eye, and it

was only then that I realized we were in an alley, and we were

alone.

Rob's hand—my hand—reached out and
ripped the hood off

the woman, sending her dark hair flying
over her face.

But it wasn't a woman at all. It was a
girl, no older than I

was, wearing a set of dark green clothes.
A uniform. A camp

uniform.

Tears mixed with rain, dripping down
over her cheeks into

her mouth, Her colorless lips formed the shape *please* and her

eyes seemed to scream, *no*, but there was a gun in my hand,

silver and shining despite the low light. The same gun that was

tucked in the back of Rob's jeans. The same one that was now

pointed at the girl's forehead.

The gun jumped in my hand as it went off, but in that instant,

the flash lit up her terrified face, an unfinished scream drowned

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out by the bang. A spray of blood flicked up over my hand as

her face seemed to cave in on itself, staining the dark jacket I

wore . . . and the edge of the white cuff beneath it.

The boy died the same way, only Rob didn't bother to even

take his hood off before he ended his life. The bodies were lifted

into the Dumpsters. I shrank back and away from the scene,

watching it grow smaller, and smaller, and smaller until the dark,

cloudy haze of Rob's mind swallowed it whole.

I tugged myself free, coming up from the inky pool with a

sharp gasp.

Rob released my arm instantly, but Cate dove forward and

would have taken his place if I hadn't raised both hands to

stop her.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You’ve gone pale.”

“I’m okay,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm and steady.

“Still feeling a little woozy from the medicine.”

Martin let out an annoyed sigh behind me. He was hopping

from foot to foot, grumbling impatiently. He slid a suspicious eye

in my direction, and for half a heartbeat I was afraid he knew

exactly what had just happened. But, no
—connections like that

were fast, and lasted only a few
seconds, no matter how long it

felt to me.

I kept my own eyes on the ground,
carefully avoiding both

the adults' faces. I couldn't bring myself
to look at Rob, not after

seeing what he had done—and I knew if
I looked at Cate, I'd

give myself away in an instant. She'd
ask me what was wrong,

and I wouldn't be able to lie, not convincingly. I'd have to tell

her that her boyfriend or partner or whatever he was had left the

brains of two kids splattered all over an alleyway.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

Rob tried to offer me a plastic water bottle from the front

seat, his mouth stretched in a thin line. My eyes settled again on

the tiny red flecks staining his cuff.

He killed them. The words echoed through my head. It could

have happened days, maybe even weeks ago, but it didn't seem

likely. Wouldn't he have changed his shirt, or tried to clean it

off? *And then he came here—to kill us, too?*

Rob smiled at me, all of his teeth showing. *Smiled.* Like

he hadn't just snuffed out two lives at point-blank range and

watched the rain carry their blood into the gutters.

My hands were shaking so hard now that I had to fist them

around the backpack to keep him from noticing. I thought I had

escaped the monsters, that I'd left them locked up behind an

electric fence. But the shadows were alive, and they had chased

me here.

I'm next.

I swallowed the scream working its way
up my throat and

smiled right back at him, my insides
twisting. Because I had no

doubt, not one single wisp of
uncertainty, that if he knew what I

had just seen, Cate would spend the next
few days bleaching my

blood out of his shirt, too.

She knows, I thought, following Martin
into the gas station.

Cate, who smelled like rosemary, who
carried me down the hall-

way, who saved my life. *She must know.*

And she kissed him anyway.

The inside of the gas station looked like it had been ravaged

by wild animals, and there was a fairly good chance that it had

been. Muddy paw tracks in all shapes and sizes created dizzying

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patterns on the floor, cutting over sticky patches of red and

brown to the shelves of food.

The store smelled like sour milk, though the drink cases were

still flickering with intermittent electricity. Most of them had

been cleared out of sodas and beer, but there was a surprising

amount left—and no wonder. The store had marked up milk to

ten dollars a carton. The same went for the food. Some shelves

had rows of untouched chip bags and candy bars, all priced like

they were endangered, precious goods. Others had been picked

clean, or were exploding with popcorn and pretzels after their

bags had been gutted.

I had a plan before I even realized it.

While Martin entertained himself by fiddling with the soda

dispenser, I grabbed a few bags of chips and chocolate bars. A

flash of guilt cut through me as I stuffed them in my bag, but,

really, who was I even stealing from?
Who was going to call the
cops on me?

“There’s only one bathroom,” Martin
announced. “I’m using
it first. Maybe if you’re lucky, I’ll leave
some water for you.”

*Maybe if I’m lucky, you’ll drown
yourself in it.*

He slammed the door shut behind him,
and any guilt I might
have felt about leaving him behind
disappeared. Maybe it was

cruel of me, maybe I would spend the rest of my life feeling

guilty about abandoning him without so much as a warning,

but there was no way I could tell him what I was about to do

without alerting Cate and Rob. I didn't trust him enough not to

shout for them, or try to hold me there.

I wasted no time in stepping out of what had been Sarah's—

Norah's—scrubs, leaving them in a heap on the floor. The

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uniform I was wearing under them was a dead giveaway to what

I was, but the scrubs were too baggy to run in. I needed to get

away fast.

Martin must have turned the faucet up all the way, because I

could hear the water sputtering as I stepped around some of the

broken glass from the store's big

windows.

I came around a shelf just in time to see Rob break away

from kissing Cate. He patted around his jacket pockets, and out

came a cell phone. Whoever it was, he wasn't all that happy to

be talking to them. After a minute, he threw the phone at Cate

and moved to the driver's side of the car. She turned her back

to me, spreading out what looked to be a map over the hood of

the SUV. When Rob appeared again, he had a long, black object

tucked under one arm and he was holding another by its barrel.

Cate took the rifle from him without so much as even glancing

at it, and pulled its strap over her shoulder. Like it belonged

there.

I recognized them—of course I did. Every PSF officer that

walked the perimeter of the electric fence carried a M16 rifle,

and I was sure every camp controller that watched us from high

up on the Tower had one within reach, too. Is that what they're

going to use on us? I wondered. Or are they expecting me to use

one, too?

The rational part of my brain finally kicked in, stomping

down the chaos of panic and terror that had overtaken me.

Maybe there was a reason Rob had killed those kids. Maybe

they had tried to hurt him even though
they were tied up, or

maybe—

—maybe they had just refused to join up
with the League.

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

The realization rose inside my chest like
fire, burning

everything in its path. Just the thought,
the *image*, of having

to touch one of those guns, of being

expected to *fire* one of

them . . . is that what it would take to be
a part of their family?

Or would I have to be like Martin, and
become the weapon

myself?

My dad had served as a cop for over
seven years before he

had to shoot someone. He never told me
the whole story. I had

to hear it secondhand from the kids in my
class, who had read

about it in the paper. A hostage situation, I guess.

It wrecked him. Dad wouldn't come out of my parents' bed-

room until Grams drove out from Virginia Beach to pick me up.

When I came back home a few weeks later, he acted like nothing

had happened at all.

I don't know what would force me to pick up a weapon like

that, but it wasn't a group of strangers.

I had to get out. Get away. To where didn't matter in that

moment. I was a lot of things, terrible things, but I didn't want

to add murderer to that list.

There was a sound like crunching glass, just loud enough

to hear over the bathroom's running water and the buzz of the

drink coolers. The water shut off, and it was only then that I

heard the rustling again. I whirled around, just in time to see the

door with the employees only sign swing open and shut behind

the low food shelves.

A way out.

I glanced back out the window one last time, making sure

Cate and Rob still had their backs to me, before bolting past the

display of beef jerky and heading straight for that door.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

It's just a raccoon, I thought, or rats.
Not for the first time in

my short life, rats were a preferable
option to humans.

But the crinkling came again, louder, and
when I pushed the

door open, I wasn't staring at a group of
rats ravaging a bag of

snack food.

It was another kid.





EIGHT

He—no, she—opened her mouth, her lips parting

in a silent gasp. At first blink I hadn't been able to tell, but

she was definitely a girl, and a little one at that. Eight, maybe

nine at most, judging by her size. Just a baby, drowning in an

oversized Indy 500 shirt, complete with checkered flags and a

bright green race car. Even weirder, her hands and arms up to

her elbows were covered by bright yellow rubber gloves—the

kind my mom used to wear when she scrubbed the bathroom

or did the dishes.

The Asian girl's dark hair was shaved down into a buzz cut,

and she was wearing baggy boys' jeans, but her face was so pretty

she might have been a doll. Her full, heart-shaped lips formed a

perfect O of shock, and her skin paled in such a drastic way that

the freckles on her nose and cheeks stood out all the more.

“Where did you come from?” I managed to choke out.

The stunned look on her face flashed to one of terror. The

hand she didn't have jammed down into a container of Twizzlers

slammed the door shut with a streak of yellow.

“Hey!” I pushed it back open in time to see her dash out

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the door at the other end of the
stockroom, heading out into

the rain. I was right behind her, throwing
the backpack over

my shoulders as I ran past the shelves.
The door had caught on

a large rock and went flying open as I
kicked it and sprinted

through.

“Hey!”

Snack-sized bags of pretzels and chips

were spilling out from

her pockets and beneath her shirt.

She had every right to be terrified of the half-crazed girl

chasing after her. I could waste time feeling bad about it later;

but, for now, my mind had gotten a whiff of hope, and it wasn't

about it let it escape through a parking lot. She had to have come

from somewhere, and if she had a way out of this town, or a

place to hide until Cate and the others gave up on me, I wanted

to know about it.

The gas station's back lot was only four parking spaces

wide, and one of them was taken up by an overturned garbage

Dumpster. I heard animals tittering inside it as I sprinted after

her, keeping my eyes on the back of her gray T-shirt. Her legs

were pumping so fast beneath her that she tripped where the

lot's loose asphalt met a patch of wild grass. My arms flew out

to catch her, but the girl recovered just in time.

I was within two steps of being able to grab the back of her

shirt when she suddenly picked up her speed, zipping through

the small cluster of trees that separated the station from what

looked like another road.

“I just—just want to talk to you!” I called. *“Please!”*

What I should have said was, *I won't hurt you*, or *I'm not a*

PSF, or something that would have clued her in to the fact that I

was just as screwed in the safety department as she was. But my

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chest was on fire, and my lungs constricted, stretched tight and

useless by the pain in my ribs. The panic button was jumping up

into the air, bouncing against my chin
and shoulders. I ripped it

off so hard, the chain's clasp snapped.

The little girl leaped over a fallen tree
trunk, her sneakers

squelching through the forest muck. Mine
weren't much quieter,

but Martin's voice drowned us both out.

“Ruby!”

My blood ran so cold, it seemed to
cease pumping through

me altogether. I should never have

turned back to look over my

shoulder, but I did, more out of instinct than fear. I didn't real-

ize that my feet had stopped moving until Martin's round shape

appeared on the other side of the trees. He was close enough for

me to see the red flush that had overtaken his face, but he hadn't

seen me. Not yet.

“Ruby!”

I had expected to find nothing but trees

and air waiting for

me as I picked up my run, but there she was, a short distance

away. The girl had tucked herself behind a tree, not hiding, but

also not beckoning me forward. Her mouth was pulled into a

tight line, eyes darting back and forth between me and the direc-

tion of Martin's voice. When I started toward her, she took off

so fast that both feet jumped up from the ground. Scared off like

a little rabbit.

“Come *on*,” I gasped, pumping my arms at my side. “I just

want to—”

We broke through the trees, pouring out onto a deserted

stretch of road. On the other side of the dead-end street was a

line of little ramshackle houses, their windows boarded up like

black eyes. I thought for sure that she was heading toward the

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closest one—the house with the gray fence and green door—but

she made a hard right and ran for the minivan parked on the

side of the road.

The car was dented beyond repair, not just on the bumpers,

but on the side doors and the roof. And that was to say nothing

of the shot-out and cracked lights, and

the black paint that was

flaking off in clumps. The nicest thing about it was the cursive,

swirling logo that someone had painted along the sliding door:

betty jean cleaning.

But it was a *car*. A way out. I wasn't thinking about the

logistics at that point—about whether \ it had gas, or if its engine

would even start. I think my heart grew a pair of big, fluffy white

wings at the mere sight of it, and nothing was going to shoot it

down.

The girl was running so hard, she slammed into the side

paneling of the minivan and bounced off it. She landed hard on

the ground, but recovered faster than I ever would have. With

both yellow-gloved hands on the door handle, she ripped the

sliding door back with a sound loud enough to shake the birds

from the nearby roofs.

I got there just in time for her to close
the door and slam her

hand down on the lock.

I could see the little girl through my own
reflection in the

tinted glass—see how she must have
seen me. Eyes that were

wide and wild, a tangled mass of dark
hair, clothes that would

have otherwise been too small if camp
hadn't made me so damn

skinny I could see bones in my chest I didn't know existed. I ran

around to the other side of the car, putting the minivan between

me and anyone who'd come charging out of the trees.

"Please!" My voice was hoarse. Martin's bellowing voice was

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either echoing around in my mind, or it was actually getting

closer. The windows' tint was light enough that I could look

through them and skim the trees for any flash of his waxy skin. If

he was getting closer, then Cate and Rob wouldn't be far behind.

They must have heard him yelling by now.

Two choices, Ruby, I thought. Go back or run.

My head and heart were in agreement on *run*, but the rest of

my body—the parts that had been

tormented by White Noise,

poisoned, and mistreated by people who
claimed they only had

the best intentions—stubbornly held its
ground. I sagged against

the minivan, deflated. It was like
someone had crushed my chest

in a vise, spinning the handle until every
ounce of air and cour-

age had been squeezed out of me.

Years at Thurmond had taught me to stop
believing I could

ever get away from the life people were so eager to set for me.

I don't know why I thought it would be any different on the outside.

I heard footsteps crashing through the trees and under-

growth, louder with each second. When I looked up again,

Cate's startlingly blond hair was weaving in and out of the trees,

glowing under the drizzly clouds like a firefly.

“Ruby!” I heard her call. “Ruby, where are you?”

And then there was Rob, standing right behind her with the

gun in his hands. I looked right to the houses on the street’s dead

end. Farther down the opposite end of the street, I saw signs

with symbols I didn’t recognize—but that, the unknown, that

had to be better than going back to Cate.

The little girl inside of the car looked at me, then turned to

look at the trees. Her lips pressed together, pulling down into

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a frown. One hand was clenched on the door handle, the other

on her seat's armrest. She started to stand once, only to sit back

down and look one more time in my direction.

I swiped at my face with the back of my hand and took a

step back. Hopefully the girl knew well enough to hide herself

when Cate and Rob ran after me. I'd lead them as far away as

I could—it was the least I could do after scaring a few years off

her life.

I hadn't even fully turned to go when I heard the door roll

open behind me. A pair of hands reached out and seized the back

of my uniform shirt, twisting the fabric for a better grip. When

she yanked, I fell back, hitting the closest seat. My neck snapped

against the armrest and I rolled onto the rough carpet behind the

front passenger seat. The door roared shut behind me.

I blinked, trying to clear the dark spots swimming in my

vision, but the other girl wasn't about to wait for me to get

settled. She climbed over my tangled legs to get to the wayback

seat, grabbing my shirt's collar and

giving it a hard tug.

“Okay, okay,” I said, crawling toward her. My fingers slid

against the minivan’s gray carpets. With the exception of a few

stacked newspapers and tied-off plastic grocery bags tucked

under the wayback seat, the inside of the minivan was pretty

well kept.

She motioned for me to crouch down behind one of the mid-

dle seats. As I pressed my knees against my chest, I realized that

despite the fact I had followed her order to the letter, she still

hadn't spoken a single word to me.

“What's your name?” I asked. She draped herself over the

top of the backseat, her feet kicking at the air as she dug around

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for something in the trunk. If she heard

me, she pretended

not to.

“It’s all right; you can talk to me . . .”

Her face was flushed when she reemerged, a paint-splattered

white sheet in hand. She pressed a finger to her lips and I wisely

shut my mouth. The girl shook out the folded fabric and threw

it over my head. The smell of fake lemon cleaner and bleach

assaulted my nostrils as the sheet settled

around me. I opened

my mouth to protest, reaching up to yank it away from my face,

but something stopped me.

Someone was coming—no, more than one person. I caught

snippets of their back and forth, heard their feet slap against the

pavement. The sound of a door opening stopped my heart dead

in my chest.

“—I swear to God it was her, Liam!”

The voice was deep, but

it didn't sound like an adult. "And, look, I told you she'd beat us

back. Suzume, did you run into trouble?"

The other car door opened. Someone else—Liam?—let out

a relieved sigh.

"Thank God," he said, with a hint of a southern drawl. "Come

on, come on, come on, get in. I don't know what's going on, but

I don't want to stay long enough to find

out. The skiptracers
were bad enough—”

“Why won’t you admit that it was her?”
the other voice
snapped.

“—because we ditched her in Ohio,
that’s why—”

Above the sound of Liam’s voice and the
blood pounding

between my ears, I heard another voice.

“Ruby! *Ruby!* ”

Cate.

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I pressed both hands against my mouth
and squeezed my

eyes shut.

“What in the world?” the first voice
said. “Is that what I

think it is?”

The first gunshot popped like a
firecracker. It might have

been the distance, or the army of trees and undergrowth muf-

fling it, but it seemed harmless. A warning. The next one had

much sharper teeth.

“*Stop!*” I heard Cate scream. “Don’t shoot—!”

“LEE!”

“I know, I know!” The engine sputtered to life, and the squeal

of the tires wasn’t far behind. “Zu, seat belt!”

I tried to brace myself, but the car tossed me back and forth

between the seats. At one point, my head cracked back against

the plastic side paneling and drink holder, but no one was pay-

ing attention to the strange noises in the backseat when someone

was firing a gun.

I wondered if Rob had given the other rifle to Martin.

“Zu, did something happen in the gas station?” The voice identi-

fied as Liam pressed. There was an edge of urgency to his words,

but not panic. We had been driving for over ten minutes now,

and were well away from the guns. His other companion, how-

ever, was a completely different story.

“Oh my God, more skiptracers? What, were they having a

freaking *convention*? You realize what would have happened if

we’d been caught, don’t you?” he railed.

“And they were shoot-

ing at us! *Shooting!* With a *gun!*”

Somewhere to the right of me, the little girl giggled.

“Well I’m glad you find it funny!” the other one said. “Do

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you know what happens when you get shot, Suzume? The bullet

rips through—”

“Chubs!” The other boy’s voice was sharp enough to cut off

whatever gory tale he was about to share. “Settle down, okay?”

We’re fine. That was a little bit closer than I would have liked,

but still. We’ll just have to try to make better mistakes tomorrow,

right, Zu?”

The first voice let out a strangled groan.

“I’m sorry about before,” Liam said. His voice was gentle,

which was enough for me to put together he was talking to the

girl, not the guy who had moved on to moaning in dismay. “Next

time I’ll go with you to get food. You’re not hurt, right?”

The vibrations from the road dulled their voices. A loose

penny was clattering around so loudly in the drink holder that

I almost reached up from under the sheet to grab it. When the

first boy spoke again, I had to strain my ears to hear him. “Did it

sound like they were looking for

someone to you?"

"No, it sounded like *they were shooting at us!*"

Feeling left my hands, draining from the tips of my fingers.

You're safe, I told myself. They're kids, too.

Kids who had unwittingly put themselves in the line of fire

for me.

I should have known this would happen.
This, not my fear of

setting off alone into a deserted town,
should have been my first

concern. But I had panicked and it was
like my brain had melted

into a simmering pool of terror.

“—a number of things,” Liam was
saying, “but let’s try to

focus on finding East River—”

I needed to get out now. Right now. This
had been a terrible

idea, maybe even my worst. If I left now,
they still had a chance

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of escaping Cate and Rob. *I* would still have a chance of escaping

them, too.

I looped the straps of the backpack over my shoulders again

and kicked the sheet off. Taking in a deep drag of the musty,

cool air-conditioning, I used the wayback seat to prop myself up.

Two teenage boys were in the front seat,

facing the road. It

was raining harder now; the fat drops
were falling too fast for

the windshield wipers to keep up with
them, making it look as

though we were headed straight into an
Impressionist's vision

of West Virginia. Silver skies were
above and a black road was

below—and somewhere in between, the
luminescent glow of the

trees with their new spring coats.

Liam, our driver, was wearing a beat-up leather jacket, darker

across the shoulders where the rain had soaked through. His hair

was a light, ashy blond that stood on end when he ran a hand

through it. Every now and then he would glance to the dark-

skinned teen in the passenger seat, but it wasn't until he cast

a quick look into the rearview mirror that I saw his eyes were

blue.

“I can’t see out of the back window when you—” His words

choked off as he did a double take.

The minivan lurched to the right as he spun around in his

seat and took the wheel with him. The other kid let out a stran-

gled noise as the car jerked to the right, toward the shoulder

of the road. The girl glanced back over her shoulder at me, her

expression somewhere between surprise and exasperation.

Liam slammed on the brakes. Both of the car's other passen-

gers gasped as their seat belts locked over their chests, but I had

nothing holding me back from flying between the two middle

seats. After what felt like a short eternity, but was likely only a

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hot second, the minivan quivered to a dead stop, letting off a

long squeal of pain.

Both boys were staring down at me, wearing two completely

different expressions. Liam's tanned face had gone porcelain pale,

his mouth hanging open in an almost comical way. The other

boy only glared at me through his thin, silver-framed glasses,

his lips pursed in disapproval, the same way my mom's used to

when she found out I had stayed up past my bedtime. His ears,

which were a touch too big for his head,
stuck out from his skull;

everything between them, from the wide
expanse of his forehead

down past the thin bridge of his nose to
his full lips, seemed to

darken in anger. For a split second I was
afraid that he was a

Red, because judging by the look in his
eyes, he wanted nothing

more than to burn me to a crisp.

Boys. Why did it have to be boys?

I peeled myself up off the carpets and bolted toward the side

door. My fingers squeezed the door handle, but no matter how

hard I pulled it, the door didn't budge.

“*Zu!*” Liam cried, looking back and forth between us. She

merely folded her hands in her lap, rubber gloves squeaking, and

blinked at him innocently. Like she had no idea how they had

come across the stowaway currently sprawled out by her feet.

“We all agreed— *no strays*.” The other boy shook his head.

“That’s why we didn’t take the kittens!”

“Oh, for the love of . . .” Liam slumped down his seat, press-

ing his face into his hands. “What were we going to do with a

box of abandoned kittens?”

“Maybe if that black heart of yours hadn’t been willing to

leave them to *starve*, we could have found them new, loving

homes.”

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Liam gave the other boy a look of pure amazement. “You’re

never going to get over those cats, are you?”

“They were innocent, defenseless kittens and you left them

outside someone’s mailbox! A *mailbox!*”

“Chubs,” Liam groaned. “Come *on*.”

Chubs? That had to have been a joke.
The kid was as skinny

as a stick. Everything about him, from
his nose to his fingers,

was long and narrow.

He leveled Liam with a withering stare.
I don't know what

amazed me more, the fact that they were
arguing about kittens,

or that they'd managed to forget that I
was in the car.

"Excuse me!" I interrupted, slamming
my palm against the

window. “Can you please unlock the door?”

That shut them up at least.

When Liam finally turned back toward me, his expression

was entirely different than before. He looked serious, but not

altogether unhappy or suspicious. Which is a lot more than I

could have said for myself if our situations had been reversed.

“Are you the one they were looking for?” he asked. “Ruth?”

“*Ruby*, ” Chubs corrected.

Liam waved his hand. “Right. Ruby.”

“Just unlock the door, please!” I yanked at the handle again.

“I made a mistake. This was a mistake! I was selfish, I know that,

so you have to let me go before they catch up.”

“Before who catches up? Skiptracers?” Liam asked. His eyes

darted over me, from my haggard face down my forest green

uniform to my mud-stained shoes. To the Psi number that had

been written on their canvas toes in permanent marker. A look

of horror flickered over his face. “Did you just come from a

camp?”

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I felt Suzume—Zu’s—dark eyes on me, but I held Liam’s

gaze and nodded. “The Children’s

League broke me out.”

“And you ran away from them?” Liam pressed. He looked

back at Zu for confirmation. She nodded.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Chubs inter-

rupted. “You heard her—unlock the stupid door! We already

have PSFs and skiptracers after us; we don’t need to add the

League to the list! They probably think we took her, and if they

put in the call that there are freaks roaming around in a beat-up

black minivan . . .” He couldn’t bring himself to finish.

“Hey,” Liam said, holding up a finger, “don’t talk about Black

Betty that way.”

“Oh, *excuse me* for hurting the feelings of a twenty-year-old

minivan.”

“He’s right,” I said. “I’m sorry, please—I don’t want any

more trouble for you.”

“You want to go back to them?” Liam was facing me again,

his mouth set in a grim line. “Listen, it’s none of my business,

Green, but you have the right to know that whatever lies they

fed you probably aren’t true. They aren’t our angel network.

They have their own agenda, and if they plucked you out of

camp, it means they have a plan for you.”

I shook my head. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Okay,” he returned in a calm voice. “Then why are you in

such a hurry to get back?”

There was nothing judgmental or accusatory about the ques-

tion, so why did I still feel like an idiot? Something hot and itchy

bubbled up in my throat, drifting up until it settled behind my

eyes. Oh God, the kid was looking at me with all the sympathy

and pity required of someone watching a
stray puppy being put

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down. I didn't know if the emotion
swelling inside me was anger

or embarrassment, but I didn't have time
to sort it out.

“No, but I can't—I didn't mean to drag
you into—I mean, I

did mean to, but . . .”

I saw Zu move out of the corner of my

eye, reaching for

me. I jerked away, sucking in a harsh breath. A hurt expression

crossed her face, staying long enough for me to feel guilty about

it. She had been trying to help me—to be kind to me. She didn't

know what kind of monster she had saved.

If she had, she would never have unlocked the door.

“Do you want to go back to them?”

Chubs was looking at Liam, and Liam was looking at me. He

had caught me again with his eyes, and I hadn't even realized it.

"No," I said, and it was the truth. "I don't."

He didn't say anything, only shifted the minivan out of park.

The van rolled forward.

What are you doing, Ruby? I willed my hand to reach for the

door, but it seemed too far and my hand too heavy. *Get out. Get*

out now.

“Lee, don’t you dare,” Chubs began. “If the League comes

after us . . .”

“It’ll be okay,” Liam said. “We’re just taking her to the near-

est bus station.”

I blinked. That was more than even I was expecting. “You

don’t have to.”

Liam waved me off. “It’s fine. Sorry we can’t do more. Can’t

risk it.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Chubs said. “So explain to me why we

aren’t taking her to one of the train stations, which are closer?”

When I looked back up, Liam was studying me, his light

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eyebrows pulled tight together by some unspoken thought. I

tried not to squirm under his gaze.

“Remind me again—Ruby,

right? I’m sure you’ve caught on by now,
but I’m Liam, the

lovely lady behind me is Suzume.”

She gave a shy smile. I turned and raised
a brow in the direc-

tion of the other boy. “I’m guessing your
name isn’t actually

Chubs?”

“No,” he sniffed. “Liam gave me that
name at camp.”

“He was a bit of a porker.” Liam had a

small smile on his

face. “Turns out field labor and a restricted diet are better than

fat camp. Zu can back me up on this one.”

But Zu wasn't paying attention, not to any of us. She had

pulled her hoodie up over her ears and twisted around in her

seat, so that she was staring over the top of it, out the back win-

dow. Her lips were parted, but she couldn't bring the words to

them. The color drained from her round face.

“Zu?” Liam said. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t need to point. Even if we hadn’t seen the tan SUV

speeding straight for us, it would have been impossible to miss

the bullet that blew through the back window and shattered it.





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The single bullet cut a path straight down the

center of the minivan, exiting out through the windshield. For

a moment, none of us did anything but stare at the hole and

spreading spiderweb of cracks radiating out from it

“Holy sh—!” Liam threw the car forward, slamming his foot

down all the way on the gas. He seemed to have forgotten that

we were in a Dodge Caravan and not a BMW, because it went

from zero to sixty in what felt like thirty minutes. Black Betty's

body began to shake, rattling from more than just the holes and

cracks in the road.

I whirled around, searching for Rob's SUV, but the car

behind us was a bright red pickup truck, and the man leaning

out of the passenger window of the truck, rifle in hand, was not

Rob.

“I told you!” Chubs yelled. “*I told you they were skiptracers!*”

“Yes, you were right,” Liam yelled right back. “But could you try to be useful, too?”

He jerked the car left, just as the man fired off another shot.

It must have gone wide, because it never hit the car, not that I

could tell. He fired again, and that bullet had far better luck; it

slammed into Black Betty's bumper. We felt the hit like a brick

to the back; every single one of let us out a sharp gasp. In Chubs'

case, he moaned and crossed himself.

Zu was slouched down in her seat, her chest pressed against

her knees. Her hood hid her face, but it couldn't mask the way

her entire body shook. I put a hand on her back, holding her

down.

Another bang sounded behind us, but this time, it wasn't a

gunshot.

“What in the . . .” Liam risked a look back over his shoulder.

“Are you kidding me?”

My heart fell like a stone into my stomach. The red truck

jolted forward and I saw the driver—a dark haired woman with

glasses—tug the wheel to the side, trying

to shake the truck free

from the tan SUV that had rammed into it. I didn't need to see

who was driving it to know who *that* vehicle belonged to: Cate

and Rob. But, then, who was in the pickup truck?

“It *is* her!” Chubs cried. “I told you! She found us!”

“Then who's the guy with the gun?” Liam cried. “Her

boyfriend?”

The man who had fired at us turned his attention to taking

out the SUV behind him, twisting around in the window. He

lasted half a breath. A gunshot from the SUV clipped him in the

chest and sent an explosive spray of blood into the air. The crack

of the next bullet sent the shooter's lifeless body sliding out of

the passenger window of the truck. The driver—the woman—

didn't so much as look back at him.

I watched the red truck finally break away from the SUV's

front bumper. With both of its back tires blown out, it swerved

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into the other lane, spinning out, until it came to a jolting stop

on the shoulder of the highway.

“That’s one,” I heard Liam say. I turned back, fully expect-

ing to see Rob’s gun trained on me

through the blown-out back

windshield of our van. Only, Rob was behind the wheel.

Cate was the one in the passenger seat, a rifle steady between

her hands.

“Please, just let me go,” I said, grabbing Liam’s shoulder. “I’ll

go back with them. No one has to get hurt.”

“Yes!” Chubs said. “Pull over, let her out!”

“Both of you shut up!” Liam said, throwing Black Betty into

the right lane and then back into the left. The SUV followed us,

more than keeping up. I couldn’t tell if we had slowed down,

or if they had somehow gunned it harder, because in the next

breath, the SUV rammed into us, and not even the seat belts

could keep us from jerking forward.

Liam muttered something under his breath, which was lost

in the sudden onslaught of heavy rain. He rolled down his win-

dow and threw a hand outside, as if to motion for the SUV to

go around us.

“Do something!” Chubs shouted, bracing his hands against

the steering wheel.

“I’m trying!” he said. “I can’t concentrate!”

He’s trying to use his abilities. The realization crept up through

my terror.

The fat droplets splattering the window
blurred the trees

around us, but Liam didn't bother with
the wipers. If he had,

he might have seen the other car blazing
toward us from the

opposite direction. Its horn screeched to
life, and woke Liam

from his trance.

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The minivan swerved back into the right lane, narrowly

missing a head-on collision with the sedan. If that little car hadn't

slammed on its brakes, the SUV would have plowed right into it,

too. Both Zu and I whirled around just in time to see the SUV

spin back into the right lane. Cate managed to recover quickly,

and they were speeding toward us again before we had a chance

to catch our breaths.

“Liam,” I begged. “Please, just pull over. I won’t let them do anything to you!”

I don’t want to go back.

I don’t want to go back.

I don’t want to . . .

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Green!” Liam’s voice cut into my thoughts. “Can you drive?”

“No—”

“Can you see better than Chubs?”

“Maybe, but—”

“Great!” he said, reaching back for my arm. “Come on up to the captain’s seat.”

He snorted, even as another bullet pinged against Black

Betty’s metal skin. “Come on, it’s just like riding a bike. Right

pedal is gas to go, left is brake, steer with wheel. That’s all you need to know.”

“Wait!” But apparently, I didn’t get a say

in the matter. He

swerved back into the left lane just as the SUV came up for

another tap. Instead of speeding up, his foot came down hard

on the brake. Black Betty skidded to a halt, and the SUV blew

right by us.

It happened too fast for me to put up any kind of fight. He

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unsnapped his seat belt and pulled me toward the driver's seat

just as he stood from it. The car rolled forward on its own accord

and I panicked, slamming my foot down on what I thought was

the brake pedal. Black Betty leaped forward, and this time I was

the one that screamed.

“Brake is on the left!” Liam flew against the dashboard as the

SUV recovered. I heard its tires scream as Rob turned the truck

around and kicked up the speed. “Hit the gas!”

“Why can’t he drive?” I asked in a strangled voice.

Chubs pushed the passenger’s seat back far enough for him

to climb over it into the back, and Liam took Chubs’s seat.

“Because,” he said, rolling down the window, “he can barely

see five feet in front of him. Trust me, you don’t want him to

drive, darlin’. Now— *hit the gas!*”

I did as I was told. The car sprung forward again, sending my

heart up into my throat. The wheels spun against the wet asphalt.

Liam was half hanging out of the window, half sitting on it.

“Faster!” he said.

The rain fell thick and heavy, but the SUV’s headlights

pierced the mist as I drove the van straight toward them. We

were going so fast that the steering wheel shook in my hands,

jerking around like it had a life of its own. I bit back a frustrated

scream and tried to let up on the gas, but Liam wasn't having it.

“No, keep going!”

“Lee,” Chubs was hunched over in his seat. “This is insane—

what are you doing?”

He had been so quiet that I'd almost forgotten he was in the

van. With the speedometer creeping past eighty, ninety, ninety-

five, I wasn't remembering much at all.

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And that's when it went to hell.

There was a horrible bang—a thousand times worse than the

sound of a balloon exploding—and the van was spinning, the

wheel dancing right out of my hands.

“Straight!” Liam was shouting,
“Straighten out!”

“Sh—!” The wind was knocked out of my chest by my seat

belt, but I fought against the natural turn of the wheel long

enough to get us heading straight again. The car tilted back,

leaving a trail of sparks on the road behind us. We were staring

the SUV down again, making a second head-on pass at them.

“Keep going toward them—don’t stop!” Liam yelled.

But the tire, I thought, my hands

strangling the steering

wheel, *the tire . . .*

Chubs had reached for Liam's legs, steadying him before he

could go flying out the window. "Let go!" he snapped. "I'm fine,

I've got it now!"

I didn't know what Liam had meant by "it," not until I

looked up into the rearview mirror and saw the dark body of a

tree come hurtling out of the woods,

guided in front of the SUV,

by nothing other than a flick of Liam's hand.

With his attention focused on the minivan barreling toward

them, Rob didn't have time to jerk the car out of the tree's path.

I spun my hands around the wheel blindly, until we were facing

away from the wreckage. I heard the sound of shattering glass

and crunching metal as Rob tried to veer, only to overcorrect.

When I looked back in the side mirror,
the SUV was on its side

in a smoking heap. Beside it was the
splintered body of a tree,

still rolling to a stop after the collision.

“What did you do?” I had to yell over
the chatter of the wind

and road. “I thought—”

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Chubs was the one to answer, his face
ashen. “Now do you

get it? They weren't going to stop.”

Liam slid back inside of the window,
plopping down with

a long sigh. His hair was standing up on
all ends, dusted with

leaves and little twigs.

“Okay, Green,” he said, without a single
trembling word,

“they blew the back tire out, so you’re
driving on the rim. Just

keep heading straight and start to slow
down. Get off on the

next ramp.”

I clenched my jaw so hard that it ached.

“You all right, Zu?” he asked. The girl gave him two thumbs

up, her yellow gloves the only bright spot of color in the van.

“Well, I’m fine, thanks for asking,” Chubs said. His little

glasses were crooked on his face as he smoothed his blue button-

down shirt. For good measure, he leaned forward and smacked

the back of Liam's head. "And by the way, are you out of your

freaking mind? Do you know what happens when a body is

thrown from a car at high velocity?"

"No," Liam interrupted, "but I imagine it's not pretty or

appropriate for an eleven-year-old's ears."

I glanced back at Zu. Eleven? That couldn't be right . . .

"Oh, so you can throw her in the path of bullets, but she

can't hear a scary story?" Chubs crossed his arms over his chest.

Liam reached down and pulled his seat back upright. When

he sat back, it was with a grimace and clenched fists. There was

a fresh cut above his eye. Blood dripped from his chin.

I saw the green highway sign through the haze of rain. It

didn't matter what town or exit number it said. I just wanted to

get off the road and out of the driver's

seat.

My entire body was numb, exhausted, as
I took my foot off

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the gas. The minivan followed the curve
of the ramp with only

the slightest nudging, and by the time we
reached the road, it

came to a natural stop. I pressed a hand
to my chest to make sure

my heart hadn't given out on me.

Liam reached over and put the parking brake on.

“You did a good job,” he began. His voice was quieter than

I expected. Unfortunately, it did nothing to calm the pissed off

snake that was coiled tight around my stomach.

I reached over and punched him in the arm. *Hard*.

“Ow!” he cried, pulling away from me with wide eyes. “What

was that for?”

“That was *not* like riding a bike, you asshole!”

He stared at me a moment, his lips twitching. It was Suzume

who burst out into a fit of silent laughter, an endless stream of

gasping and shaking that turned her face bright pink and left her

breathless. Seconds passed with it as the only sound able to float

up above the rain—at least until Chubs put his face in his hands

and let out a long groan.

“Oh yeah,” Liam said, popping his door open, “you’re gonna fit in real nice.”

The rain had slowed to a drizzle by the time Liam got to work

on the back tire. I had stayed exactly where I was in the driver’s

seat, mostly because I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to be

doing. The other two kids had jumped out of the car after him,

Suzume heading to the back of the van with Liam, and Chubs

in the exact opposite direction. I
watched through the cracked

windshield as he made his way toward a
sign pointing us in the

direction of the Monongahela National
Forest. After a minute,

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he pulled something—a paperback book
—out of his back pocket,

and sat down at the edge of the road. Out
of more than a little

envy, I squinted, trying to make out the book's title, but half of

the cover was missing, and the other half covered by his hand. I

don't know if he was actually reading or just glaring at the text.

I had pulled us over into Slaty Fork, West Virginia, if the

road signs were to be trusted. What I thought had been some

hickville back road had actually been Highway 219, in the middle

of nowhere. Marlinton might have lost

its people, but it didn't

look Slaty Fork had any to begin with.

I stood up from the driver's seat and made my way to the

back of the minivan. My hands were still trembling, as if try-

ing to shake out that last bit of adrenaline singing in my blood.

The black backpack that Rob and Cate had given me had been

thrown into the backseat, covered in a few loose sheets of news-

paper and an empty bottle of Windex.

I brushed the backpack off and set it down next to me on

the seat. The newspaper was over three years old and stiff with

age. There was a half-page ad for a new face cream someone had

oh-so-cleverly called Forever Young.

I flipped the sheet over, looking for any actual news. I

skimmed over an opinion piece that celebrated the rehabilitation

camps and was more amused than offended that Psi kids were

now being openly referred to as “mutant time bombs.” There was

also a short article on rioting that the reporter claimed was “the

direct result of escalating tensions between the West and East

government on new birth legislation.” At the very bottom of the

page, past some fluff story about the anniversary of some train

conductors’ strike, was a picture of

Clancy Gray.

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“President’s Son Attends Children’s
League Hearing,” is

what the headline beneath it said. I
didn’t need to read more

than the first two or three lines to get the
basic gist: the presi-

dent was too big of a coward to come
out hiding after a failed

assassination attempt, so he sent his

freak baby to do the dirty

work for him. How old was Clancy now, I wondered. The pic-

tures at Thurmond were identical to this one, and I had never

thought of him as anything over than eleven or twelve. But he

must have been eighteen or close to by now. Practically an old

geezer by our standards.

I tossed the paper aside in disgust and reached for my back-

pack again. Rob had said there was a change of clothes inside,

and if that was the case, I was getting out of my Thurmond

uniform once and for all.

A plain white shirt, a pair of jeans, a belt, and a zip-up hoodie.

I could handle that.

The knock on the window startled me enough that I nearly

bit my tongue clean off. Liam's face appeared there, his face

drawn in tense lines. "Can you bring those clothes to me for a

sec? I need to show you something."

The very second I knew his eyes were on me, every bone,

muscle, and joint in my body snapped to attention. With the

faint taste of blood in my mouth, I
jumped out of the sliding

door, taking in the sight of the van. If it
were possible, the car

looked worse than before—like a toy
car that someone had

wedged down the sink and run through
the garbage disposal. My

fingers came up to trace one of the fresh
punctures on the side

paneling, where a bullet had slammed
through the thin metal.

Liam knelt beside Zu, who was holding

on to the spare tire

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with everything she had, and went to work cranking the van

up on the jack and off the demolished back right tire. I came to

stand behind them just in time to watch Liam wave his hand in

front of the hubcap. The nuts and bolts twirled out on his com-

mand, collecting in a neat pile on the

ground.

Blue, I registered. Liam was Blue. What did that make the

others?

“Okay,” he began. He blew a strand of his light hair out of his

eyes. “Take out the shirt you were about to change into.”

“I’m—I’m not changing out here,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “Really? You’re worried about your mod-

esty when we’re going to have League

agents on our tail in a

matter of hours? Priorities, Green. Take out the shirt.”

I watched him for a moment, but even I wasn’t sure what I

was looking for.

“Feel around the collar,” Liam said. He set another nut on

the ground by his feet. “You’ll find a bump.”

I did. It was small, no bigger than a pea, sewn into the other-

wise nondescript shirt.

“Chubs has a little fancy lady kit under the front seat,” he

said. “If you’re going to change into it, you need to cut the

tracker out of that shirt.”

The “little fancy lady kit” turned out to be a box of thread,

scissors, and a tiny piece of embroidery. On a scrap of fabric,

someone—Chubs?—had sewn a perfect black square. I stared at

the mark, rubbing my thumb over its raised surface.

“Anyway, you should probably change out of the uniform,”

Liam continued. “But be sure to check the pants and the sweater,

too. I wouldn’t put it past them to use more than one.”

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He was right again. I found one sewn into the waistband

of the jeans, one in the hem of the hoodie, and even one glued

inside the belt buckle—four trackers for one girl, plus one that

had been sewn into the lining of the backpack itself.

Liam finished replacing the tire with the spare faster than

I thought possible. Zu helped him place the nuts back in their

sockets and slowly crank the car back down. When he handed

the tools to her, she knew exactly where

to put them in the
trunk.

“Here,” he said, holding his hand out to me. “I’ll take care of

them.” My hands trembled as I handed the trackers to him. He

threw them on the ground, and crushed them beneath the heel

of his shoe.

“I don’t understand . . .” I began. But I did, in a way. They

wouldn’t have gone to all that trouble

breaking me out if they

hadn't had a method of keeping tabs on me if I got recaptured

or separated from them.

Liam's hand came out toward me, and the sheer panic at

the thought of his touch had me jumping back, trying to put as

much air between us as I could. It still wasn't far enough; his

hand dropped between us, but I felt the warmth of his upturned

palm brush my shoulder as if it had actually rested there. My

arms came up and crossed over my chest, and some mangled

mess of anxiety and guilt rose up from deep in my guts. I tried

to focus on the Psi identification numbers on the top of my shoes

to keep from jumping away again.

You are acting like a nervy five-year-old, I told myself. Stop it.

He's just another kid.

“They tell you a lot of lies in the Children’s League, the

biggest being that you’re free,” he said.
“They talk about love

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and respect and *family*, but I don’t know
any family that puts a

tracking device on someone and then
sends them out to be shot

up and blown away.”

“But we didn’t have to kill them,” I said.

My fingers tight-

ened around the backpack straps. “There was another kid inside.

Martin. He didn’t . . . he didn’t deserve to . . .”

“You mean—” Liam wiped the grease and dirt from his hands

off on the front of his jeans. “The kind of —” He made a vague

motion with his hands, which I think was supposed to indicate

Martin’s plump stature. “That guy?”

I nodded.

“The tree didn’t actually hit them,” Liam said, leaning against

the minivan’s sliding door. “They might still be alive.”

Liam guided me back toward the passenger seat and whis-

tled to get Chubs’s attention. Somewhere behind me, I heard Zu

climb back into Black Betty.

“Look,” he continued, “they all wear the trackers. I’m sure

another League agent will be along in a little while to help them.

You can go back if you want, or we can take you to the bus sta-

tion like I said we would.”

My hands were still by my side, my face as blank as a clear

sky, but I wasn’t fooling him. He tuned into my guilt like I had

been wearing it plain as day on my face. “It doesn’t make you a

bad person, you know—to want to live your own life.”

I looked back and forth between the road
and his face, more

confused now than ever. It didn't make
sense for him to want to

help me, not when he already had two
other people counting on

him. That he wanted to protect.

Liam opened the back door for me,
tilting his head toward

the empty seat inside. But before I could
even consider the cost

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of staying with them, if just for a short while, Chubs's arm shot

out and he ripped the sliding door shut in front of my face.

“Chubs—” Liam warned.

“Why,” Chubs began, “were you with the Children's League?”

“Hey now,” Liam said. “This is a don't-ask-don't-tell opera-

tion. Green, you—”

“No,” Chubs said, “*you* decided that.

You and Suzume. If

we're going to be stuck with her, I want to know who this person

is and why we got chased down by gun-toting lunatics trying to

get her back.”

Liam lifted his hands in surrender.

“I . . .” What could I tell them that wouldn't sound like

a complete and total lie? My head felt light; I was almost too

exhausted to think. “I was . . .”

Zu gave me a nod of encouragement, her eyes bright.

“I was a runner in the Control Tower,” I blurted. “I saw the

access codes to the computer servers the League wants access

to. I have a photographic memory, and I’m good with numbers

and codes.”

That was probably overkill, but apparently I had sold it.

“What about your friend? What’s his deal?”

The longer they stared at me, the harder it became to not

fidget. *Get a grip, Ruby.*

“You mean Martin?” I said, my voice sounding high to my

own ears. “Yesterday was the first time I had ever seen him. I

don’t know what his story was. I didn’t ask.”

I wished I didn’t know what Martin’s story was.

Chubs slapped the side of the minivan. “Don’t tell me you

believe that, Lee. We knew everyone by the time we broke out.”

Broke out. They actually escaped?
Shock left me speechless

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for several moments until I asked,
finally, “Really? All three
thousand of them?”

The boys took a step back at the same
time.

“You had three thousand kids at your

camp?” Liam asked.

“Why?” I looked between them, unnerved. “How many were in your camp?”

“Three hundred at most,” Liam said. “Are you sure? Three *thousand*?”

“Well, it’s not like they gave us an official number. There

were thirty kids per cabin and about a hundred of those. There

used to be more, but they sent the Reds,

Oranges, and Yellows

away.”

Apparently, I had blown his mind. Liam let out a strangled

noise at the back of his throat. “Holy crap,” he finally managed

to squeeze out. “What camp was it?”

“It’s none of your business,” I said. “I’m not asking you where

you were.”

“We were in Caledonia, Ohio,” Chubs said, ignoring a sharp

look from Liam. “They stuck us in an abandoned elementary

school. We broke out. Your turn.”

“Why, so you can report me to the nearest PSF station?”

“Yeah, because *clearly*, we’d be able to stroll up and lodge a

sighting report.”

After a moment, I blew out a harsh breath. “Fine. I was in

Thurmond.”

The silence that followed seemed to

stretch on longer than
the road beneath us.

“Are you serious?” Liam asked, finally.
“Crazy Thurmond,
with the FrankenKiddies?”

“They’ve stopped testing,” I said,
feeling strangely defensive.

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“No, I just—I just,” Liam raced through
the words, “I

thought it was all filled up, you know?
That's why they bused
us to Ohio."

"How old were you when you went into
camp?" Chubs's

voice was measured, but I saw his face
fall all the same. "You

were young, right?"

The answer popped out before I could
stop myself. "The day

after my tenth birthday."

Liam blew out a low whistle, and I

wondered exactly how

much of Thurmond's reputation had leaked out in the time I

had been there. Who were the ones talking about it—the former

PSFs assigned there?

And, if people knew, why hadn't anyone come help us?

“How long were you guys in Caledonia?”

“Suzume was there for about two years. I was there for a year

and a half, and Lee was there for a year or so.”

“That’s . . .” A small, ugly voice inside my head whispered

That’s it? even as the better part of me knew full well that that it

didn’t matter if they had been there for one year or one day—a

minute in one of those camps was enough to smash you into

pieces.

“And you’re what, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and the thought nearly knocked me

back against the van. I really *wasn’t* sure —Sam had claimed it

was six years, but she could have been wrong. We didn’t keep

track of time at Thurmond in the usual way; I recognized sea-

sons passing, but somewhere along the line I had stopped trying

to mark it. I grew bigger, I knew every winter that I must be

another year older, but none of it . . . it

just hadn't seemed to

matter until now. "What year is it?"

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Chubs snorted, rolling his eyes heavenward. He opened his

mouth to say something, but stopped once he got a good look

at my face. I'm not sure what kind of expression I was wearing,

but it erased his exasperation in two seconds flat. His narrowed

eyes widened into something that looked very much like pity.

And Liam . . . his expression seemed to dissolve entirely.

I felt the hair on my neck begin to prickle, my fingers twist

the fabric of my uniform shorts. The absolute last thing— *the*

last thing—I wanted was to be pitied by a bunch of strangers.

Regret washed down through me, flooding out even my anxiety

and fear. I shouldn't have said anything

at all; I should have lied

or dodged the question. Whatever they thought Thurmond was

like, whatever they believed I'd gone through, it was bad enough

to mark me as pathetic in their eyes. I could see it in their faces,

and the irony stung more than I expected it to. They'd taken in

a monster, thinking it was a mouse.

"Sixteen, then," I said, once Liam had confirmed the year.

Sam had been right after all.

Something else was bothering me.

“They’re still creating new

camps and sending kids to them?”

“Not so much anymore,” Liam said.

“The younger set—Zu’s

age—they were hit the hardest. People got scared, and the birth-

rate dropped off even before the government tried banning new

births. Most of the kids that are still being sent to camps are like

us. They escaped detection during collections or tried to run.”

I nodded, mulling this over.

“At Thurmond,” Chubs began, “Did they really—”

“I think that’s enough,” Liam interrupted. He reached past

Chubs’s outstretched arm and opened the sliding door for me

again. “She answered your questions, we answered hers, and now

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we've gotta hit the road while the going is still good."

Zu climbed in first, and, without looking at either boy I fol-

lowed, heading to the wayback seat, where I could stretch out

and hide from any more unwanted questions.

Chubs took the front passenger seat, throwing one last look

back at me. His full lips were pressed so tight together they were

colorless. Eventually, he turned his attention to the book in his

lap and pretended that I wasn't there at all.

Black Betty purred as Liam hit the accelerator and my entire

body vibrated with her. She was the only one willing to speak

for a long time.

The rain was still coming down, casting a gray light around the

car. The windows had fogged, and for a minute I did nothing but

watch the rain. Car headlights were flashing through the front

windshield, but it was nowhere near dark.

Chubs eventually turned the radio on, filling the quiet space

with a report about America's gas crisis and the drilling that was

happening in Alaska as a result. If I wasn't already halfway to

sleep, the droning from the humorless newscaster would have

put me there.

“Hey, Green,” Liam called back. “You have a last name?”

I thought about lying, about making myself into someone

that I wasn’t, but it didn’t seem right. Even if I let these people

in, they’d forget about me soon enough.

“No,” I said. I had a Psi number and the name I’d inherited

from my grandmother. The rest didn’t matter.

Liam turned back to the road, his fingers drumming on the

steering wheel. “Got it.”

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I dropped back down on the seat,
pressing my hands against

my face. Sleep came for me eventually,
just as the storm clouds

peeled back to reveal a pristine night
sky. Without the sound of

rain, I could just make out the quiet song
floating from the car

speakers, and Liam’s deep voice as he

sang along.

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Chubs was the one to wake me. It was a quick

slap to my shoulder, like he couldn't bring himself to touch it

long enough to put the effort into shaking me, but it was enough.

I had been curled like a shrimp on one of the cramped seats,

but at his touch, I bolted out of it, knocking my head against

the window. I felt its cold touch on the back of my neck as I

all but tumbled in the narrow space
between the front seat and

mine. For a single, foggy instant, I
couldn't remember where I

was, never mind how I had gotten there.

Chubs's face crossed back into my line
of sight, one eyebrow

arched at my tangle of limbs. And then it
all came back to me,

like a punch to the throat.

Damn it, damn it, damn it, I thought,
trying to smooth my

dark hair out of my face. I had only meant to rest my eyes for

a few minutes—and who knows how long I'd been conked

out for? Judging by Chubs's expression, it hadn't been a short

nap.

“Don't you think you've slept long enough?” he huffed, cross-

ing his arms over his chest. The van felt warmer, and I didn't

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realize why until I sat up and saw the dark blue fabric that had

been strung up to cover the rear windshield.

The reality of the situation struck me at once, with a sharp

twist in my side. I'd left myself wide open in a van of strangers—

so wide open, in fact, that Chubs had been able to put a hand

on me. God, I didn't know which of us had come out luckier in

the end—him, for not having his brain wiped clean, or me for

avoiding yet another potential disaster. How stupid could I be?

The second they knew what I was, they'd throw me out, and

then where would I be? Speaking of which . . .

“Where are we?” I pulled myself back up into the seat.

“Where are the others?”

Chubs sat in one of the middle seats, dividing his time

between the book in his lap and the world of trees just outside

the tinted car window. I moved, trying to follow his gaze, but

there was nothing to see.

“Somewhere near the lovely city of Kingwood, West Virginia.

Lee and Suzume are checking something out,” he said.

I had leaned forward without realizing it, trying to see what

he was reading. It’d been years since I’d even seen a book,

let alone read from one. Chubs wasn't having it, though. The

moment my shoulder brushed his, he snapped the book shut

and turned to give me the nastiest stink eye he could muster.

Even with his too-small glasses and my knowledge of his little

fancy lady kit under the front seat, I reminded myself there was

a distinct possibility he was capable of killing me with his brain.

“How long did I sleep?”

“A day,” Chubs said. “The General wants you up and ready

to report to duty. He’s in one of his go-go-go moods. You may

only be a Green, but he’s expecting you to help.”

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I chose my next words carefully, ignoring the smug look on

his face. Let him think that, if it made him feel better. He was

smarter; there was no debate about that. He probably had years

of education on me, had read hundreds more books, and could

remember enough math to actually be useful. But as small and

stupid as he made me feel, there was no ignoring the fact that

all it would take is one touch, and I could have read him the

contents of his brain.

“Liam’s a Blue, right?” I began. “Are you and Zu both Blue,

too?”

“No.” He frowned, and it took him several moments to decide

whether or not to reveal his next bit of information. “Suzume’s

Yellow.”

I sat up a little straighter. “You had Yellows at your camp?”

Chubs grunted. “No Green, I just lied to you—*yes*, we had

Yellows.”

But that didn’t make sense—after all, if

they took the Yellows

out of Thurmond, why wouldn't they
have taken them from all

the camps?

“Did . . .” I began, unsure of how to ask
this. When she first

pulled me into the van, I thought she was
just shy and skittish

around strangers. But I hadn't heard her
utter a single word in

the entire time I had been with them. Not
to me, not to Chubs—

not even to Liam. “Did they . . . do something to the Yellows?

To her?”

The only way the van’s atmosphere could have electrified

faster was if I had thrown a live wire into a full bathtub.

Chubs turned toward me sharply, drawing his arms up, cross-

ing them in front of his chest. The look he leveled at me over his

glasses would have turned a weaker soul to stone.

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“That,” he said slowly—precisely, I thought, to make sure I

understood, “is absolutely none of your business.”

I held up my hands, retreating.

“Were you even thinking about what could happen to her

when you followed her?” he pressed on.

“Do you even care

that your friends in the green SUV would

have gladly scooped

her up?”

“The people in the green SUV—” I began, and would have

finished, had the door not suddenly rolled open behind us. Chubs

let out a noise that could only be described as a squawk and just

about flew into the front passenger seat. By the time he had

settled himself down, his eyes were almost as wide as Zu’s, who

stood watching him from the door.

“Don’t *do* that!” he gasped, clutching his chest. “Give us a

little warning, will you?”

Zu raised an eyebrow in my direction, and I raised one right

back at her. After a moment, she seemed to remember the reason

she had come and began waving us outside, her bright, sunny-

color glove flashing.

Chubs unbuckled his seat belt with an

aggravated sigh. “I

told him this was a waste of time. They said *Virginia*, not *West*

Virginia.” He turned his gaze back toward me. “By the way,” he

added, “that SUV was tan. That’s some photographic memory

you have.”

An excuse leaped to my throat, but he cut me off with a

knowing look, and slammed the door behind him.

I jumped out of the van and followed Zu.
As my feet sunk
into the mud and sad, yellowed grass, I
had my first good look
around.

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A large wooden sign, leaning back like
someone had nearly
run it over, said east river camping
grounds, but there was no
river, and it certainly wasn't your

typical camping ground. If

anything, it was—or once was—an old trailer and RV park.

The farther we walked from the minivan, the more nervous

I felt. It wasn't raining, but my skin felt clammy and cold to

the touch. All around us, as far as my eyes could see, were the

burned-out silver and white husks of former homes and vehicles.

Several of the larger, more permanent trailers had entire walls

ripped or charred away, revealing
kitchens and living rooms with

their insides still intact, if not
waterlogged and infested with ani-

mals and slowly rotting leaves from the
nearby trees. It was like

a mass grave of past lives.

Even though screen doors had been
ripped off and warped,

even though some RVs knelt on whatever
tires had been slashed,

there were still signs of life all around.
Walls were decorated with

pictures of happy and smiling families, a grandfather clock was

still counting time, pots were still on stoves, a small swing set

remained undisturbed and lonely on the far end of the grounds.

Zu and I navigated around an RV that was now on its side,

following a path of deep footsteps in the mud. I took one look at

its rusted bones and immediately turned away, my hand tighten-

ing around her gloves. She looked up at

me with a questioning

look, but I only shook my head and said,
“Spooky.”

When the rain came, it hammered against
the metal bodies

around us, rattling a few of the weaker
roofs and screens. I

jumped back with a yelp when a trailer's
door fell into our path.

Zu only jumped over it and pointed
ahead, to where Chubs and

Liam were locked in conversation.

It had taken me a second to recognize Liam. Under his

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jacket, he wore a blue sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over

what looked like a Redskins hat. I had no idea where he man-

aged to find them, but a pair of aviator sunglasses obscured a

good portion of his face from view.

“—isn’t it,” Chubs said. “I *told* you.”

“They said it was at the east edge of the state,” Liam insisted.

“And they could have meant West Virginia—”

“Or they could have been screwing with us,” Chubs finished

for him. He must have heard us approaching, because he jumped

and turned around. The moment he locked eyes with me, he

scowled.

“‘Mornin’, sunshine!” Liam called.
“Sleep okay?”

Zu darted out ahead of me, but I could feel my feet begin to

drag with an invisible weight as I came toward them. I crossed

my arms over my chest, steadying myself enough to ask, “What

is this place?”

This time, it was Liam who blew out a sigh. “Well, we were

hoping it was East River. *T h e* East River, I mean.”

“That’s in Virginia,” I said, looking down at my shoes. “The

peninsula. It empties into the Chesapeake Bay.”

“Thank you Detective Duh.” Chubs shook his head. “We’re

talking about the Slip Kid’s East River.”

“Hey.” Liam’s voice was sharp. “Lay off, buddy. We really

didn’t know anything about it until we were out of camp, either.”

Chubs crossed his arms over his chest and looked away.

“Whatever.”

“What is it?”

I felt Liam turn his attention back to me, which immediately

prompted me to turn my attention back to Zu, who mostly just

looked confused. *Get a grip*, I ordered myself, *stop it*.

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I wasn't afraid of them, not even Chubs. Maybe a bit when

I thought too hard about how easily I

could ruin their lives,

or pictured their horrified reactions if they were to figure out

what, exactly, I was. I just didn't know what to say or how to

act around them. Every movement and word on my part felt

uncomfortable, shrill, or sharp, and I was beginning to worry

that the feelings of hesitancy and awkwardness were never going

to lift. I already felt like the freak of freaks without the added

realization that I lacked the basic ability of communicating nor-

mally with other human beings.

Liam sighed, scratching the back of his head. “We first heard

about East River from some kids in our camp. Supposedly—and

I mean *supposedly*—it’s a place where any kids on the outside can

go and live together. The Slip Kid, who runs the show, can get

you in touch with your folks without the PSFs finding out about

it. There's food, a place to sleep—well, you get the picture. The

problem is finding it. We think it's somewhere in this area thanks

to a few fairly unhelpful Blues we ran across in Ohio. It's the

kind of thing that . . .”

“If you're in the know, you're not supposed to talk about it,”

I finished. “But who's the Slip Kid?”

Liam shrugged. “No one knows. Or . . . well, I guess peo-

ple *know*, they just don't say. The rumors about him are pretty

incredible, though. The PSFs gave him that nickname because

he—*supposedly*—escaped their custody a good four times.”

I was too stunned to say anything to that.

“Kind of puts the rest of us to shame, huh? I was feeling really

bad about myself until someone told me the rumors about him.”

Liam shuddered. “Supposedly he's one of those—an *Orange*.”

That single word thundered down
around me, freezing me in

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place. Liam went on to say something
else, with a lot less disgust,

but I couldn't hear him over the roar in
my ears. I didn't hear a

word of what he was saying.

Slip Kid. Someone who could help kids
get home, if they had

a home to return to, and parents who

remembered them and

wanted them. A life to reclaim.

And, potentially, one of the last Orange kids out there.

I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing the heels of my palms

against them for good measure. I didn't qualify for his help, not

in the traditional way. Even if I could get in touch with my par-

ents, it wasn't like they would welcome a girl they considered a

stranger back with open arms. There was Grams, but I had no

way of knowing where she was now. After finding out what I

had done, would she even want me?

“Why do you even need this guy’s help?” I interrupted, still

feeling light-headed. “Can’t you just go home?”

“Use your brain, Green,” Chubs said. “We can’t go home

because PSFs are probably watching our parents.”

Liam shook his head, finally taking his sunglasses off. He

looked exhausted, the skin under his eyes baggy and bruised.

“You’ll have to be really careful, okay? Do you even want me to

drop you off at a bus station? Because we’d be happy—”

“*No!*” Chubs said. “We most certainly *would not*. We’ve

already wasted enough time on her, and she’s the reason we

have the League after us, too.”

A sharp pain sprouted on the left side of
my chest, just

above my heart. He was right, of course.
The best option for

everyone would be to drop me off at the
nearest bus station and

be done with it.

But it didn't mean I didn't want to, or
need to, find this Slip

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Kid as badly as they did. But I couldn't

ask to stay. I couldn't

impose on them anymore than I already
had, or risk ruining

them with the invisible fingers that
seemed bent on tearing apart

every single connection I managed to
make. If the League caught

up to us and took them in, I'd never
forgive myself. Never.

If I was going to find the Slip Kid, I was
going to have to do

it by myself. You'd think I'd be used to
the thought of taking on

each day with no one beside me, that it'd be some kind of relief

not to be in constant danger of sliding into someone else's head.

But I didn't want to. I didn't want to step out under the gray

overcast sky alone and feel its chill work its way under my skin.

"So," I said, squinting at the nearest trailer. "This isn't East

River."

"It might have been, once," Liam said. "They could move

around from time to time. I hadn't really considered it."

"Or," Chubs grouched, "they could have already been taken

back into PSF custody. Maybe this was East River, and now

there is no more East River and we're going to have to find a

way to deliver Jack's letter and get home by ourselves, only we

won't ever because of the skiptracers, and we'll all be thrown

back into camp, only this time they'll—"

“Thank you, Chuckles,” Liam cut in, “for that rousing burst of optimism.”

“I could be right,” he said. “You have to acknowledge that.”

“But you could also be wrong,” Liam said, dropping a reas-

suring hand on Zu’s head. “In any case, that’s what we’re going

with now: this was just a false alarm. Let’s see if we can find

anything useful, then we’ll hit the road.”

“*Finally*. I’m sick of wasting time on things that don’t mat-

ter.” Chubs shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and stalked

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toward me. If I hadn’t jumped out of the way, his shoulder would

have knocked into mine and sent me stumbling back.

I turned, my eyes following his path as he kicked rubbish and

rocks out of his way. Liam was suddenly standing next to me, his

own arms crossed over his chest.

“Don’t take it personally,” he said. I must have made a sound

of disbelief, because he continued, “I mean . . . okay, the kid is

basically a grumpy seventy-year-old man trapped in a seventeen-

year-old’s body, but he’s only being this insufferable to try to

push you out.”

Yeah, well, I thought, it's working.

“And I know it's not an excuse, but he's as stressed and

freaked out as the rest of us and—I guess what I'm trying to

say is, all of this acid he's throwing your way? It's coming from

a good place. If you stick it out, I swear you won't find a more

loyal friend. But he's scared as hell about what'll happen, espe-

cially to Zu, if we're caught again.”

I looked up at that, but Liam was already walking away,

toward a far row of battered trailers. For one crazy second I

thought about following him, but I'd caught Zu out of the cor-

ner of my eye, her bright yellow gloves swinging at her side. She

jumped in and out of the trailers, stood on her toes to peer into

the smashed windows of the RVs, and even, at one point, started

to crawl into wreckage of an RV that

looked like it had been split

in half by a tornado. The metal roof, which was hanging on by

what looked like two flimsy joints, was swaying and bouncing

under the combined forces of rain and wind.

Although she had the hood of her oversized sweatshirt pulled

snug over her head, I watched as one of Zu's gloved hands came

up and brushed the side of her face—as if she was pushing a

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strand of hair out of her eyes. It didn't strike me as strange until

she did it again, only to pale slightly as she caught herself.

The conversation I had tried to have with Chubs in the van

came crashing back to me.

“Hey, Zu . . .” I began, only to stop short. How were you sup-

posed to ask a little kid if someone had

played slice and dice with

her brain without trampling over an already painful memory?

The truth of it was, they only shaved kids' heads at Thurmond

when they wanted to do some poking around inside of their

skulls; they had all but stopped by the time I arrived, but it had

taken a while for the older kids' hair to grow back out. Some-

where in the back of my mind, I had wondered if this wasn't

the case with her after all—if the reason she couldn't speak was

because they had crossed a few wires they shouldn't have, or

gone a step too far in the name of finding a “cure.”

“Why did they cut your hair?” I asked, finally.

I knew plenty of girls that would have preferred shorter

hair—myself included—but aside from an annual haircut for the

girls, we didn't have much say in the

matter. The way that Zu

seemed to stroke her ghost hair made me think she hadn't had

much say, either.

If she had been upset by my question, she didn't show it.

Zu's brought her hands up to her head and began to scrub at it,

making a face of acute discomfort. Seeing that I wasn't getting

it, she slipped one hand out of its glove and went to work scratch-

ing at her scalp.

“Oh,” I said, “*oh!* You mean your group had lice?”

She nodded.

“Yikes,” I said. It made sense, but it still didn’t explain why

she couldn’t open her mouth and answer me. “I’m so sorry.”

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Zu lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug, then turned and

bounded up into the nearest RV.

The door wobbled and protested as I followed her in, squeal-

ing as its joints worked. Zu made a face, and I made one back at

her in agreement. The whole home smelled sweet, but . . . not

pleasant. Almost like rotten fruit.

I started in the small, central living space, opening and clos-

ing the pale cabinet doors. The seat cushions were done up in an

obnoxiously bright purple, but they, like the small TV hanging

on the wall across from them, were coated with dust and dirt.

The only thing out on the counter was a single coffee mug. The

back sleeping area was equally spare—a few cushions, a lamp,

and a closet with a red dress, a white button-down shirt, and a

whole fleet of empty hangers.

I had only just reached for the shirt when I saw it at the edge

of my vision.

Someone had attached it to the RV's windshield in place of

a rearview mirror. It was nothing that would have seemed odd

from the outside, looking in, or drawn attention unless you were

really, truly staring at it. But inside, standing only a few feet

away from it, I was close enough to see the red light at the base

of it, close enough to see that camera inside was pointed toward

everything and everyone that passed by on the road in front of it.

And if I could see Betty from where I was, so could it.

The camera's shape was slightly different from the ones they

had at Thurmond, but close enough to make me think the same

people were behind it. I looked down at Zu and she looked up

at me.

“Stay right here,” I said, reaching for the coffeepot on the

table.

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I crossed the RV in three steps, the coffeepot out in front of

me like a sword. I kicked aside a few empty boxes and trash, and

saw, mixed in with the litter of plastic bags, a small red glove.

Too small for any adult's hand.

I didn't realize the pot was still in my hand until I brought

it down against the device and smashed it. The cheap glass body

broke off and fell to the ground, leaving me holding its handle.

The black bulb stayed perched exactly where it was, only now,

the camera's eye rotated to face me.

It's on, I thought through the haze of panic, searching for

something else to smash it with. *It's recording.*

I didn't remember calling for her, but Zu appeared at my

side in an instant, stuffing something under the front of her

oversized sweatshirt. She must have recognized it, too, because

before I could even get another word in, she was pulling off one

of her yellow rubber gloves and reaching toward it.

“Don’t—!”

I’d never seen a Yellow use their abilities before. I’d suf-

fered the aftereffects, of course—power outages across the

camp, White Noise when the camp controllers thought one of

them had done it on purpose. But they had been gone so long

at Thurmond that I had stopped trying to imagine what it must

have been like for them to speak the mysterious language of

electricity.

Zu's fingers had only brushed against it, but the camera

began to let out a high-pitched whine. There was a bolt of white-

blue that seemed to leap from her bare finger to the camera's

outer shell. That same crackling line whipped down over the

plastic, causing it to smoke and warp under its heat.

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Without warning, all of the lights in the RV flashed on,

glowing so molten hot that they shattered. The vehicle began to

cough and sputter, shaking under our feet, as its engine found

itself miraculously revived after a long sleep.

Zu jammed her hand back into its glove and crossed her arms

over her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut, as if willing it all to

stop. But we didn't have time to wait around and see if it would.

I moved toward the door, grabbing the front of her sweatshirt to

all but drag her out of the RV. She was

still stumbling as I pulled

her around to the end that faced the road,
and Black Betty.

“Come on,” I said, not letting her slow.
The brightness was

gone from her face, blown out like a
candle. “It’s okay,” I lied.

“We just need to get the others.”

There was a camera installed in the front
windshield of every

trailer in that front row; I spotted them
one by one as we ran

back toward Betty. There was no point trying to get rid of them

now. Whoever was going to see us had likely already seen us. We

just had to get out of there, and fast.

They could be old, I tried telling myself, throwing Betty's

door open. They could have been installed years ago, in case of

robberies. Who knew where the video they recorded was being

sent? Maybe nowhere at all.

And at the same time, my heart was beating out a completely

different track. *They're coming, they're coming, they're coming.*

I thought about yelling for the others, but they could have

been anywhere in the park. I climbed into the van after Zu

and did the only other thing that seemed to make sense in that

moment: I banged the heel of my palm against the fleshy part

of the wheel. The high whine of Betty's

horn shook the sleepy

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landscape awake. A cluster of birds
flew up from the nearby

trees, hitting the sky at the same moment
I began beating out a

faster, more insistent rhythm.

Chubs appeared first, booking it down
one aisle of RVs, and

Liam a second later, a few rows over.
When they saw that it was

still just us, they both slowed down. An annoyed look crossed

Chubs's face.

I leaned out of the open driver's side window and shouted,

“We have to go— *now!*”

Liam said something to Chubs that I didn't hear, but they

did as they were told. I stayed crouched between the two front

seats as the boys jumped inside.

“What?” Liam was almost out of breath.

“What’s wrong?”

I pointed to the nearest trailer. “They have cameras installed,”

my voice rasped. “In every one of them.”

Chubs sucked in a sharp breath.

“You’re sure?” Liam’s voice was calm—too calm. I could tell

he was forcing it, even as his fingers fumbled to put the keys in

the ignition.

The van’s back tires spun against the mud as he threw it into

reverse. I went tumbling on to my backside with the force of his acceleration.

“Oh my God,” Chubs was saying, “I can’t believe it. We got

Hansel and Greteled. Oh my God—do you think it was her?”

“*No,*” Liam said. “No. She’s sneaky for a skiptracer, but this—

this is something else.”

“They could have been there for a while,” I said, just as we

found the highway again. It was empty
and open in front of us,

a gaping mouth ready to swallow us
whole. “They could have

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been spying on the people that lived
there. Maybe that really

was East River. . . .”

Or it was just a trap, for kids looking for
the real East River.

Liam propped his elbow against the

door panel and his chin

against his palm. When he spoke, the
hundreds of snaking cracks

in the windshield cut up his reflection.
He pushed the minivan

up into a faster speed, causing the wind
to whistle through the

bullet hole. “Just keep your eyes open
and let me know if you see

anyone or anything acting suspect.”

Define suspect. The rows of shuttered
houses? A shot-up

minivan?

“I knew we should have waited until it was dark,” Chubs

said, tapping his fingers against the passenger seat window. “I

knew it. If those cameras were on, they probably got the license

plate number and everything.”

“I’ll take care of the plates,” Liam promised.

Chubs’s lips parted, but he said nothing, only resting his head

against the window.

“Should I be looking for PSFs?” I asked,
as we drove over

another railroad track.

“Worse.” Chubs sighed. “Skiptracers.
Bounty hunters.”

“The PSFs are stretched pretty thin, by
all accounts,” Liam

explained. “Same with the National
Guard and what’s left of

the local police. I don’t know that they’d
send a unit all the way

out here on a tip. And unless they just so happen to have a resi-

dent bounty hunter in this neck of the woods, we're going to be

fine.”

Those were famous last words if I had ever heard them.

“The reward for turning in a kid is ten thousand dollars.”

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Chubs twisted around to look at me.

“And the whole country is

broke as a joke. We are *not* going to be fine.”

I heard a train in the distance, its horn so similar to the ones

that had passed by Thurmond at all hours of the night. It was

enough for me to dig my fingernails into the skin my thighs and

squeeze my eyes shut until the nausea passed. I didn't even real-

ize the conversation had rolled on without me until I heard Liam

ask, “You okay, Green?”

I reached up and wiped my face,
wondering if the wetness

there was from the rain, or if I’d been
crying without realizing it.

I didn’t say anything as I crawled to the
wayback seat. I didn’t

jump into their conversation about where
they would need to

look next for East River, though I wanted
to. There were hun-

dreds, thousands, millions of places the
Slip Kid could have set

up camp, and I wanted to help them puzzle it out. I wanted to

be part of it.

But I couldn't ask, and I needed to stop lying to myself.

Because every second I stayed with them was another chance

for them to discover that skiptracers and PSFs weren't the real

monsters of the world. No. She was sitting in their backseat.

For once, the music was off.

It was the silence from the speakers that unnerved me,

more than the deserted roads or the empty shells of repossessed

houses. Liam was a constant stream of motion. Looking around

the abandoned small towns we drove through, glancing at the

gas level, fiddling with the turn signal, fingers dancing on the

steering wheel. At one point, his eyes flashed toward mine in

the rearview mirror. It was just for an

instant, but I felt the small

twinge in my stomach as sharply as I
would have if he had taken

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a soft finger and run it down the length of
my open palm.

My face was flushed, but something
inside of me had gone

very cold. It had been half a second, no
more, but it was plenty

long enough to notice the way his eyes

had darkened with some-

thing that might have been frustration.

Chubs was in the front seat folding and unfolding something

in his lap, over and over again, almost like he didn't realize he

was doing it.

“Will you cut that out?” Liam burst out, agitated. “You’ll

rip it.”

Chubs stopped immediately. “Can’t we just . . . try? Do we

need the Slip Kid for this?”

“Do you really want to risk it?”

“Jack would have.”

“Right, but Jack . . .” Liam’s voice trailed off. “Let’s just play

it safe. He’ll help us when we get there.”

“*If* we get there,” Chubs huffed.

“Jack?” I didn’t realize I had said it aloud until Liam’s eyes

looked up at me in the rearview mirror.

“It’s none of your business,” Chubs said,

and left it at that.

Liam was only a little more forthcoming.

“He was our

friend—in our room at camp, I mean.

We’re trying . . . we’re

just trying to get in touch with his dad.

It’s one of the reasons

we need to hit up the Slip Kid.”

I nodded toward the sheet of paper. “But

before you guys

broke out, he wrote a letter?”

“The three of us each did,” Liam said.

“In case one of us

backed out at the last minute and didn’t want to come or . . .

didn’t make it out.”

“Which Jack did not.” Chubs’s voice could have cut steel.

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Behind him, house after gorgeous colonial house passed in rapid-

fire succession, their colors winking at us through her window.

“Anyway.” Liam cleared his throat.
“We’re trying to put his

letter in his dad’s hands. We tried going
to the address Jack gave

us, but the house had been repossessed.
He left a note saying

he was going to D.C. for work, but no
new address or phone

number. That’s why we need the Slip
Kid’s help—to find where

he is now.”

“You can’t just mail it?”

“They started scanning mail for this exact reason about two

years after you went to Thurmond,” Liam explained. “The gov-

ernment reads all, speaks all, and writes all. They’ve crafted a

lovely little story about how we’re all being saved and repro-

grammed back into sweet little darlings at camp, and they don’t

want anyone to get wind of the truth.”

I honestly had no idea what to say to that.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I didn’t mean to give you a shakedown about it.”

“It’s okay,” Liam said, after the silence had stretched to the point of breaking. “It’s fine.”

There wasn’t a way to explain how I knew. Maybe it was the way Liam’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, or how he kept glancing in his side mirror throughout the conversation,

long after a silver car had passed us
from the other direction. It

could have been the way his shoulders
tensed, sloping down in

a way that was so defeated. I just knew,
long before I caught his

worried eyes in the rearview mirror.

Slowly, without disturbing Zu and Chubs
as they watched

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an endless stream of forest pass by the

side windows, I crouched

between the two front seats again.

Liam met my gaze for a split second, nodding in the direction

of his side mirror. *See for yourself*, he seemed to say. So I did.

Trailing behind us, back about two car lengths, was an old

white pickup truck. With the rain fogging up the air between

the two cars, I couldn't tell if there were one or two men inside.

They looked like little more than two black ants from where I

was sitting.

“Interesting,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Yep,” he said, his jaw clenched. The muscles of his neck

strained. “Gotta love West Virginia. Glorious Mountain State.

Land O’Many John Denver Songs.”

“Maybe . . .” I began slowly, “you should pull over and look

at a map?”

It was one way of feeling out the situation. Liam was about

to turn onto George Washington Highway—slightly wider than

the twisting road we were leaving. If the truck was following us,

they wouldn't be able to stop without revealing it. In any case,

whoever was driving the truck wasn't being aggressive about it.

If he was a bounty hunter, as Liam apparently thought, they

were probably feeling us out, too.

We continued up Gorman Road, following its natural curve.

Black Betty slowed in anticipation of the upcoming turn. Liam

hesitated half a second before flipping his turn signal on. I looked

in the mirror, my heart lifting when I saw the truck turn its other

blinker on. They were turning right. We were going left.

Liam blew out a long sigh, finally sitting back against his

seat as the minivan reached the intersection of the highway and

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the road. There was another car turning off the highway, a small

silver Volkswagen; both Liam and I threw up a hand to block the

intense glint of the sun against its windows.

“Okay, Old Man River.” Liam gave the car an impatient

wave. “Go ahead and turn before the next century. No, take

your time, shave, contemplate the universe . . .”

Lynyrd Skynyrd was blasting through the pickup truck’s open

windows as it pulled up alongside us, creaking and groaning in

the way all old cars seem to do. “Free Bird.” Of course. It had to

be Dad’s favorite. Two seconds into the damn song, and it was

like I was back in the front seat of his

squad car, cruising around

town. That was the only time I got to listen to the good music—

when it was just the two of us, cruising. Mom hated the stuff.

A laugh bubbled up inside of me as I watched the driver bob

his head in time with the music. He howled the words at the top

of his lungs, exhaling each lyric with a puff of cigarette smoke.

And then it was replaced by a different sound—a shriek of

sorts. I looked up just in time to see the Volkswagen slam on its

brakes right in front of us, jolting to a stop and sending another

blinding glare of sunlight our way.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Liam made as if to press

his hand down on the horn, but not before the driver of the

Volkswagen rolled down his window and pointed something

black and gleaming at us.

No. The world went into sharp focus.
Sound evaporated

around me. *NO.*

I reached up and slapped Black Betty's
radio button on, turn-

ing it up as loud as it would go. Liam
and Chubs both started

yelling, but I knocked Liam's hand away
before he could switch

it off.

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The White Noise cut straight through the music from the

speakers, tearing at our ears. Not as loud or as powerful as I was

used to, and not even close to as bad as it had been last time, but

still there, still agonizing. My radio trick couldn't drown it out,

not completely.

The others crumbled around me, shriveling at the first pierc-

ing shriek.

Liam fell forward against the wheel,
mashing his hands up

against his ears. Chubs knocked his head
into the passenger seat

window, as if trying to ram the noise out
of his head. I felt Black

Betty began to drift forward, only to jerk
to a stop when Liam

hit the brakes instead of the gas.

My door opened beside me, and a pair
of arms circled Chubs's

waist, trying to detangle him from the
seat belt. I pulled myself

up off the floor and lashed a hand out,
catching the man's cheek

and raking my fingernails down as hard
as I could. It was enough

to startle the truck driver, the same one
that had been nodding

his head to "Free Bird" two seconds
before, into dropping Chubs.

He was left half hanging in his seat, half
hanging out.

The truck driver stumbled back against
the bed of his car,

his words drowned out by the

thunderstorm of noise that had

settled over the three cars. It was only then that I saw the badge

hanging around his neck on a silver cord, and the bright red Ψ

stitched there. They weren't skiptracers.

Psi. PSF. Camp. Thurmond. Capture.

The man from the Volkswagen had opened the driver's side

door and was trying to unhook Liam's seat belt. He wasn't large

in any sense of the word—he looked like

he could have been

an accountant, with thick glasses and
hunched shoulders from

spending too many hours at a desk. But
he didn't need strength,

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not when he was holding the black
megaphone in his hands.

Some of the PSFs at Thurmond carried
the noise machines

around with them, blasting them at small,

rowdy groups, or just

to see a few kids squirm. What did they care? They couldn't

hear it.

Every nerve in my body was singing, but I launched my

elbow into the chest of the pickup truck driver. He fell back

again, and I pulled the door shut and locked it. I only had a

second to look back at Zu as I dove across Liam's body, fist-first.

I nailed Volkswagen in the glasses, knocking them off his face.

Somewhere behind me, Pickup Truck had moved on to the slid-

ing door, and this time he wasn't empty handed.

Zu didn't flinch as the rifle was pointed in her face—by the

way she was moaning, her eyes scrunched up and her yellow

gloves curled over her ears in agony, I don't think she was seeing

straight.

I didn't know what to do. My hands were on Liam, trying to

shake him back into consciousness. His eyes flashed open, clear

and so blue, but it was only for an instant. The megaphone was

suddenly two inches from my face, and the White Noise sunk

into my brain like an ax. My bones went to jelly. I didn't reg-

ister the fact I had fallen over Liam until I was there. The only

thing louder than the White Noise, than

the radio, than Chubs's

screams, was the sound of Liam's heart racing through his

back.

I squeezed my eyes shut again, my fingers curling into the

soft leather of Liam's coat. Half of me wanted to push away,

put enough distance between us that I had no chance of sliding

into his mind—but the other half of me, the desperate part, was

already trying to push through, to anchor myself to him and

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will him to *move*. If I could hurt someone, shouldn't that mean

I could help them, too?

Get up, I begged, *get up, get up, get up, get up . . .*

There was a high-pitched wail, a sound that couldn't have

possibly come from a human. I forced

my eyes open. Pickup

Truck had his rifle in one hand, and the collar of Zu's shirt in

the other, and he was tugging both in the direction of the truck.

I tried to scream for her, even as I felt Volkswagen's hands in

my hair, yanking me up and out of the door. He let me hit the

ground hard, the loose gravel cutting open my legs and palms.

I rolled onto my side, trying to twist away from the PSF's

reach. From under Betty, I saw flutters
of yellow dropping to the

road like two small birds and heard a
door slam.

“Stewart—confirm Psi number 42755
spotted—” Volkswagen

wrenched the driver’s side door open
again, pulling something

bright orange from his pocket. I swiped
at my eyes, trying to

force the double image of him I was
seeing back into one. The

orange device in the PSF’s free hand

was no bigger than a cell

phone, easy enough to maneuver in front of Liam's face from

where it was pressed against the minivan's steering wheel.

Taking a swipe at the PSF's ankle with my hand was

pointless—he was so involved with whatever it was he was doing

that he didn't so much as notice.

Liam! My mouth wasn't moving, it wasn't working. *Liam!*

The orange device flashed and a moment later, above even

the wailing of the White Noise, I heard Volkswagen say, “That’s

a positive ID on Liam Stewart.”

Something hot and sharp cut through the air, billowing

out under Betty like a stinging cloud of sand. I felt it rub up

against my bare skin and had to turn my face away from the

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blinding light that came next—a flash
burn that erased anything

and everything that stood in its way. I
heard Volkswagen cuss

from above me, only to be drowned out
by the sound of metal

screeching against metal, glass
exploding so hard, so fast, that

tiny shards dropped like hail onto the
ground in front of me.

And then it was gone. The White Noise
cut out sharply as

something clattered to the ground and landed a short distance

away. The megaphone.

I stretched my arm out, hand groping for the megaphone's

handle. Volkswagen was screaming something that I couldn't

hear over the ringing in my ears, and I was too focused on get-

ting the bullhorn to actually give a damn and listen. A hand

wrapped around my bare ankle and tugged me back across the

ground—but not before my fingers closed around the handle.

“Get up, you piece of—!” There was a digital squeak, like an

alarm, and the man immediately dropped my leg. “*This is Larson,*

requesting immediate back up—”

I pushed myself up on my knees with a grunt, then my feet.

The man had his back turned to me one second too long, and

when he finally realized his mistake and looked over his shoul-

der, he was rewarded with a face-full of metal as I swung the megaphone.

His radio clattered to the asphalt, and I kicked it out of his

reach. Both of his hands went up, trying to shield his face from

another hit, but I wasn't going to go easy on him. I wasn't going

to let him take me back to Thurmond.

My hand closed over his exposed forearm, and I yanked it

down, forcing him to look down at me. I watched his pupils

shrink in his hazel eyes before blowing back out to their normal

size. The man had a foot of height on me, but you never would

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have known by the way he dropped to his knees in front of me.

He hadn't even been able to catch his breath, let alone keep me

from walking straight into his mind.

Leave! I tried to say. My jaw was clenched, the muscles there

seized as though the White Noise was still running through them

like a current of pulsing electricity.
Leave!

I had never done this before, and there was no way to know

if it would actually work—but what did I have to lose now? His

memories flooded over me, wave after wave lapping at my brain,

and all I could think was, *I'm going to do this. It is going to work.*

Martin had said that he *pushed* feelings into people, but my

abilities didn't work that way, and they never had. I only saw

images. I could only muddle, sort, and erase images.

But I'd never tried to do anything else. I had never wanted

to, before this moment. Because if I couldn't help these kids, if

I couldn't save them, then what good

was I? What point did I
even have? *Do it. Just do it.*

I imagined the man picking up his radio
—every detail, from
the way he would fumble for it without
his glasses to the way
his jeans would wrinkle. I imagined him
canceling the request for
back up. I imagined him walking down
the rocky hill that kissed
the edge of the road, into the wild.

And when I released my fingers from his

arm, one by one,

that's exactly what he did. He walked away, and each step

brought a new jolt of shock. I had done that. *Me.*

I turned to where black smoke spilled out over the road,

coating the hill's grass and hidden edges in a thick, ugly blanket.

Then, I remembered.

Zu.

I could see the wreckage clearly now as

I limped forward.

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The pickup truck, which at one point had been parked beside

Betty, was now several hundred feet away, resting in the empty

green field. The smaller silver Volkswagen was on its side in front

of it, a heap of twisted metal that I barely recognized. It was

smoking wildly, belching out thick

smoke, as if it were only one

small spark away from exploding.

*It rammed it, I realized. The truck
rammed it out of the way.*

I followed the trail of tire marks and
glass, but I only found

Truck Driver. What was left of him.

His body was tangled up in itself in the
wild grass; I couldn't

tell where one limb began and the other
ended. None of them

seemed to be in their right place. His

elbows stuck up from the

ground like two broken wings. He had been rammed, too.

Something cold and brittle wrapped itself around my chest,

forcing me back out of the haze of smoke once I confirmed Zu

wasn't in either car. I waited until I cleared the heaviest of the

smoke before falling to my knees and throwing up what little

food I had in my stomach.

It was only when I looked up that I finally saw her, sitting on the road just beside Betty, her back slumped forward, her head bowed, but alive—*alive* and *safe*. My mind clung to those two words as I tried calling for her again. Zu looked up, panting. As I stumbled closer, the smoke revealed her in pieces: bloodshot eyes, a cut on her forehead, tears streaming down her dirt-stained cheeks.

My head throbbed in time with my heartbeat as I knelt down

in front of her, and for several agonizing seconds, it was all that

I could hear.

“O . . . kay?” I asked, my mouth feeling like mush.

Her teeth chattered as she nodded.

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“What . . . happened?” I squeezed out.

Zu curled down on herself like she was trying to vanish from

my sight. Her yellow gloves were beside her on the ground, and

her bare hands were still up and facing forward, as if she had

only touched the car a second before.

I didn't know what to say to get her to calm down—I didn't

even know how to calm myself down. This girl, this Yellow—

she'd destroyed two cars and one life in a matter of seconds.

And, by the looks of it, she'd done it with a single touch.

But even knowing that, she was still Zu, and those hands?

They were the ones that had pulled me to safety.

I lifted her back into Betty with shaking arms. Zu was hot,

well past the point of feeling feverish. Dropping her into the

closest seat, I pressed my hands against her cheeks, but her eyes

couldn't focus on me. I was about to roll

the door shut when she

grabbed my wrist and pointed toward her gloves on the ground.

“Got ’em,” I said. I tossed them to her, and then turned to

confront a heavier load.

Chubs was still passed out in the passenger seat, his body

hanging out of the open door. The truck driver hadn’t been

able to maneuver his long limbs farther than that, thank God—

otherwise Chubs probably would have been in the grass with

the driver. His limp sack of bones smacked against the door as I

slammed it shut behind him.

I tripped over the tips of my tennis shoes as I made my way

around the front of the van. With a cloud of bright spots bleach-

ing out my sight, I pulled the driver's door open the rest of the

way. Liam was also still out cold, and no amount of shaking was

able to stir him up into consciousness.
Zu began to whimper, her

cries muffled as she pressed her face
against her knees.

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“You’re okay, Zu,” I said. “We’re all
okay. We’re gonna be
fine.”

I untangled Liam’s arms from the gray
seat belt and half

pushed, half rolled him off the driver’s

seat. I wasn't strong

enough to deposit him into one of the back seats, not right then.

So he ended up on the ground, wedged between the two front

seats. With his face turned up toward me, I could see the mus-

cles around his mouth twitch, every so often turning the corners

of his lips up in an unnatural smile.

I stared at the wheel, trying bring to mind the right steps

to getting the van to work. Trying to remember what Liam had

done, what Cate had done, what my father used to do. Sixteen,

and I couldn't even figure out where the goddamn parking brake

was, let alone if it was actually on.

In the end, it didn't matter. I could drive with it on or off,

apparently, and all I really needed to know was that the right

pedal was go, and the left was stop, and there really wasn't a

whole lot more to it than that.

Betty tore through the thickest heart of
the smoke, and

chased it down the open road until we
were finally, finally, *finally*

free of the wreckage, and the air coming
through the vents no

longer carried the echo of the White
Noise into our heads, or

smell of smoke into our lungs.





ELEVEN

I got maybe ten miles before the boys began to

rouse. With Zu still crying in the backseat and me having no

idea where we had been headed in the first place, to say I was

relieved was an understatement.

“Holy crap,” Liam croaked. He pressed a hand against the

side of his head and startled, sitting straight up. “Holy crap!”

His face had been inches away from Chubs's feet, so his

hands went there first, yanking at them like he was making sure

they were still attached to something. Chubs let out a low moan

and said, "I think I'm going to be ill."

"Zu?" Liam crawled toward her, earning another yelp out of

Chubs as he kicked his leg. "Zu? Did you—?"

She only cried harder, burying her face in her gloves.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry—I’m so sorry—I—” Liam sounded

agonized, like his guts were being torn straight out of him. I

watched him press his fist against his mouth, heard him try to

clear his throat, but he couldn’t get another word out.

“Zu,” I said, sounding strangely calm to my own ears. “Listen

to me. You saved us. We wouldn’t have made it without you.”

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Liam's head jerked around, as if just remembering I was

there. I winced, but how could I be upset that he would check

on his real friends first?

I felt his eyes on the back of my neck as he worked his way

back up to me. When he reached the passenger seat, he collapsed

into it, his face drawn and pale. "Are you all right?" he asked, his

voice rough. “What happened? How did you get us out?”

“It was Zu,” I began, already well aware of the narrow line

I’d have to walk between the truth and what I could actually

tell them—both for myself and for Zu’s sake. I wasn’t sure how

much she actually remembered from what happened, but I

wasn’t about to confirm any of her fears. In the end, all I said

was, “She sent one car crashing into the

other. It knocked one of

the guys out and sent the other one running.”

“What was . . .” Chubs was having a hard time breathing,

“That horrible noise?”

I stared at him, my mouth trying to push the words past my

disbelief. “You’ve never heard that before?”

The boys both shook their heads. “Jesus,” Liam said, “that was

like hearing a cat go through a blender while being electrocuted.”

“You really didn’t have White Noise? Calm Control?” I

demanded, surprised by the anger licking at my heart. What

camp had these kids been in? Candy Land?

“And you did?” Liam shook his head, probably trying to clear

the ringing.

“They used it at Thurmond to . . . disable us,” I explained.

“When there were outbursts or problems. Keeps you from being able to think long enough to use your abilities.”

“Why are you all right?” Chubs wheezed, half suspicious, half jealous.

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That was the question of the day, wasn't it? My long, sordid

history with the White Noise included

several episodes of faint-

ing, vomiting, and memory loss, not to mention my most recent

experience with bleeding profusely out of my eyes and nose. I

guess once you'd had a taste of the Worst, Pretty Bad isn't all

that terrible. If it was their first time dealing with it, that would

at least explain why they wilted like dead grass after only a few

seconds.

Liam was searching my face, and I wondered what he was

seeing. All of it? I thought of how his jacket had felt against my

cheek, the curve of his spine, and something calm and warm

settled in my chest.

“I’m used to it, I guess,” I said. “And Greens aren’t as affected

as Blues and the others.” I remembered to add this. A truth and

a lie.

Liam offered to trade seats as soon as his face lost that famil-

iar pinched look, and a healthy color began to return to his

cheeks. The kid deserved a round of applause for how well he

was hiding the tremors in his hands and legs from the others,

but I had a trained eye. I recognized the nasty after-bites of the

White Noise as the old friends they were. He needed a few more

minutes.

“Come on,” he said as the dashboard clock clicked off another

minute. “You’ve done—” His voice trailed off.

I looked down at him, only to realize he was looking at me—

or, more accurately, my bony, busted knees. A moment later,

after I returned my gaze to the road, I felt something warm

hovering just above my leg and jerked away.

“Ah—sorry,” Liam whispered, pulling

his hand back. I watched

the tips of his ears go a bright cherry red. “It’s just—you’re all

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cut up. Please, can we stop for a second? We should regroup.

Figure out where we are.”

But I didn’t want to just pull over alongside some random

stretch of fence and pasture; I waited until we had found an old

rest stop, complete with its red-brick colonial-style finish, and

turned the van off the road and into its deserted parking lot.

Chubs took the opportunity to try to empty the contents of

his stomach onto the ground but accomplished little more than

some enthusiastic dry heaving. Liam stood and patted his back.

“Will you help Ruby when you’re done?”

Chubs might have hated me, or wanted to

scare me off, but

he at least recognized I had played some small part in saving his

skin. He didn't say yes, though, only crossed his arms over his

chest and blew out a long, martyred sigh.

“Thanks,” Liam said. “You’re the best, Mother Teresa.”

He went out the sliding door behind my seat and made a

beeline for the small cluster of silver water fountains that stood

between him and the restroom entrances. Zu followed him out,

bounding across the distance with a pink duffel bag in hand. By

the time I turned my attention back to him, Chubs had collected

himself enough to start poking and prodding me.

“Easy!” I gasped when his finger brushed my elbow. He

jabbed a finger against one of the overhead lights and it snapped

on at his command. I finally saw that the

skin from my elbow

down to my wrist had been rubbed raw
by the road.

“Turn toward me.” Chubs looked like he
was fighting with

all the strength he had left in him not to
roll his eyes at me.

“*Now*, Green, before I grow a beard.”

I twisted myself around so my legs were
facing toward him

in the passenger seat. Unsurprisingly,
they looked just about

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as pretty as my arm did. Both knees were skinned and already

scabbing over in places, but aside from a few stray scratches and

bruises that had nothing to do with the attack, they were in

much better shape than my hands.

Chubs pulled what looked like a briefcase out from under his

seat and popped the clasps on it open. I

was only able to sneak

a quick glance inside before he pulled out four white square

packets and shut it again.

“God, how did you even manage to do this?” he muttered as

he ripped the first one open. I smelled the antiseptic and tried

to squirm away.

Chubs glowered at me from over the rims of his glasses. “If

you’re going to make yourself at home,

could you at least try to

take better care of yourself? It's hard enough as it is to keep the

other two in one piece without you flinging yourself at danger,

too."

"I didn't *fling*—" I began, then thought better of it. "Sorry?"

"Yeah, well," he huffed. "Not as sorry as you'll be if any of

these cuts get infected."

He brought my right hand up close to his

face in order to

get a better look, and I tried not to wince
as he began to swipe

at it with one of the disinfecting wipes
about as tenderly as a

wolf shredding apart its dinner. The
sting that followed snapped

me out of the hazy, numb stupor I was
falling into. Suddenly

aware of his touch, I wrenched my hand
away from his and took

the cold wet cloth from his hand. It
didn't hurt any less when I

cleaned the small bits of asphalt out myself.

“You should go check on Lee and Zu,” I said.

“No, because then they’ll be all pissed off I’m not taking care

of you.” After a moment he admitted, somewhat reluctantly,

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“Besides, you did seem to . . . well, you’re worse off than the rest

of us, at least. They can wait.” He must have seen the corner of

my mouth twitch, because he added, “But don’t think you’re

going to get all the bandages—these are superficial wounds at

best, and not even very serious ones!”

“Yes, sir,” I said, tossing the disinfectant wipe out of the win-

dow. He handed me a new one for my other palm, eyes still

narrowed, but maybe, just maybe, softening at the edges. I felt

myself relax a bit, but I wasn't suffering under any delusion that

we were about to start braiding friendship bracelets for each

other.

“Why did you lie?”

My head shot up at his question, suddenly feeling very light.

“I didn't—what are you—I'm not—”

“About Zu.” He glanced back over his shoulder. His voice

was quiet when he continued. “You said

she only knocked that

guy out, but . . . that wasn't the case, was it? He was killed."

I nodded. "She didn't mean to—"

"Obviously not," he said, sharply. "I was wondering why no

one was coming after us, and I got worried, knowing what it

would do to her . . . and, well, I guess you have some common

sense after all."

It came to me then as I looked at him—

one of those rare,

perfect crystallizations of understanding.

He wanted me out

because he saw me as a threat to them.

He wouldn't ever trust

me until I proved myself otherwise—and

after my slip in messing

up the color of the SUV, that was likely
to be half past never.

“What's the world with one less
skiptracer, anyway?” He

bent down to retrieve his briefcase
again, replacing the unused

supplies in it.

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That's right, I thought, sitting up straighter, I didn't tell them.

“They weren't skiptracers. They were PSFs.”

At that, Chubs actually barked out a laugh. “And I'm guess-

ing their uniforms were stuffed under their plaid shirts and

jeans?”

“One of them was wearing a badge,” I said. “And the orange

device they were using—I saw one at Thurmond, once.” Chubs

didn’t look convinced, but we didn’t have the time—and I cer-

tainly did not have the energy—to be running circles around the

truth for the next hour. “Look,” I continued, “you don’t have to

believe me, but you should know that one of them radioed in a

Psi number—42755. That’s Liam,

right?”

I gave the story from my end and left the rest for him to fill

in from his side. By the time I got to a description of the orange

device, he had heard quite enough. He sucked in a deep breath,

his lips drawing together to a point, until he looked more fer-

ret than human. I held my own breath as he rolled down his

window and proceeded to relate, down to the exact words, what

I had just finished telling him, like he didn't trust me to do it

myself.

"I told *you* the PSFs would catch up to us!" he kept repeat-

ing, like we hadn't heard him shout it the first ten times. "We're

just lucky it wasn't *her*."

There it was again—the mysterious *Her*. The mysterious *She*.

Liam ignored him and kept his back to us, still bent over the

silver drinking fountain. Zu stood next to him, dutifully holding

the button down so he could use both hands to scrub his face in

the stream of water shooting out of it.

I used the last of the wipes to clean the dirt off my own face.

“I just want to know how that PSF recognized him, even before

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he used this orange *thing*. It flashed, but

he knew the number off

the top of his head. He didn't need to wait for it to tell him that."

Chubs stared at me a moment, then brought a hand up to

pinch the bridge of his nose. "Everyone had their photo taken

when they were processed. Didn't you?"

I nodded. "So they put together a network for searching the

photos?" I asked.

"Green, how the hell am I supposed to

know that?” he said.

“Describe it to me again.”

The orange gadget must have been some sort of a camera

or scanner—that was the only explanation I could drum up that

Chubs didn’t shoot down as being moronic.

I pressed my hands against my eyes, trying to fight back the

urge to vomit.

“It’s bad news if that’s all it takes for

them to ID us,” Chubs

said, rubbing a hand over his forehead and smoothing out the

wrinkles there. “If we weren’t already screwed—they probably

know we’re looking for East River now, which means they’re

going have more patrols out, which means they’re going to be

watching our families even closer, which means it’ll be even

harder for the Slip Kid . . .”

He never finished his trail of thought. He didn't have to.

I let out a humorless laugh. "C'mon. They're going to send

out a whole armada for a few freaks?"

"First of all, armadas are comprised of ships," Chubs said.

"And second, no, they wouldn't send one out for a few freaks."

"Then what's the—"

"But they *would* send one out to get Lee."

He didn't wait for me to piece it together.

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“Green, who do you think was the mastermind behind our camp's breakout?”

When the others were ready to return to the minivan, we played

a silent game of musical chairs. Chubs took the middle seat on

the passenger side, and Zu, her usual

perch behind the driver's

seat. I had two options at that point: crawl into the backseat or

tough it out in the front seat, while trying act like everything was

all hunky-dory and pretending that Chubs hadn't just told me

Liam was responsible for what might have been the only success-

ful camp breakout ever.

In the end, exhaustion won out. I managed to collapse into

the passenger seat feeling about as lovely as a wilted head of let-

tuce, just as Liam climbed into the driver's seat.

He grinned. "Must be tiring being the big hero."

I waved him off, trying to quiet the small, ridiculous buzz

of happiness in my chest that came with his words. He was just

trying to be nice.

"Good thing we had the ladies there to take care of business,"

he continued, turning to Chubs.
“Otherwise you and I would be

rolling around in the back of truck,
halfway back to Ohio.”

Chubs only grunted, his coloring still
faintly gray.

Liam looked a little better, at least. His
face was tinged

pink from the shock of cold fountain
water, and his fingers still

seemed to be twitching every so often,
but his eyes had lost that

cloudy, unfocused look. Considering it

was his first time being

ear-tased by the White Noise, Liam had recovered fast.

“All right, team,” he said, slowly. “Time for a Betty vote.”

“No!” Chubs startled back to life. “I know exactly where

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you’re going with this, and I know I’m going to be overruled,

and I—”

“All those in favor of letting our girl wonder stay with us for the time being, raise your hand.”

Both Liam and Zu raised their hands immediately. Zu looked back at me with a smile that seemed particularly bright next to Chubs’s glowering face.

“We don’t know anything about her—hell, we don’t know that what she *has* told us is even true!” he objected. “She could

be a psychopath who kills us in our sleep, or calls her League

buddies in just when we let our guards down.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said dryly, half flattered he thought I was

capable of that level of scheming.

“The longer she stays with us,” he added, “the more likely it

is the League will catch up to us, and you *know* what they do to

their kids!”

“They won’t catch up with us,” Liam said. “We took care of

that already. If we stay together, we’ll be fine.”

“No. No, no, no, no, *no*,” Chubs said. “I want to register my

may vote, even though the two of you always win.”

“Well, don’t be a bad sport about it,” Liam said. “This is

democracy in action.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course I am,” Liam said. “What I wasn’t okay with

was the thought of dropping you off at some back of beyond

Greyhound station with no money, no papers, and no way of

knowing for sure you got where you’re going safe and sound.”

There it was again—that smile. I pressed my hand against

my chest, trying to keep things at bay. Locked inside. To keep

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my hand from reaching out to brush the
one he had put on the

armrest of my seat. It seemed so sick, so
wrong, but all I wanted

to do was slip inside his mind and see
what he was thinking.

Why he was looking at me like that.

You really are a monster, I thought,
pressing a fist tight against

my stomach.

I wanted to protect him—at that moment,

it was suddenly

clear to me exactly what I wanted: to protect them, all of them.

They had saved me. They had saved my life, and hadn't expected

a single thing in return. If the showdown with the undercover

PSFs had shown me anything, it was that they needed someone

like me. I could help them, protect them.

I didn't think I could ever begin to repay them for taking

me in and letting me stay as long as I had, but if I could control

myself long enough, it would be a start. It was the best I could

do with what I had.

“Where are you trying to go, anyway?”
Liam tried to keep

his voice casual, but his eyes had darkened, obviously troubled.

“Could you even get there on a bus if you tried?”

I told them the feeble plan I’d half-baked inside of the gas

station. I fingered the ends of my long, tangled hair, and was

surprised to feel some of the tightness in my chest ease up long

enough for me to take a deep breath.

“What’s in Virginia Beach?”

“My grandmother, I think,” I said. “I hope.”

Yes, Grams, I reminded myself. Grams was still an option.

She remembered me, didn’t she? If I could help them find the

Slip Kid—and if he could help *me*—
then wasn't there a real

chance I could see her again? Live with
her?

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It was a lot of *ifs*. *If* we found the Slip Kid. *If* he was an Orange. *If* he could help me figure out how to control my abilities. *If* he could help us contact our families.

Once I had tapped into the vein of doubts, the rest came

flooding in.

What if Grams—the thought was
crushing—had passed

away? She was seventy when I was
taken, which meant she'd

be inching closer to eighty. I had never
even considered it a pos-

sibility, because I couldn't remember a
time that she didn't look

glowing and ready to take on the world
with little more than her

silver hair, a neon fanny pack, and
matching visor.

But if I wasn't the same person I had been six years ago, how

could I expect her to be? If she was alive, how could I ask her

to take care of her freak granddaughter—protect me and hide

me—when there was a chance she couldn't take care of herself?

It was too much to think about now, too much to consider

and agonize over in a logical way. My brain was still thrumming

from the effects of the White Noise, but

my weak heart made
the choice easy for me.

“All right,” I said, “I’ll stay.”

And hope that none of us regret it.

The deep wrinkle that had appeared
between Liam’s brows

eased, but didn’t disappear. I knew he
was studying me, his light

eyes flicking over my face. Trying to
figure out, maybe, why I

had hesitated so long to agree. Whatever
conclusion he came to

made him sit back with a sigh, and adjust the mirrors in silence.

Liam had the kind of face that you could read and instantly

know what he was thinking—it made it easy to trust that what-

ever he was saying was true. But there was a practiced quality

to his expression now, an intense concentration to keep his face

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blank. It looked unnatural on someone who seemed to always

have a grin tucked in the corner of his mouth. I leaned back,

trying to ignore the throbbing in my head and the pitiful dying

animal noises coming from Chubs once he remembered how

much pain he was in.

Liam silently passed him a half-empty water bottle from

under the driver's seat. I glanced back at Zu out of the corner of

my eye, but the twilight had lulled her to sleep. A thin sheen of

sweat coated her forehead and the skin above her lips.

The car rumbled back to life. Liam exhaled as he cut a diago-

nal path through the parking lot. He didn't seem to know which

direction to turn when we finally found the road.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

He was silent for a moment, scratching his chin. “We’re still

headed to Virginia, if I can find it. I think we crossed the state

line a while back, but I don't know where we landed. Not too

familiar with this area, to be honest."

"Use the damn map," Chubs grouched behind him.

"I can figure it out without it," Liam insisted. He kept swivel-

ing his head back and forth, like he expected someone to appear

and guide him in the right direction with road flares and fanfare.

Five minutes later, the map was spread out over the steering

wheel, and Chubs was gloating in the backseat. I leaned over

the armrest, trying to make sense of the pastel colors and criss-

crossing lines on the flimsy, ripped paper.

Liam pointed out the boundaries of West Virginia, Virginia,

Maryland, and North Carolina.

“I think we’re about . . . here?” He pointed to a tiny dot that

was surrounded by a rainbow of crisscrossed lines.

“I don’t suppose Black Betty has GPS?”
I said.

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Liam blew out a sigh, patting the steering wheel. He had

decided we were going right. “Black Betty may drive the straight

and true path, but souped up, she is not.”

“I told you we should have taken that

Ford SUV,” Chubs

said.

“That piece of—” Liam caught himself.

“That box on wheels

was a death trap—not to mention its transmission was shot to

hell.”

“So, naturally, the next choice was a minivan.”

“Yep, she called to me from the parking lot of abandoned

cars. The sun was shining through her

windows like a beacon

of hope.”

Chubs groaned. “Why are you *so weird?*”

“Because my weird has to be able to cancel out *your* weird,

Lady Cross-stitch.”

“At least what I do is considered an art form,” Chubs said.

“Yes, in ye olde medieval Europe you would’ve been quite

the catch—”

“Anyway,” I cut in, now in full possession of the map, “we have to be close to Winchester.” I pointed to a dot on the western end of Virginia.

“What makes you say that?” Liam began. “Are you from this area? Because if—”

“I’m not. I just remember driving past Keyser and Romney while the two of you were out. And with all the Civil War Trails

signs, we should be near one of the battlefields.”

“Those are some good detective skills, Nancy Drew, but

unfortunately those signs pretty much mean nothing in this part

of the country,” Liam said. “You can barely go fifty feet without

hitting a historical marker for the place this army crossed, or

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that guy died, or where James Madison lived—”

“That’s in Orange,” I interrupted.
“We’re nowhere near that.”

The soft blue light of evening gathered
around his blond

hair, stripping it of color. He studied me
for a minute, scratching

his chin again. “So you *are* from
Virginia, then.”

“I’m not—”

He held up a hand. “Please. No one
outside of this state gives

a crap about where James Madison's house is."

I sat back. *Walked right into that one.*

It was my mom's fault. As a high school history teacher, it

had been her personal mission to cart Dad and me around to

every major historical site in the area. So while my friends got to

have pool parties and sleepovers, I got to walk around one battle-

field after another, posing for pictures with cannons and Colonial

reenactors. Fun times, made even more fun by the thousands of

bug bites and peeling sunburns I always showed up with on the

first day of school. I still had scars from Antietam.

Liam smiled at the dark road, keeping the minivan's head-

lights off. I thought it was fairly brave—or stupid—considering

the commonwealth of Virginia had never considered it a priority

to install lights on its highways and

roads.

“I think we should stop for the night,” Chubs said. “Are you going to find a park?”

“Relax, buddy; I got this,” Liam said.

“You keep saying that,” Chubs muttered, sitting back, “and

then it’s *Oh, sorry team, let’s huddle together for warmth* while the

bears try to break in and eat our food.”

“Yeah . . . sorry about that,” Liam said. “But hey, what’s life

without a little adversity?”

That had to have been the fakest attempt at optimism since

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my fourth grade teacher tried reasoning that we were better off

without the dead kids in our class because it'd mean more turns

on the playground swings for the rest of us.

I lost track of their conversation after

that. It wasn't that I

had no interest in hearing all about the bizarre traditions and

habits they'd managed to form in the two weeks since escap-

ing their camp; I was exhausted with trying to figure out why,

exactly, those two were able to cling to the thin thread that

bound their friendship together.

Eventually Liam found Highway 81, and Chubs found a shal-

low, restless sleep. The endless stream
of old trees, only a few

fully dressed for spring, passed by my
window. We were going

too fast, and we were too far into
twilight, for me to make out

the patchwork of leaves that had grown
in. Wherever we were,

there were still traces of the dead leaves
from the fall before

staining the highway's cement. Almost
as though we were the

first car to drive the road in quite some

time.

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass, reaching over

to point the AC vent directly at my face. My headache was still

there, pinching the space behind my eyes. The freezing air would

help keep me awake, and, if nothing else, alert enough to catch

my mind blindly groping for Liam's.

“You okay?”

He was trying to watch both the road and

me. In the dark, I

couldn't do much else beside make out
curve of his nose and lips.

A part of me was glad I couldn't see the
bruises and cuts there. It

had only been a few days, a blink in my
collective sixteen years

of life, but I didn't need to see his face
to know soft concern

would be there. Liam was a great many
things, but mysterious

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and unpredictable weren't included in that deck of cards.

“Are *you* okay?” I countered.

The car was quiet enough for me to hear his fingers drum-

ming on the steering wheel. “Just need to sleep it off, I think.”

Then, after a moment, he added, “Did they really use that on

you at Thurmond? A lot?”

Not a lot, but enough. I couldn't tell him

that, though, with-

out fanning the flames of his pity.

“Do you think the PSFs figured out where you’re going?” I

asked instead.

“Maybe. We could have just been at the wrong place at the

wrong time.”

Chubs woke behind us with a loud yawn.

“Not likely,” he said sleepily. “Even if they weren’t inten-

tionally tracking us, I'm sure they are now. They were probably

forced to memorize your ugly mug and Psi number. We already

know you're a tasty treat for the skiptracers"

"Thank you Mr. Sunshine and Smiles," Liam gritted out.

"For what it's worth, the guy seemed surprised that it was

actually you," I said. "But . . . who is this person you keep talking

about? The woman?"

“Lady Jane,” Liam said, as if that explained everything.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s what we call one of the more . . . persistent skiptracers,”

he continued.

“First, it’s what *you* call her,” Chubs said, “and second: per-

sistent? Try she’s been on us like a shadow ever since we got out

of Caledonia. She shows up everywhere, at any time, like she can

guess what we're going to do before we do it.”

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“The lady is good at what she does,” Liam confirmed.

“Can you please not compliment the person trying to drag

our asses back to camp?”

“Why do you call her Lady Jane?” I asked.

Liam shrugged. “She’s a rare British

lass in a crop of blood-

thirsty Americans.”

“How did *that* happen?” I asked. “I thought they closed all

the borders.”

Liam opened his mouth to answer, but Chubs got there first.

“I don’t know, Green; why don’t you hit her up for a chat and

tea next time she comes around to capture us?”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe I will if you

tell me what she looks

like.”

“Dark hair up in a bun, glasses—” Liam began.

“—long, sort of hooked nose?” I finished.

“You’ve seen her?”

“In Marlinton. She was the one driving the red truck,

but . . .” Cate and Rob had taken care of the car. She had been

left behind. “Well, she wasn’t there this

time,” I finished. “Maybe

we lost her for real.”

“Fat chance,” Chubs grumbled. “The woman is a Terminator.”

We passed one rundown motel after another, some occupied

than others. I sat up in my seat when Liam turned into an old

Comfort Inn’s parking lot, only to immediately back out of it

with a low whistle. There were no cars in the parking lot, but a

dozen or more men and women were hanging around outside of

their rooms, smoking, talking, fighting.

“We saw this a lot driving through Ohio,” he explained with-

out me having to prompt him. “After people lost their houses,

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they’d go to the nearest closed hotel and try to fight over the

rooms there. Gangs and all that crap.”

The motel he settled on was a Howard Johnson Express, one

with a quarter of its parking lot filled with different makes and

models of cars and the blue vacancy sign on. I held my breath

as he navigated around the outer ring of rooms, careful to avoid

driving past the office building. He picked a spot at the very

edge of the lot, surveying the line of rooms in front of us. Two

were easily ruled out—we could see the

glow of the TV through

the windows and curtains—but the others weren't as obviously

occupied.

“Wait here a sec,” he said, unbuckling his seat belt. “I’m

going to scope out the area. Make sure it’s safe.” And it was just

like before; he didn’t bother to wait for any of us to protest. He

just jumped out of the car, glanced into each room he passed,

and began to jimmy the door of his choosing.

Chubs and I were left to divide up the last of the food we had

gathered from the gas station in Marlinton. Our inventory was

down to a bag of Cheetos, peanut butter crackers, some Twizzlers,

and a snack pack of Oreos, plus the candy I had managed to stuff

into my backpack. It was every six-year-old's dream feast.

We worked silently, avoiding each

other's gaze like cham-

pions. Chubs's fingers were quick and nimble as he opened his

peanut butter crackers and started in on them. The same ratty

book was on his lap, the pages open and smiling up at him. I

knew he couldn't actually be reading them—not with eyesight

as bad as his, at least. But when he finally decided to talk to me,

he didn't so much as glance up from it.

“Enjoying our life of crime yet? The General seems to think you’re a natural.”

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I reached over to wake Zu, ignoring whatever it was he

was trying to imply. I was too exhausted to deal with him, and,

frankly, none of the comebacks warring at the tip of my tongue

at the moment were likely to win him

over.

Before I could step out of the van, my backpack and food

in hand, Chubs's hand reached out and slammed the door shut

again. In the dim light of the hotel, he looked . . . not angry,

exactly, but certainly not friendly, either. "I have something to

say to you."

"You've already said quite a bit, thanks."

He waited until I had looked back at him over my shoul-

der before continuing. “I’m not going to pretend like you didn’t

help us today, or that you didn’t spend years living in a glorified

shithole, but I’m telling you now—use tonight to think seriously

about your decision to stay, and if you decide to slip out in the

middle of the night, know that you probably made the right

choice.”

I reached again for the door, but he wasn't finished. "I know

you're hiding something. I know you haven't been completely

honest. And if you think for some insane reason that we can

protect you, think again. We'll be lucky to make it out of this

mess alive *without* whatever crisis you're bringing to the table."

I felt my stomach clench, but kept my face neutral. If he was

hoping to read some clue in my face, he

was going to be disap-

pointed; I'd spent the better part of the last six years schooling

my expression into perfect innocence under the threat of guns.

Whatever he suspected couldn't have been the truth, though,

otherwise he wouldn't be giving me one last chance to duck and

run. He would have personally punted me out of the van, prefer-

ably at a high speed, in the middle of a deserted highway.

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Chubs rubbed a thumb across his lower lip. “I think . . .” he

started. “I hope you get to Virginia Beach, I really do, but—”

He pulled the glasses off his face and pinched the bridge of his

nose. “This is ridiculous, I’m sorry. Just think about what I said.

Make the right choice.”

Liam began waving at us from the door,

keeping it propped

open with his foot. Zu put a hand on Chubs's shoulder. He

jumped, blinking in surprise at the touch of yellow rubber. She

had been so silent, I had forgotten she was there, too.

“Come on, Suzume,” Chubs said, dropping a hand on her

shoulder. “Maybe if we're lucky, the General will deign to let us

take showers. And, maybe if we're *really* lucky, he'll actually take

one himself.”

Zu followed him out the side door, casting an anxious look

my way. I waved her off with a forced smile and reached in the

backseat for my black backpack.

I didn't notice it until I was already outside, the darkening

sky sapping away the last bit of the van's warmth from my skin.

One of my hands reached out to hold the sliding door open as

I leaned back into the minivan and pulled the book out of the passenger seat's back pouch. It was the first and only time I had seen it free from Chubs's hands.

The flat, empty M&M's bag he was using as a bookmark was still in place. I flipped the book open to that page, and didn't need to look at the spine to know instantly what book it was.

Watership Down, by Richard Adams. No wonder he had gone

to such great lengths to hide what he was reading. The story of

a bunch of rabbits trying to make their way in the world? Liam

would have a field day.

But I loved that book, and apparently Chubs did, too. It was

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the same old edition my dad used to read to me before bed, the

one I used to steal from his study and put

on my shelf for when

I couldn't sleep at night. How had it
come to me just when I

needed it the most?

My eyes drank in each word,
worshipping their shape until

my lips started forming them and I was
reading aloud for every-

one and no one to hear. *“All the world
will be your enemy, Prince*

*with a Thousand Enemies, and
whenever they catch you, they will*

*kill you. But first they must catch you,
digger, listener, runner, prince*

*with the swift warning. Be cunning and
full of tricks and your people*

shall never be destroyed.”

I wondered if Chubs knew how the story ended.

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TWELVE

The hot water was enough to make me forget I

was standing in an old motel's shower, washing my hair with

shampoo that reeked of fake lavender. In the entire compact

bathroom, there were only six things: the sink, the toilet, the

towel, the shower, its curtain, and me.

I was the last one in. By the time I finally walked through

the motel room door, Zu had already been in and out and Chubs

had just barricaded himself in the bathroom, where he spent the

next hour scrubbing himself and all of his clothing until they

stank of stale soap. It seemed pointless to me to try to do laundry

in a sink with hand soap, but there was no bathtub or laundry

detergent for him to use. The rest of us just sat back and tuned

out his impassioned speech on the

importance of good hygiene.

“You’re next,” Liam had said, turning to me. “Just make sure

you wipe down everything when you’re done.”

I caught the towel he threw to me. “What about you?”

“I’ll take one in the morning.”

With the bathroom door shut and locked behind me, I

dropped my backpack on the toilet seat cover and went to work

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sorting through its contents. I pulled out the clothes they had

given me and dumped them on the floor. Something silky and

red spilled out on top of the pile, causing me to jump back in

alarm.

It took several moments of suspicious inspection to figure

out what it was—the bright red dress

from the trailer's closet.

Zu, I thought, passing a tired hand over my face. She must

have grabbed it when I wasn't looking.

I poked at it with a toe, nose wrinkling at its faint scent of

stale cigarette smoke. It looked like it was going to be a size too

large for me, not to mention the somewhat icky feeling that

came with knowing where it had been.

But, clearly, she had wanted me to have

it—and wearing it,

loath as I was to admit it, was smarter
than running around in

my camp uniform. I could do this for Zu;
if it made her happy,

it'd be worth the discomfort.

There was no shampoo, but the
Children's League had

thought to give me deodorant, a bright
green toothbrush, a pack

of tissues, some tampons, and hand
sanitizer—all travel-sized,

and zipped up tight in a plastic bag.
Under that was a small

hairbrush and water bottle. And there, at
the very bottom of the

bag, was another panic button.

It must have been there the entire time,
and I just hadn't

realized it. I'd thrown the first one Cate
had given me away,

leaving it behind in the mud and brush.
The thought that this

one had been in my bag all this time—
the *entire time*—made my

skin crawl. Why hadn't I thoroughly searched the bag before

now?

I picked it up between two fingers and dropped it into the

sink like it had been a piece of hot coal. My hand was on the

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faucet, ready to drown the stupid thing in water and fry it for

good, but something stopped me.

I'm not sure how long I stared down at it
before I picked it

up again and held it toward the light,
trying to see if I could peer

inside of the black outer shell. I looked
for a red blinking light

that would tell me if it was recording. I
held it up to my ear, lis-

tening for any kind whirring or beeping
that would tell me if it

was activated. If it was on, or if it really
was a tracker, wouldn't

they have caught up to us by now?

Was it so bad to keep it—just in case?
Just in case some-

thing happened again, and I couldn't help
the others? Wouldn't

being with the League be better than
being thrown back into

Thurmond? Being *killed*—wasn't
anything better than that?

When I put the panic button back in the
pocket of the back-

pack, it wasn't for me. If Cate had seen
me she would have

smiled, and the thought only made me

angry all over again. I

couldn't even believe in my own ability to protect these kids.

Stepping under the shower's perfect warm spray was already

surreal enough without having to hear the *click-click-click-beep*

of Thurmond's automatic timer to keep my wash time under

three minutes. It was a good thing, too, since the dirt seemed

to come off me in slow layers. A good fifteen minutes of scrub-

bing later, and it felt like I had turned every inch my skin inside

out. I even tried using the bubblegum pink razor that had been

included in the hotel's small pack of soap and shampoo, opening

up old and new scabs on my shins and knees.

Sixteen years old, I thought, and this is the first time I've been

able to shave my legs.

It was stupid—so stupid. I didn't know what I was doing, and

I didn't care. I was old enough. No one was going to stop me.

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My mom always came back to me in flashes. Sometimes I'd

hear her voice, just a word or two. Other times, I'd have a mem-

ory so real it was like reliving the moment altogether. And now,

as I kept at it, all I could think of was that conversation we'd

had about this very thing, and her smile as she repeated over and

over again, “Maybe when you’re thirteen.”

Eventually, I washed the razor off and threw it in the direc-

tion of my bag. I didn’t think anyone else would want to use it

now. With blood running down my legs, I turned my attention

to the nest on my head. My hair was still too tangled for me to

run my hands through it. I had to work

through it knot by knot,

using more of the shampoo than I had
ever meant to, and by the

time I was finished, I was crying.

I'm sixteen.

I don't know what brought it out. One
minute I was fine,

and the next it felt like my chest had
collapsed in on itself. I

tried to take in a deep breath, but the air
was too hot. My hands

found the wall's white tile first, a

second before the rest of my

body collapsed against it. I sat down on
the rough, fake stone

floor of the shower, and pressed my
hands to my chest, grateful

for the noise of the shower and overhead
vent to hide the sound

of me breaking into pieces. I didn't want
them to hear me like

this, especially not Zu.

It was stupid, so stupid. I was sixteen—
so what? So what, I

hadn't seen my parents in six years? So what, I might never see

them again? It's not like they remembered me anyway.

I should have been happy that it was over, that I was out

of that place. But inside or out, I was alone, and I was begin-

ning to wonder if I always had been, if I always would be. The

water pressure wavered, its temperature spiking as someone in

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the room over flushed the toilet. It didn't matter. I could barely

feel it blasting against my back. My fingers went to my bleeding

knees and pressed down, but I couldn't feel that, either.

Cate had told me that I needed to divide my life into three

acts and close the first two behind me—but how did someone do

that? How were you just supposed to *forget*?

There was a knock on the door. Light, almost tentative at

first, but more insistent when I didn't answer right away.

“Ruby?” I heard Liam's voice call. “You okay?”

I took a deep breath and reached back, hand feeling through

the air for the faucet. The water overhead faded to a mere driz-

zle, and then a drip, and then nothing at all.

“Can you—uh—open the door? Just for

a sec?" He sounded

nervous enough to make *me* nervous. For one terrifying split

second I thought something had happened. I reached for the

towel and wrapped it around myself. My fingers flicked the lock

over and were turning the doorknob before my brain caught up.

A blast of icy air was the first thing to hit me. Liam's wide

eyes were the second. The pair of big white socks in his hand,

the third.

He glanced around the bathroom over my shoulder, his

mouth pressed in a grim line. The motel room was darker than

it had been when I first walked in; we must have been well

into night now. So I couldn't be sure, not in any real way, but

I thought I caught a hint of color flooding the tips of his ears.

“Is everything all right?” I whispered. He stared at me, let-

ting the warm fog from the bathroom wash over him. “Liam?”

The socks were thrust in my direction. I looked down at

them and then up at him, hoping I didn’t look as flabbergasted

as I felt.

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“Just wanted to . . . give you these,” he said, giving them a

little shake. He thrust them again in my

direction. “You know,
for you.”

“Don’t you need them?” I asked.

“I have a couple extra pairs, and you have none, right?” He

looked like he was in some kind of pain now. “Seriously. Please.

Just take them. Chubs says your extremities or whatever are the

first things to get cold, so you need them, and—”

“Oh my God, Green,” I heard Chubs say

from somewhere

in the room. “Just take the damn socks and put the kid out of

his misery.”

Liam didn’t wait for me to hold out a hand. He reached past

me and deposited them on the counter, right next to the sink.

“Um . . . thanks?” I said.

“Great—I mean, no problem,” Liam turned to walk away,

only to turn back again, as if thinking of

something else. “Okay.

Great. Cool—well, so you—”

“Use your words, Lee,” Chubs called.

“Some of us are trying

to get some sleep.”

“Oh, right. Sleep.” Liam made a vague motion toward the

room’s bed. “You and Zu are going to share. I hope you don’t

mind.”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Okay, great!” He put an abnormally bright smile on his face.

I wondered what he was waiting for me to do or say—if this was

one of those moments that being trapped in a cabin with dozens

of girls for six years had failed to prepare me for. It was like we

were speaking in two different languages.

“Yeah, um, great,” I repeated, more confused now than ever.

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That seemed to do the trick, though.
Liam turned and walked
away without another word.

I picked up my new socks from the
counter, examining them.

Just before I shut the door, I heard
Chubs's voice, tinged with
his usual *told-you-so*.

“—hope you're pleased with yourself,”
he was saying. “You
should have just left her alone. She was

fine.”

But I hadn't been, and somehow Liam had known.

It took me several long moments to realize it was Zu's dream.

She and I were on the room's queen-sized bed, huddled

together for warmth. The boys were on the floor with the blan-

kets, using extra towels stolen from a cleaning cart as pillows.

The collective brain trust of Chubs and Liam hadn't been able

to figure out how to turn down the air-conditioning unit, which

insisted on spitting out its frosty breath every time the room so

much as dared to spike to sixty degrees.

I had been hovering around the sweet, milky edges of sleep

for hours when I felt the itch at the back of my mind. There was

a part of me that had been expecting it; even though my body

had settled onto the bed like a slab of concrete, my brain was still

buzzing around in circles, processing
what had happened with

the PSFs, wondering if I could do what I
had done to that man

again, when Zu's bare feet brushed
against mine, and that was

all it took. I was pulled into her dream
headfirst.

I was Zu and Zu was in a small bed,
staring up at the under-

belly of a dark brown mattress.
Darkness blurred around us until

finally some recognizable shapes

emerged. Stacks of bunk beds,
a chalkboard, bright blue cabinets that
stretched from floor to

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ceiling, large windows boarded up with
plywood, and strange

square discolorations on the wall, where
posters must have once

hung.

I couldn't tear away. That was the
dangerous thing about

dreams—how quickly you became tangled in it all. People nat-

urally let their guard down when they slept, so much so that

sometimes, if the dream was frightening enough, I didn't even

need a touch to be drawn into it.

I couldn't smell the smoke, but I saw it right away, gliding

beneath the old classroom's door like spilled milk racing across

the ground. A moment later, I jolted up, rolling until I was off

the bed completely. I watched in slow,
dawning horror as a dozen

girls jumped down from their own bunks
and gathered in a buzz-

ing huddle at the center of the room.

One girl, who must have been a good
head taller and four

years older than the others, tried to get
them to crouch in a line

beneath the windows, with no success.
Her arms were waving

through the air, the long sleeves of her
simple, mustard-yellow

uniform blurring.

And then, the alarms went off and the door at the far end of

the room swung open.

The sound the bell made was nearly as excruciating as the

White Noise, its pitch stretched and distorted by the dream. I

was jostled forward as the other little girls made a break for the

door. It didn't seem to matter to them that the smoke was suf-

focusing, or that it didn't seem to have a visible source.

In the place of neat, orderly lines was mass chaos. Kids with

green, navy, and yellow uniforms spilled out into the white-tiled

hallway. The emergency lights were on, fire alarms flashing red

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and yellow along the wall. I was thrown into the crushing river

of bodies, all headed in the same direction—the direction of the smoke.

My vision blurred with tears and forced the breath out of my

chest. One glance over my shoulder was enough to see some of

the older kids, both boys and girls, dragging out the blue cabinets

from their room and knocking them over in front of the silver

double doors on the other end of the hallway.

We weren't evacuating at all. We were escaping.

My vision was swimming in black by the time we were

pushed through the other set of doors and into the cramped

stairway. The smoke was thickest there, rising not from shim-

mering flames, but two small black canisters—the kind PSFs

kept hooked on their belts, waiting to be thrown into a crowd

of unruly kids.

So the PSFs set them off? No, that wasn't possible. It was

much more likely a few kids had nabbed them, to get the alarms

going and the doors open. That was probably the extent of their

emergency protocol.

We were trapped in that stairwell, our bodies pressed against

everyone else's in one shivering mass of nerves and exhilaration.

I tried to keep my eyes forward and feel for the steps under my

feet, but it was hard not to see what the darkness and flashing

lights were doing to the other kids. Some were crying hysteri-

cally, some looked on the verge of passing out, but some were

laughing. *Laughing*, like it was a game.

I don't know how I spotted the other small Asian girl under

the tide of hands and heads. She was wedged in the bottom

left corner of the stairwell landing, standing on her toes, her

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green uniform barely visible. Her hair was gleaming black

under the emergency lights, and her arm was above her head,

outstretched—toward me?

The minute I made eye contact with her, her face lit up in

recognition. I saw her mouth form Zu's name. I tried to reach

out, to grab her hand, but the swarm of

people around me

pushed me down, jostling forward. By the time I turned around,

she had disappeared, too.

I didn't see one PSF or camp controller —not until we were

at the base of the stairwell, stepping over, but mostly on, the

three prone black figures on the ground. Their faces were swol-

len into bruised masks. Blood collected on the ground under

them.

Someone, probably a Blue, had ripped the doors from their

hinges and sent them flying outside, into what looked like a

wasteland of white snow. The ground was unnaturally bright

under the moonless sky—partly from the dream, partly from the

searchlights that switched on as the pitch of the alarm changed

from a trill to a warning siren.

Once we were out those final doors, we were running.

The snow was knee-deep, and most of the kids weren't wear-

ing anything beyond their paper-thin uniforms—most of them

hadn't even remembered to put on their shoes. Tiny flakes floated

into the deep, intersecting lines of footprints, and for a moment

I felt myself slow, watching the way the snow was neither flying

nor falling. Just hovering there, like a

held breath. Lighting up

like a thousand fireflies under the
camp's searchlights.

And then the spell was broken, shattered
with the first

gunshot.

And then it was bullets falling over us,
not snow.

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The screams ripped jagged and piercing
from the throats of

hundreds of kids. Five—ten—fifteen—it
was impossible to count

the kids that suddenly pitched forward,
falling face-first into the

snow, screaming and howling in pain. A
nightmarish red began

to creep through the snow like spilled
ink spreading, expanding,

devouring. I reached up to my cheek, to
the wetness there, and

when I pulled my hand away, my brain
finally connected that

I had run straight through a spray of

blood. I was covered in

it—someone else's blood was dripping
down my cheeks and off

my chin.

We ran harder, faster, toward the back
right corner of the

chain-link fence surrounding the old
school. I threw a look back

over my shoulder to the brick school
building, to the dozens of

black figures on top of its gray slate
roof, to the dozens more

pouring out from the first story windows
and doors. When I

turned back, the field in front of me was
covered in heaps of

every color—Yellow, Blue, Green. And
red. So, so much red.

They formed lines, unwilling barriers
that others had to jump

over to keep going.

I fell forward, barely catching myself on
the snow.

Something—someone had caught my
ankle. A Green girl on

her stomach, crawling toward me, her
eyes open, her mouth

gulping at the air. *Help me*, she was
sobbing, blood bubbling up

over her lips, *help me*.

But I got back up and ran.

There was a gate at this edge of the
camp; I could see it now

that I was within a few hundred feet of
it. What I couldn't see

was what was causing the backup of
kids, why we weren't dash-

ing through the gate to get through to freedom. With a jolt, I

realized there were almost three times as many kids down in the

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snow behind me than there were in front of me.

The cluster of kids surged forward with a unified wail, hun-

dreds of hands straining forward. My size made it easy for me to

slip through legs and fight my way up to the front, where three

older boys in blue uniforms were struggling to keep the crowd of

kids back from both the gate itself and the one-man watch booth

beside it, which was currently playing host to three people: an

unconscious PSF, Liam, and Chubs.

I was so shocked at the sight of them, I nearly missed the

blur of green that was a little kid rushing for the fence. He darted

around the teenagers in his path and
threw himself against the

bright yellow bars holding the gate
firmly in place.

He had only just touched it when all of
the hair on his head

seemed to stand on end, and a burst of
light flashed under his

fingers. Instead of releasing it, his hand
only seemed to clamp

down harder, frozen in place as
thousands of volts of electricity

sent his body into a frenzied fit of

shuddering.

Oh my God.

The gate was still on. Liam and Chubs were trying to turn

it off.

I felt my own scream bubble up in my throat when he col-

lapsed to the ground, finally still. Liam yelled something from

the booth that I couldn't hear, not above the screams from the

kids around me. The sight of that boy

burst the temporary bubble of calm in a heartbeat.

The PSFs were closer now; they had to be, because when they

started firing again, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Each layer

of kids fell down and away, peeling back to reveal a new, fresh

layer for the kill—I couldn't see the snow beneath them anymore.

Kids turned and bolted in every direction, some heading back

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toward the school, others following the edges of the electrified

fence, looking for another way out. I heard dogs bark and the

growling of engines. Combined, the noises sounded like a mon-

ster straight out of hell. I turned to look at the trail the animals

and snowmobiles were blazing toward us, when something hard

slammed into me from behind, throwing me into the thick snow.

I'm shot, I thought, half in shock.

No—that wasn't right. The blow had come from an elbow

to the back of the head. The Blue girl hadn't even seen me as

she turned and ran back toward the camp. I rolled over just in

time to see her with her hands in the air, a clear surrender, and

still—still—they shot her. She shrieked in pain and crumbled to

the ground.

It wasn't just the girl who hadn't spotted me in the snow—

no one did. I felt my arms, stinging with the cold, strain as I tried

to push myself up and out of its freezing touch, but every time

I made progress, another foot came slamming down across my

shoulders and back. I had enough time to cover my head, but

that was it. There was no getting air to my chest—I was scream-

ing and no one could hear.

Rage and despair ripped through me.
The crush of stampeding

kids pushed me deeper and deeper into
the snow and I kept

thinking, can you drown like this? Can
you suffocate in the freez-

ing dark? Would it be better to die this
way?

Hands reached around my waist.
Freezing air flooded my

lungs in a single, painful gasp as I was
lifted up and out of the

snow.

The gate was open now, and the kids who had been steady

and calm enough to remain—who had been lucky enough not

to be hit—poured through, running for the dense cluster of

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trees ahead. There couldn't have been more than twenty—of

the hundreds of kids who had flooded

through the halls of the
old school— *twenty*.

I felt warm, impossibly warm. The arms
holding me tight-

ened. When I looked up, it was into
Liam's bright eyes.

Hang on tight, okay?

Zu woke with a gasp, coming up from
her nightmare for a

long drag of air.

I was thrown out of the dream, sent
hurtling back into

the freezing hotel room. Through the
topsy-turvy vertigo that

slammed into me, I turned toward Zu, my
eyes adjusting just

enough to make out her silhouette.

When I reached for her, I found someone
else's hands already

there.

Liam shook his head, trying to snap
himself out sleep's lin-

gering grasp. "Zu," he whispered. "Hey,
Zu . . ."

I stayed perfectly still.

“Hey,” Liam said gently, “you’re okay. It was just a bad

dream.”

My gut twisted when I realized she was crying. I heard a

scraping sound, wood against wood, like he had taken something

out of the nightstand.

“Write it down,” Liam said. “Don’t force yourself.”

It must have been the hotel stationery. I

shut my eyes, wait-

ing for him to switch on the cheap
nightstand lamp, but he kept

to his rule: no lights outside the
bathroom.

“What are you sorry for?” he whispered.

“The only one that

needs beauty sleep is Chubs.”

She let out a shaky laugh, but her body
was still tense next

to mine.

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“Was it . . . the same one as before?”

The bed dipped as Liam

sat down.

“A little different?” he repeated after a moment. “Yeah?”

The silence stretched a little longer this time. I wasn’t sure

she was still scribbling in the darkness until Liam cleared his

throat and said, in rough voice. “I could never forget that. I

was . . . I was really worried you had
tried to touch the gate

before Chubs figured out how to switch
it off.” And then, so soft

that I might have imagined it, he said,
“I’m so sorry.”

The guilt and misery that coated the
words were like a kick

to the chest. I felt myself shift forward
on the bed, drawn to

the pain there, desperate to reassure him
that what had hap-

pened there in the snowy field hadn’t

been his fault. It scared

me, knowing how well I understood him in that moment.

But I couldn't. This was a private conversation, just like her

memory had been private. Why was I always trespassing into

places I didn't belong?

“Chubs isn't the only one that thinks it's too dangerous. But

I think Ruby's tough enough to make it without us if she wants

to. Why?”

More scribbling.

“The only thing Chubs wants is for us to be safe,” he said,

still whispering. “Sometimes that gets in the way of him doing

what’s good for others—seeing the big picture, you know? It’s

only been two weeks since we got out. You got to give him more

time.”

He sounded so confident then that I felt a

small part of me

give. I believed him.

“Oh, man.” I could practically see him running a hand

through his hair. “Never be ashamed of what you can do, you

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hear me? If you hadn't been there, we wouldn't be here.”

The room settled back into a peaceful quiet, save for Chubs's

wheezing snores.

“You feeling better?” he asked. “Need anything from Betty?”

She must have shaken her head, because I felt the bed shift

again as Liam stood. “I’ll be right here. Just wake me up if you

change your mind, okay?”

I didn’t hear him say good night. But instead of lying down,

I saw him sit, back flush against the bed, watching the door and

anything that might come through it.

A few hours later, with the moon still visible in the gray-blue

morning sky, I gently detangled Zu's fingers from the front of

my dress and slipped out of the bed. The red glow of the alarm

clock on the nightstand burned the time into my mind: 5:03 a.m.

Leaving time.

None of us had really unpacked our things, on Liam's insis-

tence, but I had to collect my toothbrush and toothpaste from

where I had left them next to Chubs's in the bathroom. There

was one set of HoJo toiletries left out by the sink, next to the

world's ugliest instant-coffee maker. I stuffed it into my bag,

along with one of the smaller hand towels.

Outside, it was only a few degrees warmer than it had been

in the room. Typical bipolar Virginia

spring weather. It must

have rained the night before, too. The feathery white fog the

quiet storm had left behind threaded through the cars and

nearby trees. The minivan, which last night had been parked on

the far end of the lot, was now stationed directly in front of the

hotel room. If I hadn't walked right by Black Betty, running my

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hand against her bruised side, I don't think I would have seen

Liam at all.

He was kneeling beside the sliding door, slowly scraping off

the last of the betty jean cleaning sign with his car keys. At his

feet was the Ohio plate that had, at one point, been screwed into

place. My feet drifted to a stop a few feet short of him.

There were dark circles under his eyes.
His face was drawn

in thought, his mouth set in a grim line
that didn't suit him at

all. With his damp hair combed back and
his face clean-shaven,

he could have looked a good two or
three years younger than he

had the day before, but his eyes told a
different story.

My shoes scuffed the loose asphalt,
catching Liam's atten-

tion. He started to rise. "What's

wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You’re up early,” he explained. “I usually have to drag Chubs

into the shower and blast him with cold water to get him going.”

I shrugged. “Still on Thurmond’s schedule, I guess.”

He rose to his feet slowly, wiping his hands on the front of

his jeans. The way his eyes flicked toward me made me think he

wanted to say something, but, instead, he only gave me a small

smile. The Ohio license plate was tossed into the backseat, and

in its place was a West Virginia plate. I didn't have a chance to

ask where it had come from.

I dropped my backpack at my feet and leaned against the

minivan's door. Liam disappeared around the back of the car,

reappearing a few minutes later with a red gas can and a chewed

up black hose in hand. With my eyes
closed and ear pressed

against the cool glass, I soaked up the
honeyed singsong radio

commercial for a local grocery store.
When the broadcaster came

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back on, it was with a grim forecast of
whatever was left of Wall

Street. The woman read the stock report
like a eulogy.

I forced my eyes open, letting them fall
where Liam had

been standing only a second before.

“Liam?” I called before I could stop
myself.

“Over here,” came the immediate reply.

With a quick glance to the row of
aquamarine hotel doors, I

shuffled around the back of the van until
I was a few feet behind

him. I stood on my toes, leaning to the
right to get a better look

at what he was doing to the silver SUV parked next to the van.

Liam worked silently, his light eyes focused on the task at

hand. One end of the hose was shoved deep into the belly of the

SUV's gas tank. He looped the excess length of the unruly hose

around his shoulder, and let the other end fall in the red can.

“What are you doing?” I didn't bother to hide my shock.

He his free hand hovered over the length

of the hose, glid-

ing it back in our direction. It was almost like he was tugging in

a line, or at least motioning someone forward. A few drops of

pungent liquid began to drip from the free end of the hose.

Siphoning gas, I realized. I'd heard about people doing this

during the last gas shortage, but I'd never actually *seen* it done

before. The liquid began to fill the can in a smooth pour, filling

the space between us with a sharp odor.

“Gas crisis,” he said with an unapologetic shrug. “Times are

a little desperate, and we were running on fumes for a while

yesterday.”

“You’re Blue, right?” I said, nodding toward the hand guid-

ing the gas into our red can. “Could you just move Betty along

without it?”

“Yeah, but . . . not for long.” Liam

sounded shy. When he

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pressed his lips together, they turned an
unnatural shade of white

and highlighted a small scar at the right
corner.

When I realized I was staring, I squatted
down beside him—

more to hide my embarrassment than
actually help. Stealing gas

was, surprisingly, not all that

complicated.

“I guess I’m just impressed you can use your abilities at all.”

A part of me wondered, then, if I hadn’t had it backward

this entire time. The way things were at Thurmond . . . the camp

controllers were so vigilant about making sure that we were ter-

rified of getting caught using our abilities, and we were made to

understand from the beginning that what we were, and what we

could do, was dangerous and unnatural.
Mistakes and accidents

were not excuses, and punishment was
not avoidable. There was

to be no curious testing, no stabbing at
limits to see if there was

a way to push through them.

If Liam was so accomplished with his
abilities, it probably

meant he had taken years to practice,
most of those spent out-

side of camp walls. It never occurred to
me to think that other

kids, safe at home, hiding out—that the *others*, who had never

seen the inside of a cabin, experienced the grave and still *nothing*

that was life at camp—might have managed to teach themselves

amazing things. They weren't afraid of themselves; they weren't

crippled by the weight of what they didn't know.

I had the strangest feeling, like I had lost something without

ever really having it in the first place—

that I wasn't what I once
was, and wasn't at all what I was meant
to be. The sensation
made me feel hollow down to my bones.
“The whole thing's pretty
straightforward for us Blues,” Liam
explained. “You look at something,
concentrate hard enough
to imagine that object moving from point
A to point B, and it

just . . . does,” he said. “I bet a lot of the Blues at Thurmond

figured out to use their abilities. They just chose not to. Maybe

something to do with that noise.”

“You’re probably right.” I hadn’t had enough interaction

with the Blue kids to know.

Liam jerked the hose back and forth as the stream of gas

slowed to a measly drip. I glanced up, searching the parking lot

and hotel doors for signs of life, and didn't settle back down until

I was sure we were alone.

“Did you teach yourself?” I asked, testing my theory.

He glanced my way. “Yeah. I went into camp pretty late and

had plenty of time alone, bored out of my mind, to figure things out.”

Naturally, the next question was: Were you in hiding? But I

wouldn't be able to ask that without him asking about my his-

tory, and how I was caught.

This had to stop. My hands were shaking like he had just told

me he was about to strangle the life out of me. Nothing he had

done up until now had proven him to be anything other than

nice. Hadn't he shown me, time and time again, that he was

willing to be my friend if I was willing to let him?

It had been so long since I'd even wanted a friend that I

wasn't sure I even remembered how to go about making one.

In first grade, it had been stupidly simple. Our teacher had told

us to write down our favorite animal on a sheet of paper, and

then we had to go around the room until we found someone

with a matching animal. Because making friends was supposed

to be that easy, apparently—finding

someone else who liked
elephants.

“I like this song,” I blurted out. Jim
Morrison’s voice was

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soft and barely reached us from where it
was filtering through

Betty’s speakers.

“Yeah? The Doors?” Liam’s face lit up.
“Come on baby, light

my fire,”” he crooned in a low voice, trying to match Morrison’s.

““Try to set the night on fire . . .””

I laughed. “I like it when *he* sings it.”

Liam clutched his chest, like I had wounded him, but his

recovery was quick. The radio DJ announced the next song, it

was like Liam had won the lottery. “Now this is what *I’m* talking

about!”

“The Allman Brothers?” My eyebrows

were inching up my

face. Funny, I had pegged him for a Zeppelin fan.

“This is the music of my soul,” he said, nodding his head in

time with the music.

“Have you ever actually listened to the lyrics?” I asked, feel-

ing the anxiety lift off my shoulders. My voice was growing

steadier with each word. “Was your father a gambler down in

Georgia that wound up on the wrong end of a gun? Were you

born in the backseat of a Greyhound bus?"

"Hey now," he said, reaching over to flick my hair. "I said

it was the music of my *soul*, not my life. For your information,

my stepdad is a mechanic down in North Carolina and, as far

as I know, still alive and well. But I *was* born in the backseat of

a bus."

“You’re joking.” I honestly couldn’t tell.

“Am not. It made the newspapers and everything. I was the

Miracle Bus Boy for the first three years of my life and now

I’m—”

““Trying to make a livin’ and doin’ the best I can’?” I finished.

He laughed, the tips of his ears tinged with a faint pink. The

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song went on, filling the air between us with its rapid pulse and

relentless guitars. Every piece fit together effortlessly; not quite

country and not quite rock and roll. Just warm, fast, southern.

I liked it even better when Liam started singing along.

When the flow of gas slowed to a drip, he carefully pulled

the hose free and replaced the gas cap. Before he stood, Liam

knocked his shoulder into mine. “Where

in the world did you
get that dress?”

I snorted, picking at the skirt. “Present
from Zu.”

“You look like you want to throw it into
a fire.”

“I can’t promise there won’t be an
unfortunate accident later

on,” I said, very seriously. When he
laughed again it felt like a

small victory.

“Well, Green, it was nice of you to put it

on,” Liam said.

“Though be careful. Zu’s so starved for girl time that she might

turn you into her own personal dress-up doll.”

“Kids these days,” I said. “Think the whole world belongs to

them.”

He grinned. “Kids these days.”

We moved from car to car, working our way down the park-

ing lot. He didn’t ask for my help, and I

didn't ask him any more

questions. We could have stayed together in that comfortable

silence for hours, and it still wouldn't have been enough for me.

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THIRTEEN

Chubs and Zu were not happy to be woken up

at five thirty a.m., and even less enthusiastic about Liam forcing

them to make the bed while we freshened up the bathroom and

replaced the used towels. Not exactly cleanly of us, but it was

better than alerting the management they had hosted a bunch

of squatters for the night.

Chubs took one look at me as he marched out to the minivan

and stopped dead in his tracks. He wore his thought plain as day

on his face: *You're still here?*

I shrugged. *Deal with it.*

He shook his head and let out another one of his sighs.

Once we were settled, Zu and Chubs in the middle seats, we

all watched as Liam closed the hotel room door, cup of crappy

hotel coffee in hand.

That's right, I thought, glancing at Zu out of the corner of

my eye. She had curled up on her seat, and was using her gloved

hands as a pillow. *Didn't get much sleep, did he?*

Liam ran through his usual routine of checking the mirrors'

position, adjusting the recline of his seat, buckling himself in,

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and turning the keys in the ignition. But Liam's next order of

business upon returning to the minivan wasn't to answer any of

the number of questions Chubs threw his way about where we

were going. He waited until his friend was good and snoring

before calling back to me, "Can you read a map?"

The embarrassment and shame that washed through me

painted my face red. “No. Sorry.”
Wasn’t that something your

dad was supposed to teach you
eventually?

“No problem.” Liam patted the empty
passenger seat. “I’ll

teach you later, but for now I just need
someone to watch the

signs for me. Come on up to the copilot
chair.”

I jerked a thumb in the direction of
Chubs.

Liam only shook his head. “Are you

kidding me? Yesterday

he thought a mailbox was a clown.”

I unbuckled my seat belt with a sigh. As I climbed over

Chubs’s outstretched legs to the front, I glanced over my shoul-

der, my eyes going to his too-small glasses. “Is his eyesight is

really that bad?”

“Worse,” Liam said. “So, right after we got the hell out of

Caledonia, we broke into this house to

spend the night, right? I

woke up in the middle of the night
hearing the most awful noise,

like a cow dying or something. I
followed the wailing, clutching

some kid's baseball bat, thinking I was
going to have to beat

someone's head in for us to make a clean
getaway. Then, I saw

what was sitting at the bottom of the
drained pool.”

“No way,” I said.

“Way,” he confirmed. “Hawkeye had gone out to relieve him-

self and had somehow missed the giant gaping hole in the ground.

Twisted his ankle and couldn’t climb out of the deep end.”

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I tried so hard not to laugh, but it was impossible. The mental

image was just too damn good.

Liam reached over and flipped through

the radio, letting me

choose the station. He seemed satisfied
with my decision to stay

with the Who.

With the window down all the way, I
leaned out, resting my

chin on my hands. The morning air was
warm, licked by the first

rays of sunlight. When I looked up past
the very tiptop of the

wild trees, there was nothing but blue
sky.

A small sound, a ghost of a sigh, was released behind us.

Both Liam and I turned to look at Zu's sleeping face.

“Did we wake you up last night?” he asked.

“I caught a little of it,” I said. “Does she have a lot of

nightmares?”

“In the few weeks I've known her, it's been an every other

night thing. Sometimes she dreams about Caledonia and I can

talk her down, but I never know what to say about her family. I

swear, if I ever meet her parents, I'm going to . . .”

His voice trailed off, but the anger coating them had given

the air a palpable charge.

“What did they do to her?”

“Gave her away, because they were afraid of her,” he said.

“Like, me and Chubs? Our folks tried to keep us hidden, and

that's why we went to the camp late.
Zu's parents actually *sent*

her away when she short-circuited her
dad's car in the middle

of a freeway.”

“Oh, God.”

“They sent her during the first official
Collection.” He

propped an elbow along the door panel
and leaned his face

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against his hand. His Redskins cap hid his eyes from view. “I

forgot you missed this.”

I waited for him to explain.

“It was after most people our age had already been taken or

were in hiding. The government issued a notice that any parents

who didn't feel safe or capable of taking care of their kiddos

could send them to school on a specific morning, and the Psi

Special Forces would be there to collect them for rehabilita-

tion. Kept it all very hush-hush to avoid *upsetting* the children or

inciting them to misbehave.”

I rubbed my forehead, trying to force out the images flutter-

ing through my mind. “Did she actually tell you this?”

“*Tell me*—tell me, you mean?” He kept his eyes straight

ahead, but I saw his hands choke the wheel. “No. She wrote

it out in bits and pieces. I haven't heard her say a single word

since . . .”

“Since the breakout?” I finished. I felt relieved in spite of

everything I knew. “It’s a choice, then, not something they did

to her.”

“No, it has everything to do with what they did, and it’s not a

choice,” Liam said. “I think maybe the most frustrating feeling in

the world is to have something to say,
but not know how to put

it into words. To have lived through
something, but not be able

to get it out of you before it festers. I
mean, you're right—she

can talk, and maybe one day she will.
After everything I've put

her through, after what happened . . . I
just don't know."

It *was* the most frustrating feeling in the
world, second

only to the inherent helplessness that

came with being trapped

in a camp, all of your decisions made for
you. After what had

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happened with Sam, I didn't say a word
for almost a full year;

there was just no way to vocalize that
kind of pain.

The radio jumped as we lost the
station's signal, switching

through a Spanish language channel, then

to one with classical

music, before finally settling on the dry,
nasally voice of a man

reading the news.

*“ . . . to inform you that initial reports
indicate that four separate*

*explosions were set off this morning in
Manhattan’s subway . . . ”*

Liam’s finger shot out to switch the
channel, but I changed

it right back.

“—though confirmation has been slow

to come out of the city,

we believe these explosions were not nuclear or biological in nature,

and were concentrated around midtown, where President Gray was

rumored to be in hiding after the most recent attempt on his life.”

“League, West Coast, or fake?” Chubs’s sleepy voice floated

up behind us.

“Our sources indicate that President Gray and his cabinet believe

this to be the work of the Federal Coalition.”

“Federal Coalition?” I repeated.

“West Coast,” the boys answered together. Chubs elaborated.

“Based out of Los Angeles. They’re the section of the govern-

ment that survived the D.C. bombings and weren’t crazy about

the idea of Gray disregarding that whole two-term limit they

had set up. They’re mostly talking heads, since the military sided

with Gray, obviously.”

“Why is Gray in New York and not Washington?” I asked.

“They’re still rebuilding the Capitol and the White House,

only it’s not going so well, since, you know, they defaulted on

all of their debt,” Liam said. “He spread the government out

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between Virginia and New York for

their *protection*. To make

sure none of the fugitive Psi groups or the League got any ideas

about wiping them all out at once.”

“So the Federal Coalition . . . they’re against the camps? The

reform program?”

Chubs sighed a little. “Hate to break it to you, Green, but

something you’ll learn pretty fast is that we’re not exactly a pri-

ority to *anyone* right now. Everyone’s

more focused on the fact

that the country is broke as a joke.”

“Who *do* we like, then?” I pressed.

“We like us,” Liam said after a while.

“And that’s about it.”

There were, apparently, only two restaurant chains left in the

state of Virginia, or at least the western half of it: Cracker Barrel

and Waffle House—and one wasn’t open before nine o’clock in

the morning.

“Thank goodness,” Liam said in a solemn voice as he parked

a short distance away from the Waffle House. “I don’t know

how we would have chosen between these two fine culinary

establishments.”

He had nominated himself to order whatever food he could

afford with twenty bucks, but refused when I asked if he wanted

me to go with him.

Zu held up a small notebook, waving it to get his attention

as he stepped outside.

“Done already?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t you have Chubs check your answers? No, don’t

make that face. He’s better at math than I am, anyway.”

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“You’re damn right I am,” Chubs said without looking up

from his book.

Zu flipped the flimsy notebook open to a blank page and

scribbled something down. When she held it up for him to see,

Liam grinned.

“Whoa, whoa—*long division*? I think you’re getting ahead of

yourself, ma’am. You still haven’t conquered your double-digit

multiplying.”

I watched him hop out of the minivan, a flare of annoyance

shooting up from my core. All of this would have been so much

easier if he wasn't the only one of us who looked old enough to

pass for twenty—at least I'd feel a lot better knowing one of us

could be out there watching his back. He must have felt my gaze

burning through the back of his jacket, because Liam stopped

and turned to wave before disappearing around the corner.

“You really have to stop encouraging him,” Chubs was say-

ing to Zu. I glanced back, watching as he used the blunt end of

her pencil to follow lines of numbers on the page. “He needs to

accept reality at some point.”

Zu’s face scrunched up, twisting like a piece of hard lemon

candy was stuck on her tongue. She punched him in the shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but clearly wasn’t.
“It’s just a waste of

time and energy to teach you this stuff
when you’re never going

to get the chance to use it.”

“You don’t know that,” I said. Flashing
Zu a reassuring smile,

I added, “You’ll be ahead of everyone
else your age by the time

things go back to normal.”

When had I started believing in
“normal,” anyway? Every-

thing I had been through up to that point could only be used

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as support for Chubs's argument. He was right, even if I didn't

want to admit it.

"You know what I'd be doing if things were *normal*?" Chubs

said. "I'd be picking which college I was going to attend later this

fall. I'd have taken my SATs, gone to

football games and prom,

taken chemistry . . .”

His voice trailed off, but I picked up the frayed ends of his

thought all the same—how could I not? These were the exact

things I thought about when I let myself get to that dark place of

should-be and could-have-been. My mom said once that education

was a privilege not afforded to everyone, but she was wrong—it

wasn't a privilege. It was our right. We had the right to a future.

Zu sensed the shift of mood. She looked between us, lips

moving silently. We needed a change of subject.

“Pffft,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning

back against the seat. “Like you would have ever gone to a foot-

ball game.”

“Hey, I resent that!” Chubs handed Zu her notebook. “Here,

you need to work on your nines.” When he turned back to me,

it was with a disapproving look. “I can’t believe you of all people

believe his cotton candy dreams.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were in Thurmond for what—five years?”

“Six,” I corrected. “And you’re missing the point. It’s not

that I believe in what Lee’s saying; it’s that I hope he’s right.

I really, really hope he's right, because what's the alternative?

We're stuck hiding out until their generation dies off? We flee

to Canada?"

"Good luck with that," Chubs said.

"Both Canada and Mexico

have built walls to keep us out and them in."

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

"Because they thought IAAN was a

contagious disease?”

“No, because they’ve hated us all along and were only look-

ing for the right excuse to keep our fat asses and fanny packs out

of their countries forever.”

Liam chose that exact moment to reappear, four Styrofoam

containers balanced between his hands. He was moving fast,

almost at a run. I leaned over and popped the door open for him

and he all but dumped the containers on my lap.

“Oh God, what now?” Chubs cried.

“Whoa—” I began, trying to keep the hot food from spill-

ing all over my legs and the seat. Betty’s engine started with a

snarl, and suddenly we were rocketing backward. With the sheet

blocking the back window, Liam had to rely on using the side

mirror to navigate us down the road, and up into the small back

alley that divided the Waffle House from an abandoned jewelry

consignment store. I braced an elbow against the door as he

steered the old minivan back past the Dumpsters to the cramped

employee parking lot tucked away in a dead-end around the

corner. The minivan lurched to a stop, throwing all four of us

forward.

“We’re . . . going to stay here for a little while,” he announced

to our terrified faces. “Don’t nobody panic, but I think I saw . . .

I mean, it’ll just be safer here for a bit.”

“You saw her.” It wasn’t a question; Chubs already knew the

answer before he asked. “Lady Jane.”

Liam rubbed the back of his neck as he leaned forward. He

had left the nose of the minivan out far enough so we could peer

around Waffle House’s wall to see down the alleyway. “Yeah.

I'm pretty sure."

How was it possible that she had caught up with us?

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"Holy *hell*," Chubs squawked. "*Pretty* sure or *definitely* sure?"

After a moment Liam answered, "Definitely sure. She's got a

new set of wheels—a white truck—but I'd recognize that smug

face anywhere."

“Did she see you?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Probably not, otherwise she and

whoever her new boy toy is would have tried to run me down.

They drove by just as I was leaving.”

I craned my neck forward, trying to see far enough past

the wall of the restaurant to the alley opening. As if on cue,

a glinting white truck rolled by, two dark figures in the front

seats. Liam and I flew back against our seats at the exact same

moment, looking at each other in alarm. I don't think either of

us took a breath until we were sure no one was coming down

the alley to investigate.

He cleared his throat. "Um . . . how about you pass out the

food? I'll just check—"

"Liam Michael Stewart," Chubs's voice thundered from the

backseat, “if you step one foot out of this minivan, I will order

Green to run you down with it.”

“Don’t think I won’t,” I warned, knowing exactly what Liam

wanted to do: go out and risk his neck by walking down the alley

to make sure the coast was clear. When I handed him a Styrofoam

container, he slumped back in his seat, accepting defeat.

Liam had ordered each of us a simple meal of scrambled

eggs, bacon, and two pancakes without syrup. The others dug in

with gusto, inhaling the meal in five bites. I gave my pancakes

to Zu, before Liam had the chance to.

After some semblance of calm had settled back over us,

he pulled his map up and spread it out over the wheel. The

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

dashboard clock beside him said 7:25

a.m., and when he turned

to face us, it was with an expression of determination I had never

seen someone wear so early in the morning.

“Okay, team,” he began. “We need to get back on the right

track. I know our last East River was a total bust, but we have to

keep looking. So let’s review the facts those Blues gave us: Eddo.”

It was only after a full minute of silence that I realized that

was the extent of the “facts.”

“We should have tried to bribe them for more information,”

Chubs said.

“With *what*?” Liam said, setting the map down. “They wouldn’t

take you, Chubs, and you’re our most precious commodity.”

Chubs, unsurprisingly, did not find that funny.

“Did they spell Eddo out for you? Was it one ‘d’ or two?” I

asked. “Because if it’s an actual clue, the way it’s phrased is prob-

ably just as important as the words themselves.”

The two boys shared a look.

“Well . . . crap,” Liam said, finally.

I felt a sharp tug on my arm, and turned toward Zu, who

was holding up her notebook for us to see. She had written the

letters E-D-O.

“Nice job, Zu,” Liam said. “Good thing

one of us was

listening.”

“And that was it?” I said.

“The only other thing they coughed up was that if we hit

Raleigh we’d gone too far south. And we had to beg for even

that,” Liam confessed. “It was really pathetic.”

“They could have been pulling our leg, too,” Chubs said.

“That’s what irritates me the most. If

East River is so great, why
were they leaving?”

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“They were going home, remember, the
Slip Kid—”

While they were arguing, I slipped the
map out from under

Liam’s hands and squinted at it, trying to
make sense of the lines.

He had given me a very vague rundown
of how to route a path

from point A to point B, but it was still overwhelming.

“What are you guys thinking?” I asked.

“What theory were

you working with?”

“We ran across the kids right around the Ohio state line,”

Liam said. “They were coming from the east, headed west. If you

add that to the other bit about D.C. and Raleigh, the likely can-

didates become West Virginia, Virginia, or Maryland. Zu said

Edo is another name for Tokyo, but it seems a little far-fetched

he'd be there."

"And *I* think it's a code," Chubs said.
"A cipher of some kind."

He sat up a little straighter, turning to face me fully. The way

the smile spread over his face made me think of a nature docu-

mentary we watched once in school, about the way crocodiles

flash their teeth as they skim through the water toward their

prey. “Speaking of codes, didn’t you say the League broke you

out because you were a world-class code breaker?”

Crap.

“I didn’t say *world-class* . . .”

“Oh yeah!” Liam’s face lit with the most heartbreaking

expression of excitement. “Can you take a stab at it?”

Double crap.

“I—er, I guess,” I said, careful to keep

my face neutral. “Zu,
can I see the notebook again?”

They were all staring at me; they might
as well have been sit-

ting on my chest for how paralyzing it
was. It was near-freezing

in the van without the heat on, but my
body felt heavy with

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

hot, sticky panic. I was holding on to that
notebook like it was a

prayer from heaven.

I knew there were kids out there who could plug in a few

dozen letters into their brain and spew out complex coordinates

or immediately spot a riddle hidden in a puzzle, but I definitely

was not one of them.

Chubs snorted. “Looks like the League picked a lemon.”

“Hey,” Liam said, his tone sharp. “We’ve been mulling over

the damn thing for two weeks and have figured out exactly noth-

ing. You can't even give her an hour to think about it?"

Could I sub out the letters EDO for numbers? 5-4-15? God,

what other kinds of codes were there? A railroad code? No—that

wasn't right. Or was it not a code? That would make a hell of lot

more sense, actually. The riddle had to be something that kids

both in and out of camps could figure

out, and it couldn't be *too*

difficult, otherwise no one would ever get it.

Lie, I thought, reaching up to smooth a stray piece of hair

back from my face. *Just lie. Just do it. Just say something!* What

did three digit numbers usually represent? A price, a time, an

area code—

“*Oh!*” If I was right, *Oh God* was more like it.

“Oh?” Liam repeated. “Oh what?”

“I’d forgotten—well,” I corrected myself, “I could be remem-

bering it wrong, so don’t get too excited, but I think it’s a Virginia

area code.”

“There’s no area code that’s four digits,” Chubs said. “Five-

four-fifteen doesn’t work.”

“But five-four-zero *does*,” I said. “People sub out ‘O’ for zero

when they talk sometimes, right?”

Liam scratched the back of his head, and looked over at

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Chubs. “Five forty? Does that sound familiar to you?”

I turned toward Chubs, suddenly seeing him in a new light.

“You’re from Virginia?”

He crossed his arms, and looked out his window. “I’m from

Northern Virginia.”

Well, that figured. “Five forty is western Virginia,” I explained

to Liam. “I’m not sure how far north and south it extends, but

it should be right around this area, I think.” I showed him on

the map. I didn’t just *think*, I knew. 540 had been my area code

when I lived with my parents in Salem. “There are a number of

cities and towns, but there’s also a lot of undeveloped land—not

a bad place to hide out.”

“Is that a fact?” Liam kept his eyes on the road and his voice

even, but there was something maybe a little bit too casual about

it. “Did you grow up near there?”

I looked down at the notebook in my hands again, feeling

something clench in my chest. “No, I didn’t.”

“Virginia Beach, then?”

I shook my head. “Not any place you’ve been or heard of.”

I heard Chubs's tongue cluck as he opened his mouth to say

something, but there was a sharp cough from the driver's seat.

The topic had been dropped, and no one was willing to try pick-

ing it up again, least of all me.

“Well, it's a good of a lead as any, though I wish the area was

a little smaller.” He glanced my way. “Thanks, Ruby Tuesday.”

A not unpleasant warmth rushed up from my center. “Don't

mention it.” *And if I’m wrong . . .* I let the thought trail off. It

was a good lead.

With one last glance down the alley to make sure it was

clear, Liam refolded the map and tossed it back into the open

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

glove box. Betty came back to life with a low growl.

“Where are we going?” Chubs asked.

“It’s a place I know.” Liam gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Some-

place I stayed before. The drive shouldn’t take us that long—maybe

two hours. If I get lost, though, one of you Virginians is going to

have to step up to the plate and help me out.”

It had been a very long time since someone had labeled me

like that—as a person with a home. It was true, I had been born

here, but Thurmond had been my home

for nearly as long as it

hadn't. Gray walls and concrete floors
had bleached out almost

every memory of my parents' house,
stripping away first the

small details—the smell of my mom's
honey-soaked biscuits, the

order of the pictures lining the staircase
wall—before going on

to devour the bigger ones, too.

I used to wonder, at night when it was
quiet enough in the

cabin to think, when I let myself get to the point of wishing

for *home*. If the *home* in my heart was supposed to be the place

where'd I'd been born, or if it was the place that was raising me.

If I got to choose it, or if it had somehow already claimed me.

The truth was, when I looked at my reflection in the win-

dow, I couldn't see any bit of the Ruby that had lived in a little

white house at the end of a lane, honey

sticking to her fingers

and hair falling from her braids. And it
made me feel empty in

a way—like I had forgotten the words to
my favorite song. That

girl was gone forever, and all that was
left was a product of the

place that had taught her to fear the
bright things inside of her

heart.

We passed exit after exit to
Harrisonburg and the turnoffs for

James Madison University. Driving
down a major highway with

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nothing more than a prayer that no one
would pull us over

wasn't exactly my idea of a good time,
but, for now, the risk

seemed worth it—at least for the view.

I loved the Shenandoah Valley, every
inch of its gorgeous

spread. When I was little, my parents

used to pull me out of

school early for a long weekend of hiking or camping. I never

brought books or video games for the drive—I didn't need them.

I would just stare out the window and drink it all in.

You know in movies, the ones set in older times, when the

shot freezes on the hero or heroine gazing out over the forest, or

river, and the sun catches the leaves at just the right slant, and

the music begins to swell? That's exactly how I felt as we entered the Shenandoah Valley.

It didn't hit me until that moment, until the first glimpse

of the gauzy blue mist surrounding the mountains, that we really

were in western Virginia. That if we stayed on the highway, we'd

be two hours away from my parents in Salem. Two hours.

I didn't know how to feel about that.

“Ugh,” Liam groaned, pointing toward the temporary road

sign up ahead: 81 closed between harrisonburg and staunton.

use local roads.

By nine o'clock in the morning, we were finally deep enough

into Harrisonburg to find its pulse of life. Here and there we saw

restaurants opening their doors to the morning light. We passed

a few older adults pedaling away on their bikes, balancing pre-

curiously on two wheels with their briefcases or bags, their heads

bent to the sidewalk. They didn't even look up as we passed.

No JMU students, though. None that I could spot.

Chubs sighed at the sight of them, leaning his forehead again

the window.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“You okay, buddy?” Liam asked. “Need

to stop and smell the
scholasticism?”

“What’s the point?” Chubs shook his
head. “It’s closed like
all of the others.”

I whirled around in my seat. “Why?”

“Lack of students, mostly. If you’re old
enough to go to col-
lege, you’re old enough to be drafted.
Even if that wasn’t the
case, I doubt people can really afford it
anymore.”

“Jesus, that’s depressing,” I said.

“The offer still stands,” Liam told his friend. “You know I’m

happy to break into a classroom for you if you need to sit in one

of those cramped seats and stare at a whiteboard for a while. I

know how much you like the smell of dry erase markers.”

“I appreciate that,” Chubs said, folding his hands in his lap,

“but it’s not necessary.”

We passed what I thought must have been a black wrought

iron fence, but it was almost impossible to see, trapped as it was

beneath what looked to be raggedy, patchwork blanket. It wasn't

until we got closer that I realized what we were actually looking

at: hundreds, maybe thousands of sheets of paper that had been

tied and taped onto the fence or stuck between the thin bars.

Liam slowed the car, tilting his

sunglasses down to squint at
them.

“What do they say?” Chubs asked. “I
can’t . . .”

Zu only put her head back down and shut
her eyes.

They were “Missing” posters with the
faces of little kids and

teenagers, photographs, signs whose
wording had been smeared

away by rain—the biggest of these being
a banner that said noth-

ing more than matthew 19:14. It hung crookedly, almost like

someone had tried to rip it down, only to have someone else

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come along and halfheartedly string it back up. The wall of faded

paper took a beating as the wind blew through the fences, rip-

ping some of the more decrepit sheets free and making others

flutter like hummingbird wings. And where there was room, we

saw stuffed animals and flowers and blankets and ribbons.

No, not missing, I thought. Those kids had been taken,

or really were gone forever. If their parents and families were

searching for them, posting their pictures, it was because they

wanted them back. Needed them.

“God.” Liam’s voice sounded strained. “Where did they say

we could pick the 81 back up again?”

The ash trees lining the lonely one-lane
back road were just

coming into their lovely young skin, but
in the afternoon light

their shadows couldn't have been
longer.





FOURTEEN

I slipped off into sleep somewhere between

Staunton and Lexington, and woke up just in time to get a per-

fect view of the towering white warehouse that was Roanoke,

Virginia's former Walmart.

Sure, the blue sign was still clinging desperately to the side

of the building, but that was about the only recognizable thing

about the Supercenter. A number of stray carts wandered across

the parking lot aimlessly, carried this and that way depend-

ing on each moody gust of wind. With the exception of a few

abandoned cars and green Dumpsters, the enormous blacktop

parking lot was empty. Against the tangerine blush of the after-

noon sun, it looked like the apocalypse had already touched

down in Virginia.

And we were only a stone's throw away from Salem. A ten-

minute drive. My stomach clenched at the thought.

Once again, Liam insisted on going in alone to check it out. I

felt Zu's rubber glove on my arm and didn't need to look at her

face to know what kind of expression I would find there. She

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didn't want him charging into what looked like an honest-to-God

hellhole alone anymore than I did.

This is why you stayed, I reminded myself. To take care of

them. And, in that moment, the person that needed me most

was the one walking away.

I jumped out of Betty, my hand gripping the door handle.

“Honk the horn three times for trouble,” I said, and slid the

door shut. Liam must have heard,
because he waited for me,

leaning against one of the rusted
shopping cart stalls.

“Any way I could convince you to go
back to Betty?”

“Nope,” I said. “Come on.”

He fell in step behind me, fists dug deep
in his pockets. I

couldn't see his eyes, but the way he
was slouching toward the

demolished doors was telling enough.

“You asked me before about how I knew about this place . . .”

he said, when we were nearly to the entrance.

“No—no, it’s okay. I know, none of my business.”

“Green,” Liam said. “It’s okay. I just don’t know where to

begin. You know Chubs and I were both in hiding? Well, it

wasn’t exactly pleasant for either of us. He at least got to stay at

his grandparents’ cabin in

Pennsylvania.”

“Ah, but you had the pleasure of holing up in this fine

American establishment.”

“Among other places.” Liam said. “I . . . don’t like to talk

about that time in front of Zu. I don’t want her to think that

that’s what her life is going to be.”

“But you can’t lie to her,” I said. “I know you don’t want to

scare her, but you can’t pretend that her

life isn't going to be
hard. It's not fair."

"Not fair?" He sucked in a sharp breath,
closing his eyes.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

When he spoke again, his voice had
returned to his usual soft

tones. "Never mind, forget it."

"Hey," I said, taking his arm. "I get it,
okay? I'm on your side.

But you can't act like it's going to be easy. Don't do that to her—

don't set her up to be crushed. I was in camp with thousands

of kids who grew up thinking Mommy and Daddy were always

going to be there for them, and they—*we*—are all coming out of

this seriously damaged.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Liam said, all traces of anger gone. “You are

not damaged.”

That, I could have protested until I was blue in the face.

Whoever had unhooked Walmart's glass sliding doors from

their tracks hadn't done a good job of finding a safe place to

store them. Shards of glass coated the cement floor, blown out

dozens of feet from the black metal frames. We stepped over and

through their mangled shapes, entering that small, strange space

where the greeter would have been.

Next to me, Liam's foot slipped against the sallow dust col-

lected on the floor. I shot an arm out to brace him as he grunted

in surprise. Even as I helped him right himself, his eyes remained

fixed on the ground, where a dozen footprints fanned out in the

dust.

Every shape and size, from the jagged pattern of the sole of a

man's hiking boot to the decorative swirly curls left behind by a

young child's tennis shoe, all stamped out there like cookies cut

from a fresh spread of dough.

“They could be old,” I whispered.

Liam nodded, but didn't pull away from my side. I hadn't

fooled either of us.

The store's power had been shut off some time ago, and it

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was clear it had been open to the wild
for too long. There was

only a second between when we first
heard the rattling in the

nearby shelves and when Liam jumped
in front of me. “It’s—” I

began, but he silenced me with a shake
of his head. We watched

the shelves, waiting.

And when the deer, a gorgeous, sweet
thing with a silky

caramel coat and big black eyes, came
prancing out from behind

the overturned magazine racks, Liam and I looked at each other,
dissolving into shaky laughter.

Liam pressed his finger to his lips and waved me forward, his eyes scanning the dark fleet of identical cash registers in front of us. Someone had taken the carts from the store and tried stuffing them in the lanes, as if to create a kind of fortified wall against any unwanted visitors. Carefully, without disturbing the pileup

of plastic baskets, we climbed up and over the nearest register's

conveyer belt. Standing on top of it, I could see where more

shelves had been lined up in front of the other exit. It looked as

though something huge had come slamming through it at one

point, bursting through the makeshift barricade.

What did that?

I think there's some part of everyone, Psi or not, that's tuned

into the memories of a place. Strong feelings, especially terror and

desperation, leave an imprint on the air that echo back to who-

ever's unlucky enough to walk through that place again. It felt

like the darkness was stroking beneath my chin with a beckoning

finger, whispering to me to lean forward and know its secrets.

Something terrible happened here, I thought, feeling a cold

drip down my spine. The wind whistled

through the broken

doors, playing us the kind of screeching
song that made the hair

on the back of my neck stand on end.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I wanted to leave. This was not a safe
place. This was not

a place to bring Zu or Chubs—so why
was Liam still going

forward? Overhead, the emergency
lights flickered on and off,

buzzing like boxes of trapped flies.
Everything beneath them was

cast in a sickly green light, and as he
moved further and further

down the first aisle, it seemed like the
darkness waiting at the

end of it would swallow him whole.

I sprung forward into the sea of empty
metal shelves, half

of which were knocked flat on their
backs or leaning against

others in slanted lines, their shelves
buckling under some invis-

ible weight. My sneakers squeaked as I wove through the sea of

lotions, mouthwash, and nail polish on the floor. Things that

seemed so necessary in the past, so vital to life, wasted and

forgotten.

When I caught up to him again, my fingers closed around

the soft, loose leather of his jacket's sleeve. At the slightest tug,

Liam turned, his blue eyes lit up in surprise. I took a step back

and pulled my hand back to my side, shocked at myself. It had

felt natural to do it—I hadn't been thinking at all, only feeling a

very sharp, real need to be close to him.

“I think we should leave,” I whispered. “Something about

this place doesn't feel right.” And it had nothing to do with the

strange crying of the wind, or the birds high up in the old store's

rafters.

“We’re okay,” he said. His back was to me, but he slipped

his hand from his pocket. It drifted back toward me, floating

up through the darkness. I didn’t know whether he meant to

motion me forward or for me to take it, but I couldn’t bring

myself to do either.

We walked side by side toward the back right corner of

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the store; it seemed that this section of the store, with all of its

hardware and lightbulbs had been left somewhat alone, or at

least hadn't seemed as useful to the people who had picked the

other shelves to the bone.

I saw where we were headed immediately. Someone had set

up their own little camp, using bright blue pool rafts as mat-

tresses. A few empty boxes of graham crackers and Hostess

cupcakes were piled on top of a cooler, and on top of that was a

small wireless radio and lantern flashlight.

“Wow, I can’t believe this is still here.”
Liam stood a foot

behind me, his arms crossed over his chest. I followed his gaze

down to the dozens of indentations in the cracked white tile.

They were almost enough to distract me

from the patchwork of

old bloodstains on the ground beneath his feet.

My lips parted.

“It’s old,” Liam said, quickly, like that would make me feel

any better.

Liam held out a hand, forcing a smile. I blew out the breath

I had been holding and reached up to take it.

At almost the exact moment our hands

touched, I saw it.

The emergency light above that section of the back wall snapped

back to full glare like a spotlight, illuminating the enormous black

Ψ painted there, along with a very clear message: get out now.

The thick, uneven letters looked like they were weeping. The

light crackled and went back out with a loud *pop*, but I still threw

myself forward, out of Liam's grip, straight for the spray-painted

message. Because that smell . . . the way
the words drooped . . .

I pressed my fingers against the Psi
symbol and they came away

sticky. Black.

Fresh paint.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

Liam had only just reached me when I
felt the strangest

sensation of burning, right at my core. I
looked down, expecting

to see a spark igniting the front of Zu's ridiculous dress, and then

I was falling, and Liam was falling on top of me. Bulldozed right

over, as if we had been nothing more than two daisies poking up

through the cracks in the tile.

Liam's shoulder rammed into my chest, knocking the air out

of our lungs. I tried to lift my head to see exactly what had hap-

pened, but there was this weight—this solid, invisible slab of

stone—keeping me on my back, and Liam flat against me.

The floor was freezing at my back, but my entire focus was

on the solid press of his shoulder against my cheek. Our hands

were caught between us, and for a moment I had the uneasy

sensation of not knowing where one of us began and the other

ended. He swallowed hard, the pulse in his throat close enough

for me to hear it.

Liam moved to lift his head, straining the muscles that lined

the strong column of his spine. “Hey!” he shouted. “Who’s there?”

The only response was another shove from the invisible hands

Suddenly we were shooting across the ground, Liam’s leather

jacket squealing against the dusty floor as we slid. I watched the

emergency lights beyond Liam’s head pass with dizzying speed,

tracking together like a single beam.

Riotous laughter followed

us down the aisles, seeming to come from below us, above us,

on either side. I thought I saw a dark shape move out of the cor-

ner of my eye, but it looked more like a monster than a person.

We tore through ribbons of ripped shower curtains, the body

lotion, the bleach, to the line of cash registers at the front of the

store.

“Cut it out!” Liam yelled. “We’re—”

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There are some sounds you hear once
and never forget. A

bone breaking. An ice cream truck’s
song. Velcro. A gun’s safety

clicking off.

No, I thought, Not now—not here!

We slid to a painful stop at the checkout
lanes, the impact

with the metal jarring every sense out of my body. There was a

single moment of agonizing silence before the once-dead store

lights surged into brightness. And then, the cash register flashed

on, conveyer belt sputtering to life—first one lane, then the next,

and the next. Every single one, falling to order like soldiers. The

numbered signs above blinked between yellow and blue, like a

dozen warning signals, faster than my

eyes could follow.

At first I thought it was White Noise; all at once, the build-

ing's security alarms, intercom system, and televised displays

went off, a hundred different voices screaming at us. Block after

block of ceiling lights snapped on, electricity pouring through

them after years of existing as nothing more than hollow, dusty

veins.

Liam and I turned to see Zu, her bare right hand splayed out

against a checkout lane. Chubs was next to her, his face ashen.

After only a few seconds of Zu's power surge, the lights on

the registers began to pop like firecrackers, dropping streams of

blue-white sparks and glass to the ground.

She had only meant for it to be a distraction, I think; a flash

and a bang to draw the attention of our

attackers away from us

long enough for an escape. Out of the corner of my eye, I could

see her waving us toward her, but the machine under Zu's other

hand had heated to a terrifying molten glow. I felt the invis-

ible grip on me slacken suddenly, but fear kept me still as the

dead. She wasn't letting go. Liam and I must have had the same

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thought—the same scorching fear—
because we pushed to our

feet, shouting for her to stop.

“Turn her off!” someone managed to
shout over the alarms.

“Zu, let go!” Liam stood and stumbled
over cans of sunscreen

and bug spray from a nearby display. I
saw him lift his arms,

ready to yank Zu away with his abilities,
but Chubs was faster.

He tugged the glove off Zu's other hand and pulled it over his

own, then all but ripped her arm away from the metal.

The lights went out. Just before the overhead bulbs exploded,

I saw Zu's face as she came out of whatever trance she had been

locked in. Her big eyes were rimmed with red, her short black

hair on end, freckles standing out against the full flush of her

oval face. The sudden darkness gave

Liam the opportunity to

knock both her and Chubs to the ground.

And then, by some small miracle, the
emergency lights

flicked back on

The first sign of movement didn't come
from us. I saw our

attackers clearly now, climbing over the
mangled heaps of white

shelves. Four of them, each dressed in
layers of black, each with

a gun raised and ready. My first thought,

as it almost always was

when I saw anyone in a black uniform,
was to run. To get the

others and bolt.

But these weren't PSFs. They weren't
even grown-ups.

They were kids, like us.





FIFTEEN

As they came closer, I saw their
mismatched dark

clothes and the grime on their faces.
They were all thin limbs

and hollow cheeks, as if they had
stretched out a great deal in

a short period of time.

All boys, about my age.

All easy to take, if we had to.

“Christ on a cracker,” the one closest to
me muttered, shak-

ing his mop of red hair. “I told you we should have checked the van first.”

Liam’s blond head popped up from the wreckage.

“What the *hel* are you fools trying to pull?” he snarled. There was another sound, too, like the mewling of a kitten. Or a little girl crying.

I climbed over a bin of bargain DVDs to get to them. Zu sat

on the floor, her pink palm facing up
toward Chubs's squinting

eyes. Without the glasses perched on his
nose, he looked like a

different person. "She's all right," he
said. "No burns."

Liam was suddenly standing beside me,
using my shoulder

for balance as he climbed over one of
the overturned shelves.

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“You okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Pissed. You?”

“Fine. Pissed.”

I thought for sure I was going to have to hold him back as

we came closer to the cluster of boys, but his fury seemed to fall

away from him with each step. The other kids had regrouped

beside an overturned display of neon-colored pool noodles.

The tallest one, his cloud of frizzy

brown hair hovering around

a pencil-thin neck, stepped in front of the others—the ginger

kid who had spoken before, and two big-shouldered blonds that

looked like brothers.

“Look, man, I’m sorry,” he said.

“Do you always do crap like this?” Liam said. “Attacking folks

without even checking to see if they’re armed—if they’re like

you?”

The leader bristled. “You could have been skiptracers.”

“And it was your Yellow that did all of — *this*.” The ginger

gestured toward the shelves. “The girl needs a leash.”

“Watch your mouth,” Liam snapped. The blond brothers

took a step forward, their eyes lighting at the challenge. “She

wouldn’t have panicked if you hadn’t pulled guns on us.”

“We wouldn’t have had to use them if

you'd paid attention

to our warning back there and just left.”

“Because you gave us so much time to get away—” Liam

snapped.

“Look, we could go back and forth forever and it won't solve

a damn thing,” I interrupted. “We were hoping to spend the

night here, but if you've claimed it or whatever, then we'll go.

That's the only reason we came—for

shelter.”

“For shelter,” the leader repeated.

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“I’m sorry, did I stutter?”

“No, but my ears are still bleeding from your Yellow’s melt-

down,” he snarled. “Maybe you should say it again, baby, for

good measure.”

Liam shot out an arm, cutting off my

warpath before it could
start.

“We just want to stay here a night.
We’re not looking for any
trouble,” he said flatly.

The leader’s eyes gave me the once-
over, his eyes drifting to
a stop where my hands were fisted at my
side, bunching up my
dress.

“Looks like you already found it.”

The leader's name was Greg, and he hailed from Mechanicsville,

Virginia. The nervous ginger-haired kid refused to introduce

himself, but was called Collins by the others. I caught that he

was from some town in Pennsylvania, but that was as much as

he was willing to share with anyone. The blonds—who were, as

I guessed, brothers—were Kyle and Kevin. The only thing the

ramshackle group had in common,

outside of their pool of food

and an alarming pile of firearms and knives, was their camp in

New York, which they lovingly referred to only as “Satan’s Ass

Crack.”

They told the incredibly dramatic—and highly improbable—

tale of their escape from PSF custody over our shared meal of

fruit snacks, stale Pringles, and Twinkies.

“Let me get this straight,” said Chubs, his face etched with

disbelief. “You were being moved from one camp to another?”

Greg leaned back against one of the glass freezer doors.

“They weren’t taking us to another camp. They packed up as

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many guys as they could and said we were being brought to a

testing facility in Maryland.”

“Only guys?” Chubs asked.

“We didn’t have girls there.” Greg’s voice was heavy with

disappointment. That explained a lot—particularly why he still

seemed to be inching toward me, no matter how far I scooted

away. “Otherwise I’m sure they would have been loaded up, too.”

“I’m surprised they even told you that much,” I said, trying

to steer the conversation back on track.
“Do you think that’s

actually where they were bringing you?”

“No,” Collins cut in. “It was pretty clear
that they had orders

to get rid of us.”

“And a storm flooded the road, flipping
the bus and allowing

you to escape?”

That was the part of the story I had
problems with, too. It

was that easy for them? A simple

intervention of Mother Nature,

and they were saved, washed out to freedom and a new life

Biblical style? Where was the detail of PSFs traveling with them?

“We’ve been holed up ever since. It took something like six

months to get word to my dad that I was out and safe, and

another three to get some kind of response from him.”

Chubs leaned forward. “How, exactly, did you get in touch

with them? The Internet?”

“Nah, man,” Greg said, “after that terrorist business, you

can’t even search for recipes online without the PSFs snoop-

ing and breaking down your door. All they need is one whiff of

trouble.”

“What terrorists?” I interrupted.

“The League,” Chubs said. “Don’t you remember—ah.”

He seemed to realize his mistake a

second late, and, with more

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patience than I thought he possessed, explained, “Three years

ago, the League hacked into the government’s Psi databases and

tried posting information about the camps online for everyone to

see. Other groups took that as their cue to hack into banks, the

stock exchange, the State Department . .

”
.”
“So they cracked down on it?”

“Right. Most of the social networking sites are gone, and all

of the e-mail services are required to monitor the e-mails being

sent on their servers.” He turned to the other boys, who were

staring at me with varying degrees of interest and curiosity. I

don’t think Kevin—or was it Kyle?—had stopped staring at me

the entire time I had sat there. “How, then?”

“Easy,” Greg said, with a highly unnecessary wink in my

direction. “We used what was left. I put an ad in my hometown’s

paper with a message only my brother would get.”

I didn’t need to look to know that Chubs had narrowed his

eyes. He tensed beside me. “And who paid for this ad? The edi-

tors didn’t just let you put that in there

for free, did they?”

“No, the Slip Kid did,” Greg said. “He set everything up

for me.”

I sat up straight, kicking aside some of the empty foil wrap-

pers. “You’ve actually been in contact with the Slip Kid?”

“Oh yes. He’s like . . . a god,” Collins said, his breath rush-

ing out. “He gathered all of us together. Kids from all over New

England and the South. Every color.
Older kids, young ones,

too. They say that the PSFs stay away
from his court in the

woods because they're afraid of him.
That he set his camp on fire

and killed all the PSFs sent to bring him
back.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

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The four of them grinned at one another,

the jumping

shadows from the emergency lights
making them look even

smugger.

“What else?” Chubs said, sucking all of
this down eagerly.

“How was he able to send the money for
the ad? What’s East

River like—where is it?”

I glanced back over my shoulder to
Liam, who stood behind

me, leaning against what used to be a TV

dinner freezer. He'd

been strangely quiet the entire time, his lips pressed tight

together, but his face otherwise perfectly devoid of emotion.

"They have a sweet setup at East River," Collins said. "But

if you want to find East River, you have to find it for yourself."

"Sounds that way," Liam said, finally. "Are there a lot of kids

there?"

The four of them had to think about this.
“More than a hun-

dred, but not, like, in the thousands,”
Greg said. “Why?”

Liam shook his head, but I was surprised
to see a hint of dis-

appointment there. “Just wondering.
Most never were in camps,

I take it?”

“Some.” Greg shrugged. “And some
found it after dodging

skiptracer or PSF custody.”

“And the Slip Kid—he doesn’t have . . .” Liam seemed to

struggle to figure out how to ask his question. “He doesn’t have

plans for them, does he? What’s his endgame?”

The others seemed to find the question as strange as I did. It

wasn’t until Greg said, “No endgame. Just livin’, I guess,” that I

realized I hadn’t once thought about the reason why Liam would

be looking for the Slip Kid. I’d just

assumed that he and the

others wanted to find him to get home
and to deliver Jack's

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letter—but if that really was the case,
what had sparked the fire

in Liam's eyes? His hands were stuffed
in his jacket pockets, but

I could see the outline of them curling
into fists.

“What about directions?” I asked.

“Well, now.” Something changed in Greg’s expression; a slick

smile took over his face as his free hand landed on my foot.

The brothers, Kyle and Kevin, hadn’t said a word since we’d sat

down in their makeshift encampment in the freezer aisles, but

now looked at each other with identical expressions of knowing.

I tried to gulp back the revulsion rising in me.

“I’m sure they’d be happy to have you,”

Greg said, his fingers

sliding up from my shoe to stroke my ankle. I started to push

away but stopped when he added, “It’s in a really great location

near the coast, but there just aren’t a whole lot of girls. They

could use something so . . . nice to look at.”

His fingers moved again, tracing a line up my calf. “You

should go. It’s safer than getting caught by one of tribes. There’s

a group of Blue kids that hangs out around Norfolk—they're

nasty. Steal the clothes right off your back. There was a tribe of

Yellows around here for a while, but a kid we were in camp with

claims they were all taken in by PSFs."

All of this tribe stuff was new to me. Kids banding together

and roving the countryside, trying to avoid getting caught, tak-

ing care of one another? Amazing.

Greg's warm, fleshy palm continued its ascent until it swal-

lowed up my knee and squeezed—and that was as far as he was

ever going to get. I felt the trickle at the back of my mind, the

buzz that pushed past even my anger, and had to close my eyes

at the flash of images that followed. A glimpse of a shining yel-

low shell of a school bus coming down a dirt road. A woman's

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blurry face, her mouth moving in silent
song. A campfire flaring

up into the night sky. The faces of Kevin
and Kyle leaning close

to what looked like a clock radio, in the
middle of a trashed

electronics store; the numbers on the
clock's face were climbing,

but not counting time. They lit an electric
green glow in the

dark—310, 400, 460, 500, until it finally
stopped on—

My hand clenched into a fist as I started to detach from both

Greg and his silky swarm of memories, but Chubs was already

there. He reached across my lap and began to peel Greg's fingers

off one by one with a look of pure disdain. For his part, Greg

only looked slightly dazed, his eyes glassy and him unaware of

what I had just done. I glanced around wildly, my heart lodged

somewhere between my mouth and

chest, but no one seemed to

have noticed my slip. The only one who moved was Chubs, and

it was just to scoot closer to me.

Damn it, I thought, squeezing my eyes shut again. One hand

drifted up to press against my forehead, as if I could hold back

the invisible fingers there by force. *Too close. That was way too*

close.

“What was that kid’s name again? The

Yellow who worked

with us in the kitchen? Fred? Frank?”

Collins lay back on his

sleeping bag, folding his hands over his chest.

“Felipe—Felipe Marino?” Greg’s eyes came back into full

focus and continued up my legs, past where his hand had been

allowed.

“Felipe?” Liam interrupted, as if coming out of a trance. “Did

you say Felipe Marco?”

“You know him?”

Liam nodded. “We traveled together for a while.”

“Must have been before he got his ass caught here,” Greg

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said. “He was the one that told us about this place. Said he was

here with his friend—that you?”

“Yeah. What happened to him?” Liam knelt, wedging him-

self between Greg and me. “They brought us to separate camps.”

Greg shrugged. “He was in one of the earlier buses they were

taking to Maryland. Who knows?”

So the Yellows at their camp had been removed, too. They

must have only been taken from the bigger camps, not the

smaller ones that had been cobbled together farther west.

“I miss that kid. He was smart. Knew how to use his powers—

better than your pet, at least. Might as well send her back for all

the good she’s going to do for you.” Greg nodded toward Zu,

who was sitting with her back to us, working through the pages

of multiplication problems Liam had made for her.

And that was about as much as I could take.

“You have two seconds to tell me you’re

kidding,” I said, “or

I’m punching you in the face.”

“Do it,” Chubs hissed beside me.

But Liam put a firm hand on my shoulder, effectively shutting

down any chance I had of making good on my threat. He kept

his face passive, easygoing, but his breath hitched in his throat.

He stretched his fingers out, brushing them against mine on the

floor. I jolted at the touch, but couldn’t

bring myself to pull away.

Greg held up his hands. “All I’m saying is there’s something

off about her. She’s not like the others, is she?” He leaned closer.

“Is she retarded? Did they do testing on her?”

“She’s mute, not deaf,” Liam cut in smoothly. “And I promise

you, she’s probably five times smarter than the seven of us put

together.”

“I’m not so sure about *that*,” Chubs began. “I’m—”

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Liam silenced him with a look, and brought his lips down

next to my ear. “Take Zu?”

I nodded, my fingers tapping his to show that I understood.

I pushed myself up off the ground, feeling calmer now.

When I reached Zu, I held out my hand to

her. She raised

hers without looking up, blindly reaching
for mine. I stared at

the yellow glove in front of me, streaked
with dirt and black

grime, and, despite what had happened a
few minutes before,

pulled it right off her little fingers.

I couldn't say why I had done it; maybe
being so close to

Liam and not losing control had made
me stupidly brave, or

maybe I was just sick of the reality that forced her into them.

All I knew for sure was that if I never saw Zu wear those gloves

again, it would be too soon.

Zu jerked when she felt the warm skin of my hand against

hers, and tried to tug away. Her eyes went wide, but I couldn't

tell if it was from worry or wonder.

“Come on,” I said, squeezing her hand.
“Girl time.”

Her face brightened, but she didn't smile.

"Don't go too far," Liam called after us.

"Don't go too far," the other boys echoed, then burst out into laughter.

Zu's nose wrinkled in disgust.

"I know what you mean," I said, and took her as far away from them as I could.

For the first ten or so minutes we spent walking around the store,

Zu kept turning to look at our linked hands, as if she couldn't

believe what she was seeing. Every now and then, some bin of

unwanted DVDs or an aisle endcap of pointless knickknacks

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would catch her attention, but her dark eyes would always wan-

der back to where our hands swung between us. We had just

turned down one of many ravaged
cleaning supply aisles when

she gave my arm a tug.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, kicking aside
a stray mop.

Zu pointed at the glove I was twirling
around with my free

hand.

I lifted our hands between us. “What’s
so bad about this?”

She blew out the breath she had been
holding and it was

evident I had missed the point. I was dragged all the way to the

other end of the aisle, where she let go of my hand to snatch

a white box from the shelf. Zu went to work tearing the box

open, tossing aside the foam and plastic stuffing to get the old-

fashioned silver toaster inside.

“I’m not sure we’re going to need that,” I started slowly.

She pinned me with a look that very clearly said *Quiet, please*.

Zu tugged the other glove off her hand and spread all ten of

fingers out along either side of the appliance. After a moment, I

saw her shut her dark eyes.

The metal piping that served as the toaster's innards heated

to a glowing red. A long black cord dangled near her feet,

unplugged. The cheap little thing only lasted another minute

before its insides started to melt together. I made her put it down

at the first sign of smoke.

See? she seemed to be saying. *Get it?*

“But you can’t do that to me,” I said, reaching for her hand

again. “You don’t have to worry about hurting me, because you

never could.”

I know how it feels, is what I really should have been saying,

I know what it’s like to be scared of what you can barely control.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I had forced myself to stop thinking about what I had done

to that undercover PSF. I didn't let myself wonder if I could do

it again, let alone test it out. But how, I wondered, were either

of us ever going to learn to control ourselves if we couldn't prac-

tice? If we couldn't stretch and test boundaries?

“Let's see if we can find something useful,” I said, slipping

my fingers around hers again. I waited

until I felt her hand close

against mine before leading her back down the aisle. “What do

you think—”

I’m not even sure what I was about to ask her, but she wasn’t

paying attention to me. Zu stopped so suddenly and gripped my

hand so damn hard, that I stumbled back a few steps. My eyes

followed the line of her outstretched arm to the upended cloth-

ing and shoe racks.

More specifically, to the lone hot pink dress dangling from

an otherwise empty rack.

Zu took off at a run, blitzing down the aisles of extension

cords and buckets. I tried to keep up with her, but it was like

the wind had caught her heels and was propelling her forward.

She stopped just short of a rack. I watched, fascinated, as one of

her hands reached out to stroke the fabric, only to pull back at the last second.

“Beautiful,” I told her. The dress itself flared out at the waist,

with a big ribbon bow at the place where the sleeveless top met

the pink and white striped skirt. She looked like she wanted

nothing more than to pull it down, hug it to her chest, and press

her face against the satiny fabric.

I could think of about a thousand things I missed while I was

at Thurmond, but dresses were not on that list. My dad's favor-

ite story to tell strangers and indulging relatives was the day he

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and Mom tried to button me up into a blue one for his birthday

party when I was three. Because the buttons were so small and

impossible for me to reach, I shredded the fabric by hand, bit by

gauzy bit. I spent the rest of the party proudly parading around

in Batman underwear.

“Are you going to try it on?” I asked.

She looked back up at me and shook her head. Her hands

dropped from where they were hovering over the plastic hanger’s

shoulders, and it took me a moment to recognize what was

happening.

Zu thought she didn't deserve it. She thought it was too

nice, too new, too pretty. I felt a sweltering hate rise in me, but

I didn't know where to direct it. Her parents, for sending her

away? Her camp? The PSFs?

I pulled the dress off the silver rack with one hand and took

Zu's arm in the other. I knew she was looking at me again, her

dark eyes wide with confusion, but instead of explaining—instead

of trying to force her to understand the words I wanted to say—I

led her over to the dressing rooms in the center of the clothing

section, thrust the dress into her hands, and told her to try it on.

It was like tugging a boat in to dock on a thin line. The first

few times I handed it to her, she would put it down and I'd have

to pick it back up again. I don't know if

her desire finally won

out, or if I'd managed to exhaust even her wariness, but by the

time she appeared, peeking out from around her dressing room's

door, I was so relieved I almost cried.

"You look *amazing*." I turned her back around, so she could

see herself in the room's tall mirror. When I finally coaxed her

to look, I felt her shoulders jerk under my hands—saw her eyes

go huge and bright, only to droop again a moment later. Her

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fingers began to pluck at the fabric. She was shaking her head,

as if to say, *No, no I can't.*

“Why not?” I asked, turning her so she was looking at me.

“You like it, right?”

She didn't look up, but I saw her nod.

“Then what’s the problem?” At that, I caught her sneak

another look at herself in the corner of the mirror. Her hands

were smoothing the fabric of the skirt and she didn’t seem aware

of it in the slightest.

“That’s right,” I said. “There is no problem. Let’s see what

else we can find.”

After, she wanted to find something for me. Unsurprisingly,

the adult section had been decimated by looters; my choices

seemed limited to hunting gear and industrial jumpsuits. After

several patient explanations about why I didn't need the silky

cornflower blue nightgown or the skirt with daisies on it, she—

with a look of total and complete exasperation—accepted that I

was only ever going to try on jeans and plain T-shirts.

And then, she pointed to the bra rack and

a part of me

wanted to crawl under the discarded
piles of kids' pajamas and

die. The letters and numbers might as
well have been in Chinese

for how much sense I could make of
them, and I half expected

Zu to start laughing when the first touch
of frustrated tears

welled up in my eyes.

There were not many times I'd stop and
think, *I wish Mom*

were here. I understood now, at least, that what I had done to

her I could never fix. She would never look at me again and

recognize me, and I would never be able to think of anything

other than the look in her eyes when she saw me that morning.

It was strange how my feelings about her seemed to change by

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the minute; that one moment I could remember what it felt like

for her to brush my hair, and the next, be furious that she had

abandoned me. That she hadn't taught me how to live in my

own skin and be a girl like she was supposed to.

But whose fault was that, really?

Zu's lips puckered in thought, her eyebrows knitting together

as she surveyed the Everest of undergarments in front of us. She

began to pluck one of every size, tossing them back toward me

until both of us were laughing ourselves silly for no real reason

at all.

Eventually, I found what I thought might have been the right

fit for me. It was hard to tell; they had all been so damn uncom-

fortable with their wires and pinching straps. While I changed

out of my dress, Zu happily pulled together an outfit for herself

that looked like something out of a store catalog—the pink dress,

white leggings beneath it, and a jean jacket that was one or two

sizes too big for her. The rest of the things she found were stuffed

into a flower patterned backpack I pulled down off a display for

her. Now that she had found her own things, she wanted to go

the whole hog and pick out things for the boys, too.

When I found her a new pair of tennis

shoes with rosy laces,

she actually wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me,

like she could squeeze the thanks into me. And while Zu was

not especially impressed by the pair of short black boots I found

for myself in the men's section, she didn't try to force any of the

ribbon flats or towering high heels on me.

Zu was in the process of neatly folding a button-down shirt

she had chosen for Chubs when I remembered something.

“I’ll be right back,” I told her. “Wait right here, okay?”

It took me a few minutes to find the aisle again. Liam and

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I had walked past it so quickly as we made our way toward the

back of the store, I wasn’t altogether sure that I hadn’t imag-

ined seeing them. But there they were,
just above the cleaning

supplies—a pair of bright pink rubber
gloves dangling amid a sea

of traditional yellow ones.

“Hey Zu,” I called as I made my way
back to her. I dangled

them out in front of me and waited for
her to turn around.

When she did, her mouth actually fell
open. She was so dazzled

by her new gloves that she walked with
her hands stretched out

in front of her—the way a princess
examining the collection of

fine jewelry around her fingers and
wrists would. I watched her

curtsy and twirl in her new dress as we
lapped the store, all the

while her feet dancing over the evidence
of what had happened

at the checkout lanes. Watching her,
feeling the exhilaration

swelling in my chest, I couldn't say I
was all that aware of the

broken glass and flickering monitor

displays, either. We turned

down the dimly lit corridor of
cosmetics, and I could barely keep

the grin off my face.

Liam found us there a short while later,
just as Zu was tying

off the braid she'd woven in my hair
with a glittery hair tie. I

sat on the tile and she sat on the shelf
behind me like some fairy

queen. "Magnificent!" I told her, when
she held a broken mirror

out in front of my face. “You are incredible.”

And my reward for that was the feeling
of her arm’s birdlike

bones twining around my neck. I twisted
around so that I was

facing her, because I wanted her to see
my face—I wanted her

to see how serious, how sincerely I
meant it when I repeated

myself. “You are *incredible*.”

“You two have been busy, I see.”

Liam leaned against the aisle's endcap, eyebrows raised. Zu

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bounded toward him, scooping up the shirts and socks she'd

picked for him.

“Thank you—oh God, Chubs is going to piss his pants when

he sees this!” His hand came down to rest on top of her head.

“Jeez, I leave you two alone for a little

while and you clean out
the joint. Good job.”

I pushed myself up off the floor, helping
them gather up the

clothes and supplies we’d managed to
scrounge up. That done,

we started our slow, reluctant shuffle
back to the others. All

three of us seemed to be aware that once
we left that peaceful

moment, it would be behind us forever.

Zu had only just darted out a few steps

ahead of us when

Liam turned to me and said, “Thanks for doing this. I’m glad you

got what I meant.” He gave my braid a little playful tug. “I just

wanted to ask them a few more questions.”

“And you didn’t want”—I nodded towards Zu—“to hear?”

He looked down at his feet, and when he looked back up, his

ears were pink. “Yeah, but also . . . you were kind of distracting

them.”

“What? I’m sorry I threatened them or whatever, but—”

“ N o — *distracting* them,” Liam repeated. “With your . . . face.”

“Oh.” I recovered quickly. “Did you get anything useful out

of them?”

“The names of a few of the friendlier tribes, a few cities under

lockdown for insurrection—stuff like that. I just wanted to get a

sense of what was happening in Virginia.”

“I meant about the Slip Kid,” I said, maybe a little too eagerly.

“Nothing we didn’t have before. Apparently everyone takes

some sacred oath not to reveal more information than that.

Totally ridiculous.”

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“They really wouldn’t give you any

more information?” I

said.

Liam looked down at the ground. “Greg made us an offer—a

trade—but we turned him down.”

“What did he want?” What was so valuable that they

wouldn’t trade it for the one thing that would reunite them with

their families? Black Betty?

“Doesn’t matter,” Liam said, and there was finality in his

voice. “If those numbnuts managed, I’m sure we can find East

River ourselves. Eventually.”

“Yeah,” I said, with a light laugh.
“True.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him hoist the pile of

clothes onto his shoulder, his gaze never leaving where Zu was

hopping and skipping through the field of cans and old maga-

zines. I glanced down at a blond movie star’s face as we passed

it, my eyes falling over the words she finally tells all printed

under her face.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Why are you looking for the Slip Kid?”
I asked. I felt

his eyes on me and I knew what explanation was coming. “I

mean, besides wanting to help Chubs and Zu get there, and try-

ing to deliver Jack’s letter. Is it because

you want to go home,

or . . . ?”

“Any reason in particular you’re asking?” His voice was even.

Testing.

“The questions you were asking them about the camp,” I

explained. “It just seemed like you were trying to figure some-

thing out.”

Liam didn’t reply for a long while, not until the tents they’d

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set up for the night were in sight. Even then, it wasn't an answer.

“Why do *you* want to find the Slip Kid?”

“Because I want to be able to see my grandmother.” *Because*

I need to understand how to control my abilities before they destroy

everyone I care about. “But you didn't answer my question.”

Zu dashed through our tent's flap, and

the lantern in the tent

lit up Chubs's delighted face. When she handed his new things

over, he folded her into an enormous hug, lifting her off her feet

with the force of it.

"It's . . . the same as you," he said. "I just want to get home."

"Where's that?"

"See, that's the funny thing," he said. "It used to be North

Carolina, but I'm not so sure anymore."

We stood staring at each other for a moment, nearly toe to

toe, and when he lifted the tent flap for me, I couldn't help but

wonder if he had picked up on my half-truth as easily as I had

picked up on his.





SIXTEEN

It was an hour, maybe more, before Liam's

breathing evened out and he began to snore. He slept flat on

his back, his hands resting against the soft flannel of his shirt.

His face, which earlier had seemed marked by old, bruising

shadows, looked young again. He might have been able to pass

as a twenty-year-old with his facial scruff and solid build, but

he didn't fool anyone while tucked away in his sleep.

His face was turned toward Zu, who slept between us under a

mountain of blankets, and was currently the only thing that was

keeping me from inching closer to him; from slipping my hand

under his bigger one and learning the contents of his dreams.

But the distance between us was there for a reason. Imagin-

ing a future in which I didn't exist, in

which I had unwittingly

erased myself from his memories, kept
my hands pinned under

my legs and my mind, for once, in check.

When I heard Greg and his pals stir in
their tents next to

ours, I finally gave up all pretense of
sleep. Their voices began as

a low murmur, their voices
indistinguishable from one another,

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and grew louder as the minutes ticked by. Finally, they turned

their lantern on to the lowest setting, just enough to be visible

through our own green tent's shell.

I slipped out the other side of the tent, careful to keep my

footsteps soft against the concrete. Their whispers grew in vol-

ume and urgency the closer I came.

“—them,” Greg mumbled. “We don’t owe them anything.”

My hands clenched at my side, all of the anxiety and dis-

trust that had been swelling up inside of me over the past few

hours coming to a head. For a single second, I wished that I had

brought my backpack inside the store with me. The panic button

was there, waiting to be used if the situation blew up fast and

ugly. *Stupid Ruby*, I thought, *stupid*.

I wasn't worried about taking care of Greg and his friends.

Even with their guns, we still had a chance. But if they tried

to pull something while we were asleep, or if they called in

reinforcements—

My feet stopped mid-stride.

Chubs had beaten me to guard duty.

He sat facing the tents, his long, spidery legs crossed in front

of him, and Zu's workbook in his lap. He was leaning toward the

others' tents, concentrating so hard on

picking up their conversa-

tion that he missed my approach and nearly jumped out of his

skin when I appeared.

“Zu?” He squinted in my direction.

“Zu?” I whispered back. “*Really?*” I mean, *really?*

I took Zu’s workbook and pencil out of his hands, and flipped

the page without looking at whatever he had been writing.

what are you doing? I wrote, showing it

to him. He rolled

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his eyes and refused to respond when I
tried to put the pencil

back in his hand.

do you think they're going to try
something?

After a moment, he sighed and finally
nodded.

me too, I scribbled. come with me?

By the way his shoulders slumped, Chubs seemed to think

he didn't have much of a choice. He stood quickly and quietly,

wiping his palms against the front of his khaki pants.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Chubs said when we were

out of earshot. The tents were in our line of sight, but we weren't

in theirs. "About them."

"Do you think they're going to try to rob us?"

“I think they’re going to try to take Betty, actually.”

There was a long pause; I felt Chubs’s eyes slide over to me,

but my own were fixed on the tents, watching for trouble.

“You should go back to sleep.” There was a gruff edge to his

voice as he crossed his arms over his chest. But there was also

something about the way he said it that made me wonder if he

was waiting to see what I would say to

that. “What are you even doing up?”

“Same as you, I guess,” I said. “Making sure no one gets bru-

tally mugged, beaten, or murdered in their sleep. Watching to

see if those kids are the assholes I think they are.”

Chubs snorted at that, rubbing his hand over his forehead.

It took some time in silence, but I felt the air between us ease

from a guarded hostility to something
that felt to me like accep-

tance. His shoulders were no longer
bunched up with tension,

and when he tilted his head toward me, I
saw it for the subtle

invitation it was. I took a step closer.

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“It was bad enough he had to come back
here,” Chubs

mumbled, more to himself than to me.

“God . . .”

“Liam?” I asked. “This is where he and his friend were captured, right?”

Chubs nodded. “He’s never told me the whole story, but

I *think* what happened was that he and Felipe were traveling

and ran into a tribe of Blues. Instead of recruiting them like

Lee hoped, the tribe beat the hell out of them and stole every-

thing they had—food, packs, family pictures, you name it. They

came here for a few days to regroup, but they were in such bad

shape that they couldn't get away when the skiptracers finally

showed up.”

Something hard settled in my throat.

“Lee thinks that that tribe probably called them in,” Chubs

continued. “That they got a cut of the reward.”

I didn't know what to say. The thought of a kid, of any of us,

turning against our own kind made me want to smash the shelf

we were leaning against into a heap of metal.

"I trust Liam," I said slowly. "He's such a good person, but

he's so easy for others to read—and *they* don't have the best

intentions."

"Exactly," Chubs said. "He's so busy looking inside people to

find the good that he misses the knife they're holding in their hand.”

“And even then he'd probably blame himself for the person having the knife to begin with, and apologize for being such a tempting target.”

That was what troubled me the most about Liam—if he was any more trusting and good-hearted, he would have been a Boy

Scout. It was either an amazing feat of stubbornness or naivety, I

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thought, for someone who had seen so much death and suffering

to still believe so unconditionally that everyone was as stand-up

as he was. It was something that inspired both exasperation and a

fierce sense of protectiveness in me—and Chubs, too, it seemed.

“I think we both know he’s far from perfect, no matter how

hard he tries,” Chubs said, settling himself down on the ground

and leaning back against the empty shelf.

“He’s never been a big

thinker, that one. Always rush, rush, rushing to do whatever his

gut tells him to, and then drowning in his own self-pity and guilt

when things blow up in his face.”

I nodded, absently fiddling with a tear in the sleeve of my

new plaid shirt I hadn't noticed before taking it. After hearing

him with Zu, I knew that he felt an intense guilt over what

had happened the night of their breakout, but it sounded like it

might run even deeper than that.

"I can fix that for you later." Chubs nodded toward the torn

fabric. His long fingers were splayed out over his knees, tapping

against the bones. "Just remind me."

“Who taught you how to sew, anyway?”
I asked. Apparently

it was not the right question to ask.
Chubs’s back went stiff and

straight, like I had dropped an ice cube
down the back of his

own shirt.

“I don’t know how to *sew*,” he snapped,
“I know how to *stitch*.”

Sewing is for decoration; stitching is for
saving lives. I don’t do

this because I think it’s pretty or fun. I do
it for practice.”

He stared at me over the rims of his glasses. Waiting to see

if I got what he was trying to say.

“My dad taught me how to stitch before I went into hiding,”

he said, finally. “In case of emergencies.”

“Is your dad a doctor?” I asked.

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“He’s a trauma surgeon.” Chubs didn’t bother to hide the

pride in his voice. “One of the best in the D.C. area.”

“What does your mom do?”

“She used to work for the Department of Defense, but got

fired when she refused to register me in the IAAN database. I

don’t know what she’s doing now.”

“They sound great,” I said.

Chubs snorted, but I could see him warm to the compliment.

The minutes dragged by, and the

conversation waned. I

found myself reaching for Zu's notebook and flipping it open

to the beginning. The first few pages were mostly sketches and

doodles, but those gave way to page after page of math prob-

lems. Liam's handwriting was neat and precise, and, surprisingly,

so was Zu's.

—Betty traveled 118 miles in three hours. How fast was Lee

driving?

—You have five Snickers bars to share with three friends.

You cut them in half. How many will each friend get? How

can you make sure the leftovers get shared equally so Chubs

doesn't complain?

And then I got to a page with completely different handwrit-

ing. Messy and smeared. The letters were darker, as if the writer

had been pressing down on the paper too hard.

I'm not sure what else can be said about this book that hasn't already been said. I'm

out of clever things to say, I'm afraid. Jonathan Swift has always been a favorite but I

can't get over how clever his wordplay is throughout the novel. I really can't

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get over how similar it is to Robinson

Crusoe at times, especially when he's on the ship to Lilliput. Though his interaction with the Lilliputians wasn't the strongest section,

you would be hard pressed to find equally clever interplay of parody and originality. I

can see why the book has been studied so carefully by scholars over the years. We

meet Gulliver as a dreamy young man in search of adventure, trying to get

anywhere that would involve sea travel and see him evolve masterfully. If I had to

name the best section of the book, it would probably be the Laputians section, a

place I would greatly like to visit, because my own head is often stuck in the clouds

and to be able to study philosophy and mathematics all day—a dream. There was a

time or two over the course of the novel that I felt Swift had gone overboard and

missed some opportunities to drive home his idea of what the ideal society should be.

You, as the reader, are left to figure it out for yourself. This book is perfect if you

love thought-provoking literature from an objective, rational viewpoint, or if

you dream about one day traveling the world yourself.

“Umm . . .” I held the page up for him to see. “This yours?”

“Give me that,” he said. His face was wild with panic. Not

just panic—by the way his nostrils flared and his hand shook,

it was almost like I had scared him half to death. Guilt shot

through me. I passed it back to him and watched him tear that

sheet of paper out.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I said, worried about the tinge of green col-

oring his face. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m just wondering

why you’d practice writing essays when you said you didn’t think

we’d ever get to go back to school.”

He continued to stare at me for several seconds, until

something in his stony expression finally gave. Chubs blew out

the breath he'd been holding.

“I’m not practicing for school.” Instead of tucking the

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sheet of paper inside of the briefcase, he laid it out between us.

“Before . . . before camp, my parents

thought the PSFs were

investigating them, which, you know, they were. They sent me

up to my grandparents' cabin to hide, and—you remember what

I said about the Internet being policed? We had to find a way

around it, especially when they started putting pressure on Mom

at work.”

I glanced down at the sheet of paper again. “So you used to

send book reviews?”

“I had a laptop and a few wireless Internet cards,” he said.

“We would post book reviews online. It was the only way we

could think of to talk without them catching on.”

He leaned over, covering the paper so only the first column

of words was visible. *I'm out can't get to you can meet anywhere*

name place and time missed you love you.

“Oh.”

“I wanted to write it out now,” Chubs said. “In case I can get

online, but only have a few minutes.”

“You’re pretty genius,” I said slowly.
“Your whole family.”

I got a snort in response. *Duh.*

The question I really wanted to ask him was inching its

way up my throat when he pulled a deck of cards out of his

briefcase.

“Want to play a few games?” he asked.
“We’re going to be
here a while.”

“Sure . . . but I only know Old Maid and
Go Fish.”

“Well.” He cleared his throat. “We
don’t have the right deck

for Old Maid and, unfortunately for you,
I excel at Go Fish. I

won the Go Fish tournament in fifth
grade.”

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I grinned, waiting for him to deal my cards. “You are a star,

Chubs, a—” His nose wrinkled at the name. “I can’t call you by

anything else if I don’t know your real name.”

“Charles,” he replied. “Charles Carrington Meriwether IV,

actually.”

I tried to keep my face as straight as possible. Of course he

would be named something like that.
“Okay, Charles. Charlie?

Chuck? Chip?”

“Chip?”

“I don’t know, I thought it was kind of cute.”

“Ugh. Just call me Chubs. Everyone else does.”

I figured it out.

It must have been half past five in the morning, well after

several delirious games of cards and

charades that had been

brought on by too much candy and too little sleep. Both of us

had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, to be proven right

about the other boys. We kept the baseball bat beside us and

never once turned our backs to the tents. When exhaustion

finally set in, we took turns curled up on the ground, trying to

steal a few minutes of sleep here and there.

I picked up Zu's notebook again in an attempt avoid being

lulled into sleep by Chubs's rhythmic snores and added a few

clouds and stars to the first page of doodles. The pages fanned

out under my fingers as I flipped through it again, not catching

until I found what I was looking for.

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It *was* an area code for this part of the state, I was sure of it.

Grams had lived down near
Charlottesville for a time, and I had

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a very vague memory of standing in the
kitchen of my parents'

house, staring at her number printed on a
notepad beside the

phone. But the area it covered—that was
no small bit of land,

and there was no real guarantee that it
was supposed to repre-

sent an area code in the first place.

It was easier to think of it now without
three eager sets of

eyes on me, but slightly complicated by
the fact I was running on

fumes, sleepwise. With more than
enough time to kill, I started

in again—rearranging them, trying to
create anagrams, substi-

tuting different letters for others.

The feeling snuck up on me slowly,
crawling back up

through the crowded, tired portions of my brain. The other

number—540—where had I seen that? Why did it feel like—?

When it came to me, I almost laughed. Almost.

I had seen the number on the radio in Greg's memory only

a few hours earlier, burning brightly through even the murkiest

clouds of his thoughts.

It was 540 AM—a radio station.

Shaking Chubs back awake wasn't enough for me, not when I

thought I would actually burst at the seams with excitement. I

all but pounced onto Chubs's back, both scaring him senseless

and kneeling him in the kidney in the process. I'm not sure what

sound he made when I landed, but I was fairly certain it wasn't

human.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" I hissed, hauling him huffing

and puffing and cursing to his feet.
“When they gave you EDO,
did they say anything else?”

“Green, if I can still walk tomorrow, so
help me God—”

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“Listen to me!” I hissed. “Did they say
anything about tuning
in, or picking it up?”

He fixed me with a baleful look. “All
they said was to check

out Edo.”

“*Check out?*” I repeated. “Those exact words?”

“Yes!” he said, exasperated. “Why?”

“I was wrong before,” I said. “I don’t think the number has

anything to do with a phone number. We were right before. The

last letter isn’t a letter at all—it was supposed to be a zero. Five

forty. It’s some kind of radio station.”

“How in the world did you reach that

conclusion?”

Ah. The tricky part in all of this. How to B.S. the fact I had

cheated and seen the answer, rather than being in possession of

brain power to actually work it through. “I was trying to think of

what else uses three digit numbers when I remembered hearing

them—Greg and the others, I mean—talk about needing to find

a radio here. I should have mentioned it to you guys before, but

I didn't think anything of it until now.”

“Oh my God.” Chubs was shaking his head, mildly stunned.

“I don't even believe it. We have honestly had such shit luck this

entire trip I thought at least two of us were going to end up dead

in a ditch somewhere before we figured it out.”

“We need a radio,” I said. “I think I'm right, but if I'm not . . .

we need to test it before telling the others.”

“Betty?”

“No!” I wasn’t about to leave the tent unguarded, even for

fifteen minutes. “I thought I saw a radio in the back—let me go

grab it.”

The store was rushing around me in dark streams and fading

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colors as I ran, but I wasn’t afraid of what was lurking there,

not now. I hadn't imagined the radio after all. It was back in the

small cluster of rafts and blankets that Liam and his friend had

set up the last time he was here.

Chubs was pacing in front of the shelves by the time I got

back. I set the small device up on a shelf that was about eye

level and began to fuss with its buttons, searching for the on

switch.

I had to be the one to start it up—and the one to fumble

with the volume knob when it just about blew our eardrums out

with static. The thing was ancient, a beat-up silver box, but it

worked. The speakers jumped between voices, commercials, and

even a few old songs I recognized.

“It has to be AM,” Chubs said, taking the radio in his hands.

“FM frequencies don’t go up past 108 or so. Here we go—”

My first thought was that Chubs had somehow tuned it to

the wrong station. I had never heard a sound like the one sput-

tering through the speakers—a low growl of static pierced by

what sounded like a tub of broken glass being tossed around.

It wasn't painful like the White Noise, but it wasn't pleasant,

either.

But Chubs was still grinning.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked,
and was all too happy

to explain when I shook my head. “Have
you heard that there

are certain frequencies and pitches that
only kids with a Psi brain

can pick up?”

I braced a hand on the shelf to keep from
doubling over. I

had. Cate had told me as much, when she
explained the camp

controllers had embedded a certain
frequency in the White

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Noise to root out any of the dangerous ones still hiding out in

the other cabins.

“It’s not so much that others can’t hear the noise, it’s that

their brains translate the sounds differently than ours do—really

fascinating stuff. They did some testing with it at Caledonia, to

see if there were any pitches that certain

colors couldn't pick

up and others could, and it always sounded like this when we

couldn't—”

No sooner had the words left his mouth, than there was

another sharp *click*, and the noise cut off altogether, replaced by

a soft, male voice whispering, *If you can hear this, you're one of us.*

*If you're one of us, you can find us.
Lake Prince. Virginia.*

That same message, three times, before
it clicked again

and switched back to the frequency we
had heard before. For

a long time, Chubs and I could only stare
at one another,

speechless.

“Oh my God!” Chubs said, “*Oh my
God!*” and then we were

saying it together, jumping up and down,
arms flung around one

another like two damn fools—like we
had never, ever wanted

to reach over and slap each other multiple times on multiple

days. I hugged him with any kind of fear or self-consciousness;

fiercely, with a rush of emotion that almost brought tears to my

eyes.

“I could kiss you!” Chubs cried.

“Please don’t!” I gasped out, feeling his arms tighten around

my ribs to the point of cracking them.

Either by his internal clock or Chubs’s

excited squeaks, Liam

woke first. I saw him out the corner of my eye, his head of

tousled blond hair sticking out of the tent. He looked between us

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once and retreated back into the tent, only to reemerge a second

later looking torn between confusion and worry.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “What’s

going on?”

Chubs and I glanced at each other, wearing identical grins.

“Get Zu,” I said. “You guys are going to want to hear this.”

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SEVENTEEN

According to Chubs, Jack Fields was the second

son in a family of five kids, and the only one to survive Idiopathic

Adolescent Acute Neurodegeneration. His father had owned an

Italian restaurant and his mother died of cancer when he was

young. Jack was unremarkable in appearance, the kind of kid you

would pass in a school hallway and not think twice about. But

he was stealth cool, the only one in their room that knew what

Liam was talking about when he started in on Japanese horror

flicks or articles from back issues of *Rolling Stone*. Apparently,

he liked to tell stories in weird voices and spent years scratch-

ing out a replica of New York City's skyline on the converted

classroom's blackboards. The PSFs assigned to their room had

been so impressed with the sheer detail

of his work that they
actually let him finish.

More importantly, Jack took great
pleasure in antagonizing

the camp controllers by using his
abilities to lift things off their

belts and out of their pockets, or to
throw things into their paths

so that they'd trip and fall in front of
everyone. To hear Chubs

talk, you would have thought Jack Fields
was a saint walking

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on earth, a disciple of Awesome, preaching the proper way to

use their Blue abilities after spending years figuring it out for

himself.

Which was probably why he was the first one the camp con-

trollers shot in the back of the head the night the kids tried to

make their escape.

Liam was silent as we approached Petersburg's outer city

limits, only nodding once or twice to confirm that the craziest

parts of Chubs's tale were true. He had been just as excited as

the two of us when we dragged him over to listen to the broad-

cast, but slowly, over the course of a few hours, his mood had

deteriorated. When Chubs's stories died out, so did all conversa-

tion in the van.

“It’s supposed to be really beautiful there,” I said, suddenly,

then winced at how awkward it sounded.

“Lake Prince, I mean.”

Liam didn’t look stressed so much as profoundly sad. That

was what worried me—that he was sinking into something that

not even our breakthrough could pull him out of.

“I’m sure you’re right,” he said, quietly. He handed me the

half-folded map. “Can you put this back

in the glove box?”

I certainly hadn't been looking for it when I opened the small

compartment, but there they were, nested on top of a pile of

crumpled napkins.

Truthfully, I had been expecting envelopes, or at the very

least lined notebook paper. Which was stupid and didn't make

any sense, because it's not like their camp had arts and crafts

days. It's not like they were just *given* the paper and pens. Still, I

had been expecting the letters to be something . . . heavier. For

Chubs and Liam to be carrying theirs on themselves.

Jack's letter was on top, written on half of what looked like a

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computer printout, folded over several times. He had managed

to squeeze his father's name in tight capital letters on the back of

the paper, between the large, black words: AREA RESTRICTED.

Instead of putting the map away, I took the letter out, only

vaguely aware of the argument Liam and Chubs had gotten into

over the best route to Lake Prince. I wasn't thinking much of

anything as my fingers slid over the wrinkled surface, smoothing

it out as I unfolded it. No date in the

upper right hand corner,

just a hasty, straight to the point, *Dear Dad*.

I didn't get to take in another word. Liam reached over and

ripped the paper out of my hand, crumpling it slightly in his fist.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“I'm sorry, I just . . .”

“You just *what*?” he barked. I felt my body jerk in response.

“It's personal! It's none of your business

what it says.”

“Lee . . .” Chubs said, sounding every bit as surprised as I

felt. “Come on.”

“No, this is serious. We don’t read each other’s letters!”

“Never?” I said. “What if you can’t find his dad and the letter

has some clue about where he might be?”

Liam was shaking his head, even as Chubs said, “She has a

point.”

He said nothing, but Liam’s hands trembled on the steering

wheel. It was his silence that stung, and when I couldn’t take

another second of it, I reached over and turned on the radio,

sending up a prayer that an Allman Brothers’ song would be on.

Instead, Betty picked up a news talk show.

“—children are in containment for their own good, not just the

safety of the American public. My well-placed sources in the Gray

administration have informed me that all instances in which a child

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has been removed from rehabilitation early have resulted in their

untimely death. There is simply no way to reproduce the routine of

medication, exercise, and stimulation these rehab centers are using

to keep your children alive.”

Liam punched a knuckle against the volume button, trying

to turn it off. Instead, the tuner jumped to the next available

station, and this time it was a woman's voice delivering the bad

news. *“Sources are reporting that two Psi fugitives were picked up*

on the Ohio-West Virginia border, traveling on foot—”

Betty turned so hard and fast into the empty rest stop that

I swore she did it on two wheels. Liam parked diagonally across

three different spaces, throwing the brake on with a fast, “Be

right back.” One minute he was beside me, and the next, we

were watching the back of his red flannel shirt as he jumped

over a puddle of stale rainwater and headed for the colonial-style

brick building and vending machines.

“That was . . . dramatic.”

I turned to look at Chubs over the seat, but he was just as

confused as I was.

“You should probably follow him,” Chubs said.

“What should I say?”

Chubs gave me one of his looks.

“Really? You need me to

spell it out for you?”

I had no idea what he meant, but I went anyway, tracing

Liam’s trail of anger and frustration past

the restrooms, past the

abandoned sitting area, to the other side of the building. Where

there was wild long grass, trees, and absolutely no way we could

have seen him from Betty.

He stood with his back toward me, sagging against the rest

stop's wall. Arms crossed over his chest, hair standing on end. I

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thought I was being quiet like a fox, but
he knew the moment

I stepped behind him. His grief hung
around us like humidity,

seeping into my skin. I felt the invisible
fingers at the back of

my mind awaken. Howling, like a feral
cat that'd been caged

too long.

I kept my distance.

“Lee?”

“I’m okay. Go back to the van.” Again,

with the forced,

bright voice.

He dropped to a crouch, then completely to the ground. But

I didn't move, not until he leaned forward and stuck his head

between his knees, looking like he was about to throw up every-

thing in his stomach.

I stared long and hard at the place where his light hair curled

against his neck, at the exact spot an old

bruise disappeared down

his shirt collar. My hand lifted at my side to push the soft fabric

away. I wanted to see how far the ugly mark extended. To see

what other old wounds he was hiding.

You touched him before, a little voice whispered at the back of

my mind, *and nothing happened then. . .*
.

Instead, I took a step back and away, so I was no longer

standing directly behind him, but off to the side. Distance. Dis-

tance was good.

“You’re right, you know,” he said, quietly. “I don’t want to

find the Slip Kid just to deliver Jack’s letter. I don’t even want

to use to him to help me find my family. I know where they are

and how to reach them, but I can’t go home. Not yet.”

Somewhere behind us, I heard one of Betty’s doors roll open,

but it didn't break the stillness of the moment. "Why not? I'm sure your parents miss you."

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Liam rested his arms over his knees, his back still to me. "Did

Chubs tell you . . . did he say anything to you about me and the

League?"

He couldn't see it, but I still shook my head.

“Harry—my stepdad—he knew from the start that the

Children’s League was bad news. Said they would use us worse

that Gray ever would, and wouldn’t shed one damn tear if we

died helping them. Even after . . . even after Claire—Claire is,

was, my little sister.” He cleared his throat. “Even after she was

gone, he used to remind me that no amount of fighting was ever

going to bring her back. Cole had

already joined up with them,

and he came back to get me to go with him. To fight.”

Was. Was my sister. *Was* gone. Another victim of IAAN.

“I bought into it. I was so angry, and I hated everyone and

everything, but there wasn’t anyone to direct it at. I was there

with them for weeks, training, letting them turn me into this

weapon. Into the kind of person that would take an innocent

person's life just because it served their needs and what *they*

wanted. My brother was like a stranger; he even kept this—this

thing he called a kill chart in room. And he'd add to it, every

time he killed someone important. Every time he completed a

mission. And I would come in after training all day, and I'd look

at it and think, How many of those people had families? and

How many of those people had people

who needed them like we

needed Claire? And that's just it—they all did, Ruby, I'm sure of

it. People don't live like islands.”

“So you got out.”

He nodded. “Had to run during a training simulation out-

side. I was trying to get back to Harry and Mom when the PSFs

picked me up.” He finally turned so he was looking at me. “I

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can't go back to them yet, not until I earn it. Not until I make it right."

"What are you talking about?"

"While I was with the League I realized that the only people

that were ever going to help us were ourselves. So when I figured

out a way to break out of Caledonia . . ."
Liam's voice trailed

off. Then he said, "It was horrible.

Horrible. I totally failed them,
even after I promised it would work out
in the end. So why—”

His voice caught. “You heard what that
newscaster said. Only a

few of us got out and they just keep
picking us off like rabbits

in hunting season. So *why* do I want to
do it again? Why can’t I

shake it? All I want is to help more kids
break out of Caledonia—

out of Thurmond—out of every single
camp, one by one.”

Oh, I thought, feeling vaguely numb. *Oh*.
I had only ever

wanted to find the Slip Kid to help
myself, to figure out how

to tame my abilities. But all along, he
had wanted to find him

because he was sure he'd be able to help
others. That, together,

they could figure out a way to save the
kids we'd all been forced

to leave behind.

“It’s just so unfair, you know? All this
morning, I kept think-

ing, it's so goddamned unfair that I'm here, so close to finding

East River, and the rest of them are gone.” He pressed the back

of his hand to his eyes. “It makes me feel sick. I can’t shake it. I

can’t. Those kids they were talking about on the radio—I’m sure

they were from Caledonia. I just . . .” He took in a ragged breath.

“Do you think . . . do you think they regret following me?”

“Not for a second,” I said. “Listen to me.

You didn't force

them to follow you. You only gave them
what the PSFs and

camp controllers took away from them—
a choice. You can't live

in a place like those camps and not know
what the consequences

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might be. If those kids followed you out,
it was because they

chose to. They believed you when you

said we'd all get home

someday."

"But most of them didn't." Liam shook his head. "In some

ways, it would have been safer for them to stay in the camps,

right? They wouldn't have been hunted. They wouldn't have had

to see how afraid everyone is of them, or felt like they don't have

a place out here."

"But isn't it better to give them that

choice?” I asked.

“Is it?”

My head was pounding, and my shoulders ached. By the

time I finally thought of something to say, Liam was climbing

up onto his knees.

“What are you still doing here?” Not upset or angry. Not

anymore.

“Watching your back.”

He shook his head, a sad smile on his face. “You’ve got better things to worry about.”

“I’m really sorry.” The words tumbled out of me in a breath-

less rush. “I shouldn’t have opened his letter. It was none of my

business. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No— *no*, I’m the one that’s sorry. I didn’t mean to blow up

at you. God, it was like Dad was talking through me. I’m so, so

sorry.”

Liam looked down, and when he looked back at me, his lips

were pressed tight together. I thought he might cry or scream,

and felt myself sway forward at the same time he took another

dangerous step toward me. It made me feel boneless to meet his

gaze straight-on, but I wanted the truth of him, even as I worried

the intensity of his gaze would burn me.

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“Come on, let’s go back.” He shook his head. “I’m fine. I

shouldn’t have left those two alone again.”

“I think you need another minute,” I said. “And I think you

should take it. Because when you get back in that car, you’ll have people depending on you.”

He tried to reach for my arm, but I took a

step back.

“I don’t know what you’re—” he began.
God, I wanted to

take his hand when he offered it. Mine
were frozen, needled

with pain.

“Here—” I motioned between us. “This
is a place where you

don’t need to lie. I meant what I said
before, but I can’t help you

if you don’t tell me what’s really going
on inside your head. If

you need to talk or vent or scream, do it to me. Don't just get

up and go like that again—like you always do. I know you think

you're protecting us, but Lee, what happens if one of these days

you go off and don't come back?"

He took a step toward me, his eyes darkening with some-

thing I didn't recognize. It never occurred to me how tall he was,

but he seemed to tower over me then, leaning down until our

faces were level with each other. I could see what I would have

done if our situation had been different. If I had been in control

of myself. I could see what he wanted.

What *I* wanted.

My foot slipped against a rock as I stepped away, my back

scraping against the wall, my head sending me spiraling into

panic. It was trilling in anticipation, relishing how close he was.

Maybe his anger had evaporated, but whatever he was feeling

now was stronger than before, stronger than pain or frustration

or fury. The words *Get away from me* and *Don't* were stuck in my

tight chest, wedged between terror and want. Liam's lips formed

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my name, but there was nothing outside of the blood rushing in

my ears.

I tried one last time to wrench myself away, but my knees,

the traitors, buckled under me. Spots in every shade of the rain-

bow popped and burst in front of my eyes.

And that's when he grabbed me, only this time it was to hold

me up, not pull me to him. It didn't matter. The moment his

hands circled my waist, he was gone.





EIGHTEEN

My eyes were shut, but I could imagine what

must have happened. How his pupils must have shrunk and then

dilated, open and vulnerable. Waiting for a command.

Liam's mind was a blur of colors and lights. One moment I

was standing next to a young, blond boy in overalls, clutching a

woman's hand. Then I was balancing on the front bumper of an

old car as a gentle-faced man with strong arms pointed out the

engine. I saw the face of a kid rocket back as I punched him in

the nose, heard a roar of approval from a circle of boys formed

around us. I stared at Chubs's long legs as they hung over the

edge of the top bunk, and then I was standing in front of Black

Betty, watching Zu climb into the backseat, looking frail and

hungry.

And then I was seeing me.

I was seeing me with the sunlight
reflecting off my dark hair,

laughing my fool head off in the
passenger seat. I didn't know I

could look like that.

No.

No.

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No! I don't want to see—

I slapped him across the face. The sound
echoed up through

the tree branches. Pain flared in my
hand, spreading quickly up

my arm to the center of my chest. I heard
something else, too—a

snap, like dried out wishbone being
pulled apart. I reeled back, as

if he had been the one to hit me. I almost
wished he had, because

the pain would have distracted me from
the dizzy disorientation

that came next.

I panicked. I knew from countless experiences at Thurmond

that the best way to break a connection was to do it slowly,

carefully. Unravel the invisible threads linking us together one

by one. Wasn't this exactly what had happened with Sam? One

wrong touch and I had pulled back so hard and so fast from her

mind that I ripped away every single trace of me.

Wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

The pain lessened the farther I dragged myself away from

him.

“Ruby?”

Why did I always have to do this? Why couldn't I just hold

it together *for once?*

Liam was staring at me. *A t* me, not through me. He looked

focused, if not completely bewildered. My eyes fell on the red

welt forming on his cheek.

Had I heard that right? My name?

“What the hell just happened?” He let out a strangled laugh.

“I feel like I just got hit by a linebacker.”

“I slipped—” What could I possibly say? The truth was on

the tip of my tongue, dangling there, but if he knew, if he knew

what I had just done to him . . .

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“And there I was, trying to be all valiant and stuff by catching

you?” He chuckled, using the closest tree to help him stand. “Les-

son learned! You’re falling next time, darlin’, because, *man*, you

have a hard head . . .”

“I’m sorry.” I whispered. “I’m so, so sorry . . .”

Liam stopped laughing. “Green . . . you know I’m just kid-

ding, right? Really, it takes a special kind of guy to get knocked

out by the same person he's trying to catch. Aside from bring-

ing back a few humiliating memories of school sports, I'm fine,

honestly—what?"

Do you even remember what we were talking about?

"Oh my God," he said, all of a sudden noticing I was still on

the ground. "Are *you* okay? I can't believe I didn't even ask—are

you hurt?”

I avoided the hand he offered. It was too soon.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I think we should head back now. You left

Betty running.”

My voice sounded calm, but inwardly I was such a desert. All

of the hope that had sprung there, growing and spreading and

yielding like a stream, had dried up in an instant. I had slipped

up, but he didn't know. They never did.

This couldn't happen again—I was lucky this time; he still

remembered *me*, even if he couldn't recall what I had done, but

there was no guaranteeing that luck would hold.

No more touching. No more fingers brushing against arms,

or shoulders pressed against shoulders. No more taking his hand,

no matter how warm or big it was.

That alone was a reason to find this Slip
Kid. To beg him to
help me.

“Yeah . . . yeah.” He nodded, but I didn’t
miss the way his

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brows furrowed when he looked my way
again, or the grinding

ache in my chest when he passed by and
didn’t let his hand reach

for mine.

I stayed five steps in front of him as we made our way back

around the rest stop, past the water fountains, through the silver

benches and tables under the overhang. I moved faster, practi-

cally jogging as I came around the corner. I half expected to see

Chubs and Zu outside trying to rig the vending machines into

burping up whatever snacks they had left.

But it wasn't Chubs waiting there for

me, and it certainly

wasn't Zu.

Dark hair, darker eyes. A man that couldn't have been older

than twenty-five, with a scar that began just under his right

eye and raced up to his hairline, where the shiny pink skin had

prevented any hair from growing back. My brain processed his

features one by one, in agonizing slowness. I watched as his face

twisted, turning his narrow nose up in disgust.

Liam called my name in a panic, his feet thundering against

the cement. *Run*, I wanted to scream to him, *What are you doing?*

Run! I turned back to face the man—the skiptracer—in his wrin-

kled blue Windbreaker just in time to see the butt of his rifle

flying down toward my face, knocking every thought clear out

of my skull.

Pain blinded me, flashing white beneath my eyelids. But I was

down, not out. When the man tried to haul me up by the front

of my shirt, I swung a leg around and caught him by the ankles.

He landed on the ground with a grunt, his gun clattering against

a nearby patch of rocks. I kicked until I made contact with some-

thing solid. I knew it wasn't enough.

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I tried pushing myself up to my feet, but
the world swung

wild and loose under me. My head
throbbed and something hot

and wet poured down over my right eye
—blood. I could taste it

then, just as plainly as I felt the air move
as Liam lifted the man

clear off the ground with a wave of his
hand. He threw him like

a rag doll into the sharp edges of the
picnic tables, knocking the

skiptracer out in a single blow.

Zu, Chubs, Zu, Chubs, my mind was stuck on a loop. I pressed

a hand against my forehead, to the place where the gun had

burst the skin in a jagged line.

I don't know what happened next. It felt like my head was

skipping seconds as we moved. At one point, I think Liam must

have tried help me up, but I pushed him away with clumsy, slow

hands.

Run! I tried to say. *Get out of here!*

“Ruby— *Ruby.*” Liam was trying to get my attention, because

he hadn’t seen what was up ahead.

Zu and Chubs were sitting on the ground, outside of Betty.

Their hands were handcuffed behind their backs and their feet

tied straight out in front of them with a length of bright yellow

rope. Standing over them was none other

than Lady Jane.

This was the first time I had seen her up close—close enough,

at least, that I could make out the beauty mark on her cheek,

and the sunken quality to her eyes behind the black frames of her

glasses. Her dark hair was down around her shoulders and curl-

ing with the humidity, but her skin still looked as though it had

been pulled taut over the sharp angles of her face. Her black shirt

was tucked neatly into her jeans, and a black utility belt was there

to keep them both in place. I recognized the countless devices

hanging from them. The orange identifier, a Taser, handcuffs . . .

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“Hello, Liam Stewart,” the woman said, her accent cold and

silky.

Next to me, Liam braced his feet and

threw his arms up—to

knock her back, I think. The woman only tsk-tsked, nodding

a head toward her outstretched left arm. My eyes followed its

angle downward, to the gun pointed at Zu's head.

“Lee—” Chubs's voice was unnaturally high, but it was the

look in Zu's eyes that planted me in place.

“Come here,” the woman said. “Slowly, with your hands on

top of your head— *now*, Liam,
otherwise I can't be sure that my

finger won't slip." She cocked her head
to the side.

Panic, I thought, *the panic button—*
where? My backpack was

somewhere tucked under the front
passenger seat. If I could get

to it, if I could reach the door—

"Yeah?" Liam spat. "And what's the
going rate for me these

days? How much did it get cut back
when it took you three

weeks to finally catch up to us?”

Her smile faltered, but returned with far more teeth than

before. “You’re still at a healthy two hundred and fifty thousand

dollars, love. You should feel proud of that. You barely fetched

me ten thousand the first time around.”

Liam was vibrating with rage, too choked up to speak. I

heard his breath catch in his throat. I suddenly understood how

he had known so much about her—this was the same woman

who had captured him before.

“You can’t imagine my surprise when your name popped

back up in the bounty database—and with that kind of reward?

It seems that you’ve gotten yourself in a fair bit of trouble since

we last met.”

“Yeah, well,” Liam said, his voice rough. “I do my best.”

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“But darling, how could you be stupid enough to go back to

that place? Didn’t you think I’d look for you there?” The woman

cocked her head to the side. “Your friends were only too willing

to tell me where you were headed and why in exchange for let-

ting them go. Lake Prince, is it?”

My pain gave way again to fear. *If she*

finds East River . . .

God, I couldn't even imagine the consequences.

Liam could, from the look of it. His knuckles were white

with the effort it took him to keep his fingers clutched in his

hair.

“If I can pull in that much for you, imagine what I'll get for

a whole *camp* full of kids,” she said.

“Enough to finally buy my

way home, I think, so thank you for that.
You have no idea what

kind of funds it takes to get an official to
look the other way and

admit someone from a disease-ridden
country.”

The next second of silence that passed
was deafening, only

because I knew exactly what he would
say next.

“If you let them all go, you can have
me,” he said, both

hands still on his head. “I won’t give you

any trouble.”

“*No!*” Chubs shouted. “Don’t—”

The woman didn’t even need a moment to consider it. “You

think I’m going to do *you* any favors? No, Liam Stewart, I’m

going to take all of you, even that girl of yours—maybe you

should consider her condition before you try to bargain?”

His eyes slid my way, taking in the blood streaking down my

face. I tried to keep my vision straight as
I took the tiniest step
forward.

“I don’t know where you came from,
little girl, but I can

assure you that where you’re going
won’t be nearly as pleasant.”

I’m not going back.

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None of us were. Not if I could help it.

“Come here,” she said, her eyes on me, but her gun still

trained on Liam. “You first, little girl. I’ll take special care of you.”

I went one step at a time, ignoring Liam’s sharp intake of

breath and the buzzing in my ears. My eyes went from Chubs,

to Zu, to the woman’s all-too-pleased face. Everyone was watch-

ing me.

Everyone will know.

And no one would be willing to have me after that.

“Turn around,” the woman barked. Her eyes flickered over

to where her partner was still hidden behind a tangle of picnic

tables. I saw her grip relax ever so slightly on her handgun with

her focus torn, and I took my chance.

My knee flew up, nailing her just under her chest. The gun

clattered to the ground, and I heard Liam take two running steps

in my direction, but somehow I was faster. Blood was alive and

warm on my face, dripping from my chin. The woman's eyes

widened as my hand closed over her exposed throat, slamming

her back against Betty's door. When her gaze met mine, I knew

I had her. The pain that exploded behind my eyes told me so.

Slipping into her head was as easy as releasing a sigh. Seeing

her pupils shrink and explode back out

to their normal size, it felt

as though someone had wrapped a line of barbed wire around

my brain, and was tightening it with every passing second.

Chubs's face appeared at the corner of my vision, eyes wide.

When he tried to stand, I knocked him back down with my foot.

No. It wasn't safe. Not yet.

The woman looked around, her eyes wide and unfocused.

That's when the pounding began in my ears. *Da-duh, da-duh,*

da-duh, da-duh . . . I couldn't tell if it was my heart or hers.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“Hand him your gun,” I said, tilting my head toward the place

I knew Liam was standing. When she didn't move, I pushed the

image of her doing it through the bubbling black shapes of her

mind. I couldn't bring myself to look at his reaction as the black

weapon was placed in his outstretched hand.

“Listen to me very carefully,” I said. The blood was bitter

in my mouth. “You are going to turn and walk back across the

highway. You are . . . going to walk into that forest and keep

walking until an hour passes . . . and you are going to sit down

in the middle of it and not move. You're

not going to eat . . . or

sleep . . . or drink, no matter how much you want to. You're not

going to move."

Imagining that into her mind, pushing the thought of her

doing exactly that, was becoming more difficult. Not because

my grip on her was slipping, but because my grip on conscious-

ness was.

You can do this, I told myself. It didn't

matter that no one

had ever taught me, or that I had never practiced. In the end, it

was all instinct. Like I had known all along.

I closed my eyes and went to work sorting through the dark-

ened memories bubbling up behind her eyes. I found myself

driving down the highway, one hand on the wheel, the other

pointing to the rest stop up ahead. I parked the car a ways back,

half hidden by the trees, and began to walk toward the lone

black van in the parking lot. I stayed with this memory, taking

in the scent of rain and grass, feeling the light breeze, until her

partner reached the van, his rifle up and ready to fire.

I forced the memory out of her mind, imagining nothing

but air where Black Betty had been in the parking lot. I traced

the line of memories back to the boys at

Walmart, to the secret

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they had revealed about East River. The images slipped away in

smears of light, like raindrops racing down a car window.

“Now, you’re . . . you won’t remember any of this, or any of us.”

“I won’t remember any of this. . . .” she parroted, as though

the thought had just occurred to her.

I let go of her neck, but my pain didn't go away. Her eyes

regained some of their focus. The pain didn't go away. She

turned sharply on her heel and started to make her way toward

the deserted highway.

The pain didn't go away.

No, it got worse. A trickle of sweat began at my temple and

worked its way down the length of my

spine. I was drenched.

My hair clung to my face. My shirt was a second skin. I dropped

into a crouch. If I was going to faint, it was better to stay close

to the ground.

God, I don't want to faint. Don't faint. Do. Not. Faint . . .

I heard Liam say something. His foot came into my line of

sight, and I leaned away.

“Don’t—” I began. *Don't touch me. Not*

right now.

And it was strange, because the last thing I saw before I

closed my eyes wasn't the old asphalt, it wasn't the sky, or even

my reflection in Betty's panels. It was a glimmering memory

of my own. Of a few days before, when Liam had been in the

driver's seat, singing along to Derek and the Dominos' "Layla" at

the top of his lungs, so off-key that it had even Chubs laughing.

Zu had been sitting right behind him,
moving in time with the

music, her entire body rocking out to the
wailing electric guitar.

And it had been so easy then, to laugh
and pretend, even if just

for a second, that we would be okay.
That I belonged with them.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

Because they hadn't known—none of
them had known, and

now that they did, it was over. It was all over now, and I would

never have that back.

I wished that I had gone for the panic button. I wished that

Cate could come and take me away from them, back to the only

people who would ever embrace me for the monster I was.





NINETEEN

When I was about to turn ten years old,
the

most significant thing about that number
was that it was double-

digits. It didn't really feel much like a
birthday, anyway. At

dinner, I sat bookended by my parents at
the table, moving

peas around my plate, trying to ignore
the fact that neither of

them were speaking—to each other, or
to me. Mom's eyes were

rimmed with red and glassy over the
argument they'd had a

half hour before; she was still valiantly
trying to gather up kids

for a surprise birthday party for me, but
Dad forced her to call

and cancel. Said it wasn't the kind of
year to be celebrating,

and, as the last kid alive on my block, it
would be cruel of us

to hang the birthday banner and tie up the
usual cluster of bal-

loons outside. I heard the whole thing

from the top of the stairs.

I didn't really care about the birthday either way. It wasn't

like I had anyone left I really wanted to invite. What was more

important to me was the fact that, at ten, I was suddenly *old*—

or rather, would be old *soon*. I'd start to look like the girls in

the magazines, be forced to wear dresses and high heels and

makeup—go to *high school*.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“In ten years from tomorrow, I’ll be twenty.” I don’t know

why I said it out loud. It was just this profound realization, and

it had to be shared.

The silence that followed was actually painful. Mom sat

straight up and pressed her napkin to her mouth. For a moment

I thought she might stand up and leave,

but Dad's hand came

down to rest on top of hers, settling her like an anchor.

Dad finished chewing on his barbecued chicken before giv-

ing me a smile that quivered at the edges. He leaned down a

ways so our identical green eyes met. "That's right, Little Bee.

And how old will you be ten years after that?"

"Thirty," I said. "And you'll be . . . fifty-two!"

He chuckled. “That’s right! Halfway to the—”

Grave, my mind whispered. *Halfway to the grave*. Dad real-

ized his mistake before the word fully left his mouth, but it didn’t

matter. All three of us knew what he meant.

Grave.

I knew what death was. I knew what happened after you

died. At school, they brought in special visitors to talk to the kids

that came back. The one assigned to our room, Miss Finch, gave

her presentation two weeks before Christmas, wearing a bright

pink turtleneck and glasses that covered half of her face. She

wrote everything out on the whiteboard, in thick, capital letters.

death is not sleeping. it happens to everyone. it could happen

at any time. you do not come back.

When people die, she explained, they stop breathing. They

do not have to eat, they no longer speak,
and they cannot think

or miss us like we miss them. They do
not, ever, *ever* wake up.

She kept giving us more examples, like
we were too stupid or

little to understand—like the six of us
left hadn't sat there and

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watched Grace's lights go out. Dead cats
cannot purr, and dead

dogs cannot play. Dead flowers—Miss Finch pointed to the

bundle of dried flowers on my teacher's desk—do not grow or

bloom anymore. Hours of this. Hours of being asked, *Do you*

understand? But for all of her answers, she never got around to

the one question I had wanted to ask.

“What does it feel like?”

Dad looked up sharply. “What does what feel like?”

I looked down at my plate. “To die. Do you feel it? I know

that it’s not the same for everyone, and that you stop breathing

and your heart stops beating, but what does that feel like?”

“Ruby!” I could hear the horror in Mom’s voice.

“It’s okay if it hurts,” I said, “but are you still in your body

after things stop working? Do you know that you’ve died?”

“Ruby!”

Dad's bushy eyebrows drew together as his shoulders

slumped. "Well . . ."

"Don't you dare," Mom said, using her free hand to try to

pry his big one off her other trembling fingers. "Jacob, don't you

dare—"

I kept my hands clenched together under the table, trying

not to stare at Mom's face as it paled from a deep red to a stark

white.

“No one . . .” Dad began. “No one knows, sweetheart. I can’t

give you an answer. Everyone finds out when it’s their time. I

guess it probably depends—”

“*Stop it!*” Mom said, slapping her other hand down on the

table. Our plates jumped in time with her palm. “Ruby, go to

your room!”

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“Calm down,” Dad told her in a stern voice. “This is important to talk about.”

“It is not! It absolutely is not! How dare you? First you can-

cel the party, and when I told you—” She strained against his

grip. I watched, my lips parting, as she picked up her water glass

and threw it at his head. In ducking, he lifted his hand from the

table, just enough for her to wrench away and stand. Her chair

clattered to the ground a second after the glass shattered against

the wall behind Dad's head.

I screamed—I didn't mean to, but it slipped out. Mom came

around to my side of the table and grabbed me by the elbow,

hauling me up, nearly taking the tablecloth with me.

“Cut it out,” I heard Dad say, “*Stop!* We have to talk to her

about it! The doctors said we needed to prepare her!”

“You’re hurting me,” I managed to choke out. Mom startled

at the sound of my voice, looking down at where her nails were

digging into the soft skin of my upper arm.

“Oh my God . . .” she said, but I was already in the hallway,

flying up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door shut and lock-

ing it behind me, closing out the sound of

my parents screaming

at each other.

I dove under my heavy purple bed covers, knocking the row

of carefully arranged stuffed animals to the ground. I didn't

bother to change out of the clothes I had worn to school or turn

off the lights, not until I was sure they were still in the kitchen,

and far away from me.

An hour later, breathing the same hot air

under the com-

forter in and out, listening to the rattle of
the air vent, I thought

about the other significant thing about
turning ten.

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

Grace had been ten. So had Frankie, and
Peter, and Mario,

and Ramona. So had half of my class, the
half that never came

back after Christmas. *Ten is the most*

common age for IAAN to

manifest, I had overheard a newscaster saying, but the affliction

can claim anyone between the ages of eight and fourteen.

I straightened my legs out and pressed my arms in at my

side. I held my breath and shut my eyes, staying as still as pos-

sible. *Dead.* Miss Finch had described it like a series of stops and

nots. Stopped breathing. Not moving. Stopped heart. Not sleep-

ing. It didn't seem like it should have been that simple.

“When a loved one dies, they don't get to wake up,” she

had said. “There are no comebacks or do-overs. You may wish

they can come back, but it's important that you understand they

can't, and that they won't.”

Tears slipped down the side of my face, dripping into my

ears and hair. I turned to the side, smashing a pillow over my

face, trying to block out the screaming
match downstairs. Were

they coming up to my room to yell at me?
Once or twice I heard

heavy footsteps on the stairs, but then
Dad's voice would float

up to me, booming and terrible, yelling
words I didn't like or

understand. Mom sounded like she was
being gutted.

I drew my legs up to my chest and
pressed my face against

my knees. For every two breaths I was

taking in, I was lucky to

get one out. Inside my chest, my heart
had been racing for what

felt like hours, jumping with every
shatter or thud from down-

stairs. I stuck my head over the covers
just once, to make sure

that I had locked the door. That would
make them every angrier

if they tried it, but I didn't care.

My head felt light and heavy all at once,
but worst of all was

the pounding. The *dum-dum-dum* at the back of my head, like

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something was inside of me knocking against my skull, trying to

break out.

“Stop it,” I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut against the

pain. My hands were shaking so hard I couldn’t keep them over

my ears. “Please, please *stop!*”

Hours later, when my feet carried me downstairs, I found

them in their dark bedroom, deep into sleep. I stood in the sliver

of light coming through their open doorway, waiting to see if

they would wake up. I had half a mind to climb into bed between

them like I used to do, into that small space between them that

I knew was warm and safe. But Dad had told me I was too big

to be doing such silly things.

So instead, I walked over to my Mom's side of the bed and

kissed her good night. Her cheek was slick with rosemary-scented

cream, cool and smooth to the touch. The instant I pressed my

lips there, I jumped back, a flash of white burning inside my

eyelids. For one strange second, the image of my own face had

leaped to the front of a long series of jumbled thoughts, then

disappeared, like a photo drifting into

dark water. Her blanket

must have shocked me—the jolt traveled
all the way up to my

brain, flashing it white for a second.

She must not have felt it, because she
didn't wake up. Nei-

ther did Dad, even when the same
strange thing happened.

As I made my way back upstairs, the
tightness in my chest

vanished, lifting away with the
comforter as I kicked it to the

floor. The head-splitting pain released its grip on my brain, leav-

ing me feeling like my tank had run empty. I had to close my

eyes to block out the sight of my room swaying in the darkness.

And then it was morning. My alarm went off at seven exactly,

switching over to the radio, just as Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow

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The Darkest Minds

Brick Road” was starting. I remember sitting straight up in bed,

more surprised than anything. I touched my face, my chest. The

room seemed unnaturally bright for so early in the morning

despite the curtains being closed, and within only a few minutes,

the headache had crept back in, claws out.

I rolled out of bed and onto the floor, my stomach turning

with me. I waited until the dark spots

had stopped floating in

my eyes and tried to swallow to ease my dry throat. I knew this

feeling—I knew what the clenching in my guts meant. Sick. I

was sick on my birthday.

I stumbled out of bed, changing into my Batman pj's on

the way to the door. Mom would be even angrier at me if she

knew I had slept in my nice button-down shirt; it was wrinkled

and drenched in sweat, despite the cold
clinging to my bedroom

window. Maybe she'd feel bad about the
night before, and let me

stay home to show how sorry she was.

I wasn't even halfway down the stairs
when I saw the wreck-

age in the living room. From the landing,
it looked like a pack of

animals had gotten in and had a field day
throwing around pil-

lows, overturning an armchair, and
smashing every single glass

candleholder that had been on the now-cracked coffee table.

Every picture on the fireplace mantle was face down on the

ground, as were the line of school portraits my Mom had placed

on the table behind the couch. And then there were the books.

Dozens of them. Mom must have emptied out every book in

her library in her anger. They littered the ground like rainbow

candy.

But as scary as that room was, I didn't feel like throwing up

until I reached the last step and smelled bacon, not pancakes.

We didn't have many traditions as a family, but chocolate

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

pancakes on birthdays was one of them, and the one we were

least likely to forget. For the past three years they'd forgotten to

leave out milk and cookies for Santa,
somehow forgotten their

pact that we would go camping every
Fourth of July weekend,

and even, on occasion, forgot to
celebrate St. Patrick's Day. But

forgetting the birthday pancakes?

Or maybe she was just mad enough at me
not to make them.

Maybe she hated me after what I had
said last night.

Mom had her back to me when I walked
into the kitchen,

shielding my eyes from the sunlight streaming through the win-

dow above the sink. Her dark hair was pulled back into a low,

messy bun, resting against the collar of her red robe. I had a

matching one; dad had bought them for Christmas the month

before. “Ruby red for my Ruby,” he had said.

She was humming under her breath, one hand flipping the

bacon on the stove, the other holding a

folded newspaper. What-

ever song was stuck in her head was upbeat, chipper, and, for a

moment, I really did think the stars had aligned for me. She was

over last night. She was going to let me stay home. After months

of being angry and upset over the tiniest things, she was finally

happy again.

“Mom?” Then again, louder. “Mom?”

She turned around so quickly, she

knocked the pan off the

stove and nearly dropped the gray paper
into the open flame

there. I saw her reach back and slap her
hand against the knobs,

twisting a dial until the smell of gas
disappeared.

“I don’t feel good. Can I stay home
today?”

No response, not even a blink. Her jaw
was working, grind-

ing, but it took me walking over to the
table and sitting down for

her to find her voice. “How—how did you get in here?”

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The Darkest Minds

“I have a bad headache and my stomach hurts,” I told her,

putting my elbows up on the table. I knew she hated when I

whined, but I didn’t think she hated it enough to come over and

grab me by the arm again.

“I asked you how you got in here, young

lady. What's your

name?" Her voice sounded strange.
"Where do you live?"

Her grip on my skin only tightened the
longer I waited to

answer. It had to have been a joke, right?
Was she sick, too?

Sometimes cold medicine did funny
things to her.

Funny things, though. Not scary things.

"Can you tell me your name?" she
repeated.

“Ouch!” I yelped, trying to pull my arm away. “Mom, what’s wrong?”

She yanked me up from the table, forcing me onto my feet.

“Where are your parents? How did you get in this house?”

Something tightened in my chest to the point of snapping.

“Mom, Mommy, why—”

“Stop it,” she hissed, “stop calling me that!”

“What are you—?” I think I must have tried to say some-

thing else, but she dragged me over to the door that led out

into the garage. My feet slid against the wood, skin burning.

“Wh-what’s wrong with you?” I cried. I tried twisted out of her

grasp, but she wouldn’t even look at me. Not until we were at

the door to the garage and she pushed my back up against it.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard

way. I know you're

confused, but I promise that I'm not your mother. I don't know

how you got into this house, and, frankly, I'm not sure I want

to know—"

"I live here!" I told her. "I live here! I'm *Ruby!*"

When she looked at me again, I saw none of the things that

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made Mom my mother. The lines that formed around her eyes

when she smiled were smoothed out, and her jaw was clenched

around whatever she wanted to say next. When she looked at

me, she didn't see *me*. I wasn't invisible, but I wasn't Ruby.

“Mom.” I started to cry. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be bad.

I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry! Please, I promise I’ll be good—I’ll go

to school today and won’t be sick and

I'll pick up my room. I'm

sorry, please remember. *Please!*”

She put one hand on my shoulder and the other on the door

handle. “My husband is a police officer. He'll be able to help you

get home. Wait in here—and don't touch anything.”

The door opened and I was pushed into a wall of freezing

January air. I stumbled down onto the dirty, oil-stained concrete,

just managing to catch myself before I slammed into the side of

her car. I heard the door shut behind me, and the lock click in

place. Heard her call Dad's name as clearly as I heard the birds

in the bushes outside the dark garage.

She hadn't even turned on the light for me.

I pushed myself up onto my hands and knees, ignoring the

bite of the frosty air on my bare skin. I launched myself in the

direction of the door, fumbling around until I found it. I tried

shaking the handle, jiggling it, still thinking, hoping, praying that

this was some big birthday surprise, and that by the time I got

back inside, there would be a plate of pancakes at the table and

Dad would bring in the presents, and we could—we could—we

could pretend like the night before had never happened, even

with the evidence in the next room over.

The door was locked.

“I’m sorry!” I was screaming. Pounding my fists against it.

“Mommy, I’m sorry! Please!”

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

Dad appeared a moment later, his stocky shape outlined by

the light from inside of the house. I saw Mom’s bright red face

over his shoulder; he turned to wave her off and then reached

over to flip on the overhead lights.

“Dad!” I said, throwing my arms around his waist. He let me

keep them there, but all I got in return was a light pat on the

back.

“You’re safe,” he told me, in his usual soft, rumbling voice.

“Dad—there’s something wrong with her,” I was babbling.

The tears were burning my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to be bad! You

have to fix her, okay? She's . . . she's . .
.”
.

“I know, I believe you.”

At that, he carefully peeled my arms off
his uniform and

guided me down, so we were sitting on
the step, facing Mom's

maroon sedan. He was fumbling in his
pockets for something,

listening to me as I told him everything
that had happened since

I walked into the kitchen. He pulled out
a small pad of paper

from his pocket.

“Daddy,” I tried again, but he cut me off, putting down an

arm between us. I understood— *no touching*. I had seen him do

something like this before, on Take Your Child to Work Day at

the station. The way he spoke, the way he wouldn’t let me touch

him—I had watched him treat another kid this way, only that one

had a black eye and a broken nose. That kid had been a stranger.

Any hope I had felt bubbling up inside me burst into a thou-

sand tiny pieces.

“Did your parents tell you that you’d been bad?” he asked,

when he could get a word in. “Did you leave your house because

you were afraid they would hurt you?”

I pushed myself up off the ground. *This is my house!* I wanted

to scream. *You are my parents!* My throat felt like it had closed

up on itself.

“You can talk to me,” he said, very gently. “I won’t let anyone

hurt you. I just need your name, and then we can go down to

the station and make some calls—”

I don’t know what part of what he was saying finally broke

me, but before I could stop myself, I had launched my fists against

him, hitting him over and over, like that would drive some sense

back into him. “I am your *kid!*” I screamed. “I’m *Ruby!*”

“You’ve got to calm down, Ruby,” he told me, catching

my wrists. “It’ll be okay. I’ll call ahead to the station, and then

we’ll go.”

“No!” I shrieked. “No!”

He pulled me off him again and stood, making his way to the

door again. My nails caught the back of his hand and I heard him

grunt in pain. He didn't turn back around as he shut the door.

I stood alone in the garage, less than ten feet away from my

blue bike. From the tent that we had used to camp in dozens of

time, from the sled I'd almost broken my arm on. All around

the garage and house were pieces of me, but Mom and Dad—

they couldn't put them together. They

didn't see the completed
puzzle standing in front of them.

But, eventually, they must have seen the
pictures of me in

the living room, or gone up to my mess
of the room.

“—that's not my child, Ruby!” I could
hear my mom yell-

ing through the walls. She was talking to
Grams, she had to be.

Grams would set her straight. “I have no
child! She's not mine—

I already called them, don't— *stop it!*
I'm *not crazy!*”

I had to hide. I couldn't let him take me
to the police station,

but I also couldn't dial 911 to get them
help. Maybe if I waited it

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out, they'd get better on their own? I
dashed toward the storage

tubs on the other side of the garage,
squeezing past the front

of Mom's car. One, maybe two steps more, and I would have

jumped inside the closest tub and buried myself under a pile of

blankets. The garage door rolled open first.

Not all the way, just enough that I could see the snow on

the driveway and grass and the bottom half of a dark uniform. I

squinted, holding a hand up to the blinding blanket of white light

that seemed to settle over my vision. My

head started pounding,

a thousand times worse than before.

The man in the dark uniform knelt down in the snow, his

eyes hidden by sunglasses. I hadn't seen him before, but I cer-

tainly hadn't met all the police officers at my dad's station. This

one looked older. *Harder*, I remembered thinking.

He waved me forward again, saying, "We're here to help

you. Please come outside.”

I took a tentative step, then another. This man is a police

officer, I told myself, Mom and Dad are sick, and they need

help. His navy uniform looked darker the closer I got, like it was

drenched straight through with rain. “My parents . . .”

The officer didn’t let me finish. “Come out here, honey.

You’re safe now.”

It wasn't until my bare toes brushed up
against the snow, and

the man had wrapped my long hair
around his fist and yanked

me through the opening, that I even
realized his uniform was

black.

When I finally came to in the gray light, I
knew by the curve of

my wayback seat and the smell of fake
lemon detergent that I

was back in Betty.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

The van wasn't on and running, and the road wasn't passing

underneath me, but the keys had been left in the ignition and

the radio was on. Bob Dylan whispered the opening verse of

“Forever Young” through the speakers.

The song cut off abruptly, replaced by the DJ's flustered

voice.

“—*sorry about that.*” The man let out a nervous, breathy

laugh. “*I don’t know why the system brought that one up. It’s on*

the no-play list. Uh . . . back to . . . the music. This one’s a request

from Bill out in Suffolk. Here’s ‘We Gotta Get Out of This Place’ by

the Animals.”

I opened one eye, and tried to sit up with zero success. The

throbbing in my head was so brutal, I had to clench my teeth to

keep from getting sick all over myself. A
good five minutes must

have passed before I felt strong enough
to reach up and touch

the pain's epicenter on my right temple.
My fingers brushed

against the jagged, raised surface of my
skin, feeling each coarse

stitch holding it together.

Chubs.

I pulled my right arm in front of me. It
flopped around, use-

less and asleep, until the blood began to fill it again. From there

it was fire and needles. But the pain was good. It roused the rest

of me from its stubborn sleep.

It didn't let me forget.

I should go, I thought. Now, before they get back. The

thought of seeing any of their faces made my chest feel like it

was going to explode.

They know.

They know.

I did start to cry then. I wasn't proud of it, but I knew I

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couldn't go through this again and come out of it in one piece.

Footsteps sounded outside.

“—saying it's too dangerous.” Chubs.

“We need to consider

getting rid of her.”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now.” Liam sounded agitated.

I used one of the seat belts to pull me upright. The sliding door was wide open, giving me a perfect view of where Chubs and Liam stood in front of a small fire, ringed by a series of mismatched stones. The sky was dipping into night.

“When *are* we going to talk about it, then?” Chubs said.

“Never? We’re just going to pretend like it never happened?”

“Zu will be back soon—”

“Good!” Chubs shouted. “Good! This is her decision, too—

this is all of our decision, not just yours!”

Liam’s face was as red as I had ever seen it. “What the hell

are we supposed to do, just *dump* her here?”

Yes, I thought. That’s exactly what you should do. And I had

started to climb over the middle seats to tell them that much

when Chubs lurched forward, throwing Liam onto his back with-

out touching him. Unfazed, Liam pressed his mouth into a tight

line, raised his hand, and literally pulled the ground out from

under his friend's feet. Chubs hit the dirt with a sharp gasp, too

stunned to do anything but lay there.

Liam stayed on the ground, too, pressing his fists against his

eyes.

“Why are you doing this to us?” Chubs cried. “Do you *want* to get caught?”

“I know, I know,” he said. “This is my fault. I should have been more careful . . .”

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“Why didn’t you just *tell* me?” Chubs continued. “Did you

know this whole time? Why lie about it?
Do you even want to
get home, or—?”

“Charles!”

His name cracked as it left my throat. I
didn’t think I

sounded anything like myself, but the
boys recognized me at

once. Chubs’s face lost some of its heat
as he turned to where I

stood clutching the minivan’s sun-
warmed frame. Liam pushed

himself up off the ground.

“I’m gonna go, so you—don’t fight anymore, okay?” I said.

“I’m sorry I lied to you. I know I should have left, but I wanted

to help you get home because you had helped me, and I’m sorry,

I’m so, so, sorry—”

“Ruby,” Chubs said, then again, louder, “Ruby! Oh, for the

love of . . . we were talking about Black Betty, not your Orange

ass.”

I froze. “I just . . . I thought . . . I understand why you would

leave me behind . . .”

“Huh?” Liam looked horrified. “We left the radio on in case

you woke up, so you’d know that we *didn’t* leave you.”

God help me, that only made me cry harder.

When a girl cries, few things are more worthless than a boy.

Having two of them just meant that they stared at each other

helplessly instead of at me. Chubs and Liam stood, up to their

ears in awkward, until Chubs finally reached out and patted my

head like he would have patted a dog.

“You thought that we wanted to get rid of you because you’re

not really Green?” Liam sounded like he was having a hard time

wrapping his head around that. “I mean, I’m not thrilled you didn’t

trust us enough to tell us the truth, but that was your secret.”

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“I trust you, I do,” I said, “but I didn’t want you to think that

I had forced my way in or manipulated you. I didn’t want you

to be afraid of me.”

“Okay, first?” Liam said. “Why would we think that you

pulled a Jedi mind trick on us to let you

stay? We voted— *we*

asked *you*. Second, what in the name of God's green earth is

wrong with being Orange?"

"You have no idea—" *What I'm capable of.*

"Exactly," Chubs cut in. "We have no idea, but it's not like

we're going to win any awards for normalcy anytime soon. So

you get into people's heads? The two of us can throw people

around like toys. Zu once blew up an AC unit, and all she did was walk by it.”

It wasn't the same, and they didn't understand that.

“I can't always control it like you can,” I said. “And some-

times I do things—*bad* things. I see things I shouldn't. I turn

people into things they aren't. It's horrible. When I'm in some-

one's head, it's like quicksand; the more I try to pull free, the

more damage I do.”

Chubs started to say something, only to stop. Liam leaned

down so his face was level with mine, so close that our foreheads

were nearly touching. “We want you,” he said, his hand slipping

through my hair to cup the back of my neck. “We wanted you

yesterday, we want you today, and we’ll want you tomorrow.

There’s nothing you could do to change that. If you’re scared

and you don't understand your crazy abilities, then we'll help

you understand—but don't think, not for one second, that we

would ever just leave you.”

He waited until I was looking him in the eye before

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continuing. “Is this why you acted that way when I said the Slip

Kid might be an Orange? Is that really

why you want to find

him, or do you just want to go to your grandmother's? Because

either way, darlin', we'll get you there."

"Both," I said. Was it so wrong to want both?

I had stopped crying, but my lungs felt sticky, heavy, and get-

ting in even an ounce of air was too much effort. I don't know

why my brain was as still as it was, but I was trying not to think

about it. Liam and Chubs both took an arm. I was lifted out of

the van, guided over to the crackling fire.

“Where are we?” I asked, finally.

“Somewhere between North Carolina and the Great Dismal

Swamp, I hope,” Liam said, his hand still on my back, now rub-

bing circles there. “Southeast Virginia. Now that you’re awake,

I need to check on Zu. You two stay put, okay?”

Chubs nodded; we watched him go in silence, then he turned

to me. “Ruby,” he began, voice perfectly serious. “Can you tell

me who the president is?”

I blinked. “Can you tell me why you’re asking this question?”

“Do you remember what happened?”

Did I? The memory was milky and distorted, like I was

glimpsing someone else’s dream. “Angry man,” I said. “Rifle.

Ruby's head. Ouch."

"Cut it out, I'm being serious!"

I winced, touching the stitching in my forehead again. "Can

you keep your voice down? It feels like my head is about to

cave in."

"Yeah, well, serves you right for scaring the hell out of all

of us. Here, keep drinking this," he said, handing me what was

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left of our water bottle. It didn't matter that the water was stale

or warm; I finished it off in one gulp. "I mean, my dad used to

say that head wounds look worse than they actually are, but I

legitimately thought you were a corpse."

"Thanks for stitching me up," I said. "I'm looking a little

Frankenstein, but I guess it's appropriate, all things considered."

Chubs gave me a weary sigh.
“Frankenstein is the name of

the doctor that *created* the monster, not
the monster itself.”

“Couldn’t let that one go, could you?”

“Don’t get on my case about it. You’re
the one that doesn’t

know her classic literature.”

“Funny, I don’t think they had that one in
Thurmond’s

library.” I hadn’t meant for it to come
out as sharply as it did,

but it wasn't a pleasant experience being reminded that your

education level equaled that of a ten-year-old.

He had the decency to look apologetic as he let out a deep

sigh. "It's just . . . take it easy, will you? My heart can only take

so much stress."

All along, while listening to Chubs and Liam try to talk me

down, some part of me had been trying to work through the

argument I had overheard. I could understand, as horrifying as

it was, the need to leave Betty behind.
The PSFs and skip tracers

all seemed to know to look for her now.
But there had been

something else underlying their words—
something else that had

them at odds. I had a feeling I knew
exactly what it was, but I

couldn't ask Liam. I wanted the truth, not
a sugarcoated ver-

sion of it. The Team Reality take. Only
Chubs could give that

to me.

But I hesitated, because next to his feet,
on the ground

between us, was Chubs's copy of
Watership Down. And I kept

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thinking about this one line, the one that
had made me so angry

the first time I read it as a little kid.

*Rabbits need dignity and, above all, the
will to accept their fate.*

In the book, the rabbits had come across

this warren—this

community—that accepted food handouts
from humans in

exchange for accepting that some of them
would be killed by

the same humans in return. Those rabbits
stopped fighting the

system, because it was easier to take the
loss of freedom, to for-

get what it was like before the fence kept
them in, than to be out

there in the world struggling to find
shelter and food. They had

decided that the loss of some was worth
the temporary comfort

of many.

“Will it always be this way?” I asked,
drawing my knees up

to my chest and pressing my face against
them. “Even if we find

East River and we get help—there’s
always going to be a Lady

Jane around the corner, isn’t there? Will
it even be worth it?”

The will to accept their fate. In our
case, that fate was to never

see our families again. To always be hunted and chased down to

every dark pocket of earth we tried to hide inside. Something

had to give—we couldn't live that way. We weren't made to.

I felt him drop a heavy palm on the back of my head, but

it was a long time before he could piece together his thoughts.

“Maybe nothing will ever change for us,” he said. “But don't

you want to be around just in case it

does?”

I don't know if it was the smoke from the campfire that calmed

me, or the sudden reappearance of Zu, who had come back from

scouting a nearby campsite to make sure it was deserted. As she

wrapped her arms around my center, the boys began to pool

together what was left of the food in Betty.

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“So that’s how you figured out the clue,” Liam said. “You saw a memory of it?”

I nodded. “Not so impressive now, is it?”

“No—*no*, that’s not what I meant,” Liam said, adding quickly,

“It’s just I’m trying to imagine what the inside of that kid’s head

looked like, and the best I can come up with is a swamp filled

with alligators. It must have been terrible.”

“Not as terrible as slipping into someone’s head I actually

like,” I admitted.

“Did you?” Chubs said after nearly ten minutes of silence.

Liam was busy testing out whether he could use Betty’s car key

to pry open the lids of the fruit and soup cans.

“Did I what?”

“Did you ever get inside our heads?” he finished. The way

he asked reminded me of the way a kid would ask for the end

of a bedtime story. Eager. Surprising—in all of my nightmares

about them finding out the truth, I had pictured Chubs taking

it the worst.

“Of course she’s in our heads,” Liam said, his arms straining

to open the can’s lid. “Ruby is one of us now.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Chubs huffed.
“I just want to

know how it works. I’ve never met an
Orange before. We didn’t

have any at Caledonia.”

“That’s probably because the
government erased them all,”

I said, dropping my hands in my lap.
“That’s what happened to

them at Thurmond.”

Liam looked up, alarmed. “What do you
mean?”

“For the first two or three years I was there, we had every

kind of color, even Red and Orange,” I said. “but . . . no one

really knows why or how it happened. Some people thought they

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were taken away because of all the trouble they caused, but there

were rumors they were being moved to a new camp, where they

could do more testing on them. We just woke up one morning

and the Reds, Oranges, and Yellows were gone.” And it was just

as terrifying for me to think about now as it was then.

“What about you, though?” Chubs asked.

“How did you

avoid getting bused?”

“I pretended to be Green from the start,”

I said. “I saw how

scared the PSFs were of the Oranges, and I messed with the sci-

entist who was running the classifying test.” It was a struggle to

push the rest of the words out. “Those kids were . . . they were

so messed up, you know? Maybe they were like that before they

got their abilities, or they hated themselves for having them, but

they used to do terrible things.”

“Like what?” Chubs pressed.

Oh, God, I couldn’t even talk about it. I physically could not

speak. Not about the hundreds of mind
games I watched them

play on the PSFs. Nothing about the
memory of having to scrub

the floors of the Mess Hall after an
Orange told a PSF to walk in

and open fire on every other soldier he
saw there. My stomach

turned violently, and I could taste it, the
metallic bitterness of

blood. Smell it. I remembered how it felt
to scrape it out from

where it was packed painfully under my

nails.

Chubs opened his mouth, but Liam held up a hand to shut

him up.

“I just knew I needed to protect myself.”

And, truthfully, because I was scared of the Oranges, too.

There was something wrong with them. With us. It was the con-

stant chatter, the flood of everyone else's feelings and thoughts,

I think. Eventually you learned how to

block some of it out, to

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build up a thin wall between your mind
and others', but not

before everyone else's poisonous
thoughts were in there, stain-

ing your own. Some spent so long
outside of their own heads

that they couldn't function right when
they finally had to return

their own.

“So now you see,” I said, finally, “what a mistake it was to

let me stay.”

Zu was shaking her head, looking distraught at the sugges-

tion. Chubs rubbed at his eyes, hiding his expression. Only Liam

was willing to look me straight in the eye. And there was no

disgust, or fear, or any of the thousand other ugly emotions he

was entitled to, only understanding.

“Try to imagine where we’d be without you, darlin’,” he said,

quietly, “and then maybe you’ll see just how lucky we got.”

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TWENTY

That night we slept in the van, each
sprawled

out on a seat. I let Zu have the wayback,
and stayed up front

next Liam. I felt uneasy in the silence,
and sleep didn't come

easy, even when I called to it.

Sometime around five in morning, just as
I was about to give

into the fuzz covering my brain, I felt
someone run a light finger

down the back of my neck. I rolled over onto my other side, and

Liam was there, half-awake.

“You were muttering to yourself,” he whispered. “You okay?”

I propped myself up on an elbow, wiping the sleep away

from my eyes. The rain had condensed on the windows, covering

the cracked windshield like a filmy overlay of lace. Every time a

fat raindrop dislodged itself and went streaking down the glass,

it was like a tear in the fabric.

Looking out into the forest was like searching someone's

dreams, disorienting and unsettling, but inside the van, every-

thing was sharp. The lines of the reclining seats, the dashboard

knobs—I could even read the tiny printed brand name on the

buttons of Liam's shirt.

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In that light, I could see every bruise and cut on his face, some

just beginning to heal, and others that had long-since scarred.

But what held my attention wasn't the bruise on his cheek—the

same one I had given him a few days and lifetimes before—but

the way his hair was standing almost straight up, curling around

his ears and against his neck. The storm had turned its color to

a darker shade of honey, but it didn't

lose any of its softness. It

didn't make me want to reach out and touch it any less.

“What?” he whispered. “What are you smiling about?”

My fingers brushed against his hair, trying to smooth it

down. I realized what I was doing a full minute after Liam had

closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. Embarrassment flared

up in my chest, but he grabbed my hand before I could pull back

and tucked it under his chin.

“Nope,” he whispered, when I tried to tug it away. “Mine

now.”

Dangerous. This is dangerous. The warning was fleeting,

banished to the back corners of my mind, where it wouldn't

interrupt how good it felt to touch him—how *right*.

“I'm going to need it back eventually,” I said, letting him run

it along the stubble on his chin.

“Too bad.”

“... *crackers* ...” a voice breathed out behind us, “yessss ...”

Both of us turned, watching as Chubs twisted around in his

seat and settled back down, still fast asleep.

I pressed a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing.

Liam rolled his eyes, smiling.

“He dreams about food,” he said. “A

lot.”

“At least they’re good dreams.”

“Yeah,” Liam agreed. “I guess he’s lucky.” I looked back at

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Chubs’s curled up form, and, for the first time realized just how

cold it was without the heat from Betty’s vent.

Liam let his head slide down to rest against his other arm,

threading his fingers through mine. He seemed to be studying

the shape they made, the way my thumb appeared to rest natu-

rally on top of his.

“If you wanted to,” he began, “could you see what he was

dreaming about?”

I nodded. “But those things are private.”

“But you’ve done it before?”

“Not intentionally.”

“To me?”

“To the girls in my cabin at camp,” I said. “To Zu that night

in the motel. I’ve been in your head—once. Just not in your

dreams.”

“Two days ago,” he said, putting it together. “At the rest stop.”

It was instinct to pull back, to let go before I felt him let go

first, but he didn’t allow me.

“Don’t,” he said. “I’m not mad.”

He brought our hands down against his forehead, not look-

ing at me when he asked, “Does it make it worse? To be touching

someone, I mean. Is it harder to control?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. I didn’t know how to explain it,

because I had never wanted to.

“Sometimes, when I’m tired or

upset, I’ll pick up on someone’s thoughts or a memory they’re

thinking about, but I can avoid being

pulled in if I don't touch

the person. Touching them when my head is like that . . . it's an

automatic connection.”

“I thought so.” Liam sighed, closing his eyes again. “You

know, when we first met, you used to go out of your way to

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avoid touching us. I kept wondering if it was something you had

been trained to do at your camp, because every time one of us

would try to touch you or talk to you, you'd jump like we had

shocked you."

"I didn't want to hurt any of you," I whispered.

His eyes flashed open again, brighter, somehow, than before.

He nodded to our linked fingers. "Is this okay?"

"Are you okay?" I countered. I recognized the look on his

face—it was nearly identical to the grief he'd worn at the rest

stop, talking about his own camp. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about how strange it is that we haven't even

known each other for two weeks, but it feels like I've known you

for much longer than that,” he said. “And I'm thinking that it's

frustrating to feel like I know certain parts of you so well, but

other parts of you . . . I don't even know

what your life was like

before you went to camp.”

What could I tell him? What could I say
about what I had

done to my parents and to Sam that
wouldn't scare him into

letting go?

“This is a place we don't have to lie,”
he said, motioning

between us. “Didn't you tell me that?”

“You remember?”

“Of course I do,” he said. “Because I keep hoping that goes

both ways. That if I ask you why you don’t want to go home

to your parents, you’ll tell me the truth, or if I ask you what

Thurmond was really like, you’ll stop lying. But then I realized

that it’s not fair, because it’s not like I want to talk about my

family. It’s like . . . those . . .”

I turned to look at him, waiting as he tried to piece together

his thought. “I don’t know if I can explain it,” he said. “It’s hard

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to put into words. Those things—those memories—are mine,

you know? They’re the things that the camp didn’t take away

when I went in, and they’re the things I don’t have to share if I

don’t want to. I guess that’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” I said. “That’s not stupid at all.”

“And I want to talk about everything with you. Everything.

But I don’t know what to tell you about Caledonia,” he said. “I

don’t know what I can tell you that won’t make you hate me.

I was stupid and I’m embarrassed and ashamed and I know— *I*

know—that Charles and Zu blame me for what happened. And

I know that Cole has told Mom about it

by now, and she's told

Harry, and the thought just makes me sick."

"You did what you thought was right," I said. "I'm sure they

understand that."

He shook his head, swallowing hard. I reached over with my

other hand to brush the hair out of his eyes. The way he turned

his face toward me again, closing his eyes and tilting his chin,

made me brave enough to do it again.
My fingers followed the

natural wave of his hair, tracing the
strands down around his ear.

“What do you want to do?” I whispered.

“I’ve got to wake the others up,” he said.

“We have to keep

moving. On foot.”

My hand stilled, but it was clear that he
had made his choice.

“What’s the rush?” I asked, lightly.

There, at the right corner of his mouth,

where his scar met

his lips—a faint smile. “I think we could
let them sleep, at least

for a few more hours.”

“And then?”

“We’ll hit the road.”

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Two hours rolled right on by around us.
We both must have

fallen asleep at some point, because by

the time I opened my
eyes, the condensation was shrinking
against the glass, and a few
rays of morning light had made it to the
forest floor.

As I stirred, so did Liam. For a while,
we said and did noth-
ing beyond working out the cricks and
kinks from the awkward
positions we slept in. When it came time
to finally let go of
his hand, I felt the first touch of cold air
work its way in from

outside.

“Wake up, team,” he said. His shoulder popped as he reached

back to slap Chubs’s knee. “Time to carpe the hell out of this

diem.”

Less than an hour later, we were standing in front of the

black minivan, watching as Zu did one last check under the seats.

I buttoned my plaid shirt up to my throat, and wrapped a red

scarf I'd picked up around my neck three times—not because I

was all that cold, but because it helped hide the disturbing blood-

stain smeared down my front.

“Yikes.” Liam’s expression was grim as he leaned over pulled

my hair out from where it was trapped beneath the collar.

“Would you rather wear mine?”

I smiled and zipped his coat up for him. My forehead was

still tender to the touch and the stitches were as ugly as sin, but

I was feeling better. “Was it really that bad?”

“*Evil Dead II* bad.” Liam bent down to add a few of his

clothes to my backpack. Something red appeared in his hand.

“Just about gave me a heart attack, Green.”

“You can’t really call her Green anymore,” Chubs pointed

out. He was making the difficult decision

about which books to

abandon and which to take with him, and
had seemed to settle

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o n *Watership Down*, *The Heart is a
Lonely Hunter*, and some book

I had never heard of called *Howards
End*. Left behind: *The Spy*

Who Came In From the Cold and *The
Sound and the Fury*, which

Chubs had taken to calling *The Snore*

and the Just Kill Me.

“Yeah,” I said. “No more Green . . .”

“All done?” Liam called to Zu. When she gave him a thumbs-

up, he threw her pink bag over one shoulder and my backpack

over the other. “Any day now, Marian Librarian. I thought you

were the one that wanted to check out.”

Chubs gave him the finger, leaning forward to put his full

weight into closing the briefcase. I

leaned over to help him, try-

ing to avoid the look on Liam's face as he stood there staring at

Betty's mangled black shell. Zu was crying without making a

sound; Liam had his hands on her shoulders, holding her steady.

Even Chubs looked on the car with a rare softness, his fingers

bunching up the fabric of his pants.

I understood why we were parting ways with Betty now; the

other skiptracer that had been with Lady Jane was still out there,

and there was some chance that the woman had reported the

car to whatever bounty network the skiptracers used. But I also

understood why Liam had been so reluctant to do it. Unlike the

abandoned and withered small towns we had driven through in

western Virginia, the nearby cities and their populations were

still holding on, which meant there

would be more folks on the

road and Betty, with her bullet holes and cracked windows, was

not exactly inconspicuous. Then there was the fact that we had

little to no gas left, and no easy way of finding more aside from

going up and down and siphoning it from the abandoned cars

along the nearby highway. There was too much traffic—too

many potential eyes—running down the road to do it.

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Liam had gotten us as close as he could to Lake Prince, but

it was anyone's guess how long it would take us to walk there.

“It feels like we should do something,” he said. “Like, send

her off on a barge out to sea and set her on fire. Let her go out

in a blaze of glory.”

Chubs raised an eyebrow. “It’s a

minivan, not a Viking.”

Zu pulled away from his grasp and headed for the trees to

her left. Liam rubbed the back of his neck, looking at a loss.

“Hey,” he started, “it’s okay, we’ll—”

But when Zu reappeared in our line of sight, she wasn’t

empty-handed. Clutched between her fingers were four small

yellow flowers—wild weeds, by the looks of it. The kind we

always used to have to pull up in
Thurmond's garden every
spring.

She walked over to the van, stood on her
toes, and lifted
up the closest windshield wiper. With
delicate fingers, she posi-
tioned each flower in a row, keeping
them straight across the
cracked glass.

Something cold and wet caught on my
eyelashes. Not tears,

but a misty rain, the kind that soaked
through you slow and sure,

driving you crazy with chills in the
process. And I realized then

how unfair it all was that we couldn't
just crawl back inside of

the car; that even if we made it to East
River, we'd be soaked

and sore for days.

This car—this had been a safe place for
them. For us. Now

we had lost that, too.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and turned away, head-

ing for the trees. My fingers brushed again something hard and

smooth in my pocket, and I didn't need to pull it out to know

that it was the panic button. In the beginning, I had kept it

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because I wasn't sure I'd be able to protect them on my own,

and now . . . I had half the mind to drop
it and let the ground

claim it. Liam had confirmed everything
that I'd suspected, but

it seemed foolish to toss it then, when
there was a chance for us

to use them like they would have used
us. If a PSF or skiptracer

caught up to us now, I could press the
button, and the agents

that showed up would be more than
enough distraction for us to

have a chance to get away.

But it still didn't make me feel any less
ashamed of how

relieved I felt to find it still there—to
know that Cate, with all

of her promises to take care of things,
was still out there, still

only a touch away.

Liam thought the easiest and fastest way
to navigate our small

pack to East River was to travel
alongside the roads that we

would have taken had we still been in
Betty. We were close

enough to the highway to hear the occasional car whiz by, or see

the flash of some long, silver-bellied semitruck out of the corner

of our eyes, but, he assured us, out of their line of sight. This

was the way he had traveled after escaping the League, how he

had navigated through most of Virginia—how he hoped to get

home.

We were debating whether or not Chubs had broken his toe

against an exposed tree root when the wail of a truck's horn

shattered the silence. The booms that came next were infinitely

worse—the thundering of something heavy falling to its side and

the resounding crack of metal snapping.

We all jumped—I dropped Zu's hand to cover my ears. The

way the tires squealed just before the crash came was like the

warning signal for White Noise.

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Liam reached over and gently pried my hands from my ears.

“Come with me for a second.” He turned back to the others.

“You guys watch the bags.”

Before the sound had even settled in the air, we heard the

screams. Not the desperate kind—the one you’d hear when

someone was terrified or hurt or even

out of their head with

grief. This was a war cry. A rising rebel yell. After that, there was

no chance of Zu or Chubs coming with us. They stayed behind

to watch the bags as Liam and I made our way to the line of trees

that separated us from the rain-soaked asphalt of the highway.

The semitruck was on its side in the middle of the road, as

if it had been flung there like a toy. The smell of burned rubber

and smoke curled my stomach as we
crouched down, and I was

concerned the trail of sparks in front of
us would turn into a wall

of flame.

Liam stood up and was nearly at the
shoulder of the road

before my hand managed to catch his
elbow.

“What are you doing?” I had to shout
over the sound of the

rain pinging against the silver, rippled
body of the trailer the

truck had been hauling.

“The driver—”

Needed help, yes, I knew that, and maybe it made me soul-

less and horrible, but I wasn't about to let Liam be the one to do

it. Trucks didn't just flip over on their side for no reason. Either

there was another car and driver we couldn't see, or . . .

Or the yelling and the accident were connected.

Liam and I were still standing out in the open when the fig-

ures in black came pouring out of the trees opposite us. Every

inch of them was covered in black, from the ski masks pulled

down over their faces to their black shoes. There was an entire

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highway between us, and still the sight of them was enough to

make me reach out and grab Liam's arm, squeezing it until I was

sure he'd be left with a permanent imprint of my fingers.

There were at least two dozen figures in black; they moved

in unison, with practiced ease. And it was so weird, but watching

them flood the road and divide into two groups—one that went

to the front of the truck, the other to the back where its boxed

contents were spilling out—reminded

me of a football team run-

ning a play. The four of them sent to the front cab climbed up

and ripped the door open. The driver, who was screaming some-

thing in a language I didn't understand, was hauled down to the

ground.

One of the figures in black—a big one, with shoulders the

size of Kansas, pulled a knife from his belt and, signaling for the

others to hold the driver down, pressed
its silver blade against

the man's palm.

I heard a scream, and didn't realize it
had belonged to me

until that same black monster's head
swiveled toward us. Liam

jumped at the ten gun barrels that swung
our way. The first bul-

let was close enough to nick his ear as it
whistled by. There wasn't

even time to turn and run. The firing
stopped long enough for

three of the figures to rush forward,
screaming, “On your knees!”

and “Head to the ground!”

I wanted to run. Liam must have sensed
this, because he

latched onto my shoulder and forced me
down, pressing the side

of my face against the cold, rough
asphalt. The rain picked up,

filling my ear, my nose, my mouth as I
tried to bite back another

scream.

“We’re not armed!” I heard Liam shout.
“Easy— *easy!*”

“Save it, asshole,” someone hissed.

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I was intimately familiar with what it
felt like to have a barrel

of a gun dig into my skin. Whoever was
doing it this time had

no qualms about dropping a knee onto
my back, along with

their entire weight. The gun’s metal

mouth was cold against my

cheek, and I felt someone weave a hand
in my hair and give a

sharp twist. That's when I disconnected
from the pain and lifted

a hand, trying to twist my body enough to
grab whoever was

holding me. I was not powerless—we
were *not* going to die here.

“Not those!” I heard Liam say. He was
begging. “*Please!*”

“Awww, don't want your precious
papers to get wet?” The

same voice as before. “How about you try being worried about

yourself or your girl, here, huh? Huh?” He sounded like a jock

amped up on too much juice and game adrenaline.

Someone stomped their foot down on the same hand I was

trying to maneuver toward my attacker’s skin. I let out a choked

cry, wishing I could turn my head to see what was causing Liam

to do the same.

“Doctor Charles Meriwether,” the voice read out, “2775

Arlington Court, Alexandria, Virginia. George Fields—”

The letters.

“Stop it,” Liam said. “We didn’t do anything—we didn’t see

anything, just—”

“Charles Meriwether?” another voice said. Also male, this

one with a heavier southern accent. I almost didn’t hear him

over the rain. “George Fields—like Jack Fields?”

“Yes!” Liam made the connection a full second before I did.

This was a tribe—these were kids.

“Yes, we’re Psi, please—we’re

Psi like you!”

“Lee? Liam Stewart?” There was a shuffle of feet running

toward us.

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“Mike? That you?” That, from Liam.

“Oh my God . . . stop, stop!” The gun lifted off my face,

but I was still pinned to the ground. “I know him—that’s Liam

Stewart! Stop! Hayes, get off of him!”

“He saw; you know the rules!”

“Jesus, are you deaf?” Mike yelled.

“The rules apply to

adults—they’re kids, you asshole!”

I don’t know if Liam finally managed to throw him off, or if

Mike's words did the trick, but I felt Liam rise next to me, and

opened my eyes in time to see Liam drive his shoulder into the

black figure on top of me. I gulped in a full chest of air.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He put his hands on either side

of my face. “Ruby, look at me—you okay?”

My hands came up to grab his. I nodded.

Of the six guys gathered around us, only two pulled their

knit ski caps up off their faces: the big kid—big in a Hercules

kind of way—with ruddy skin and black paint under both eyes,

and another one with olive coloring, shaggy brown hair pulled

back into a short ponytail. The latter was Mike. He reached over

and pulled the letters out of Hercules' hand and pressed them

against his own chest.

“Lee, man, I’m so sorry. I never thought —” Mike choked up.

Liam let go of one of my hands to clap him on the back. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Liam took the letters back from him, and reached back to

draw me forward again. “We’re okay now,” he told me. It seemed

to be true enough. The other kids in black had lost interest in us

the minute Mike stepped up.

“God, Lee,” he said, wiping the rain off his face. “Oh my

God, I can't believe you actually made it out.”

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Liam's voice was tight. “I thought you were with Josh

when . . .”

“I was, but I got through the fields.” He added, “Thanks to

you.”

Another kid, this one with skin as dark as Chubs, jerked his

thumb in Liam's direction. "This is Lee Stewart?" he demanded.

"From Caledonia?"

"From *North Carolina*," Liam said, with surprising venom.

Mike gripped Liam's hand, his entire body shaking. "The

others—did you see if any of the others made it out?"

Liam hesitated. I knew what he was thinking, and I won-

dered if he would tell Mike the truth about how many kids

actually escaped that night.

Instead, all six of their watches went off at once, a shrill beep.

“That’s time,” Hercules said to the others. “Grab the supplies

and head back. The uniforms will be here any second.”

A single gunshot punctuated his order like an exclamation

point, thundering across the open road. Liam and I both jumped

back, away from them.

The kids at the back of the truck were
tossing down the

entirety of the truck's load: boxes and
crates of brightly colored

fruit. My lips parted at the sight of green
bananas, just a few days

shy of being ripe.

When they moved off and started back
toward the trees, I

had a clear view of the truck driver
being rolled, unconscious and

bound, into the ditch alongside the road.

“So, you’re what?” Liam rubbed the back of his neck. “Raid-

ing anyone stupid enough to drive by?”

“It’s a supply hit,” Mike said. “We’re just trying to bring in a

little food to eat, and this is the only way that works for us. We

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just have to do it fast—in and out before anyone notices us and

can follow us back home.”

“Back home?”

“Yeah. Where are you guys headed?”

Mike had to shout over

the people shouting for him. “You should come with us!”

“We already have our own tribe, thanks,” Liam said.

Mike’s dark brows furrowed. “We’re not a tribe. Not like

that, at least. We’re with the Slip Kid. You heard of him?”





TWENTY-

ONE

East River was, after all that
speculating,

nothing more than a camping ground. A
big one, of course,

but nothing I hadn't seen before a dozen
times over with my

parents. After the buildup that Mike and
the others had given

it, you would have thought we were
walking toward Heaven's

pearly gates, not some old camping spot that had been called

Chesapeake Trails in its past life.

Since Mike had been the one to convince the others to take

us along, he was the one stuck babysitting us as we hiked up the

muddy unpaved road, saddled with boxes of fruit that were as

heavy as they were tempting.

“We go on these things—we call them hits—to gather up

supplies for the camp. Stuff like food, medicine, you name it. We

also raid stores from time to time.”

Liam had given me his jacket to wear to ward off the rain.

Though it had turned to a faint drizzle as we walked, the dam-

age had already been done to the flimsy cardboard boxes in

our arms. Every now and then, the bottom of a carton would

give out completely, and whatever kid was carrying it would be

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forced to stuff the sodden piles of fruit in
their pockets or carry

them cupped in their shirts. Kids were
doubling back to pick up

the scattered, bright trail we were
leaving behind us. Everyone

once in a while, I would catch myself
from being distracted by

the bright trail we were leaving behind.

When Mike had his back turned to us,

Liam snuck a hand

in the top box and held an orange out in front of my face, a shy

smile on his lips. When he dropped it in my jacket's pocket,

he leaned over, his sweatshirt hood slipping off his head, and

pressed a light kiss against my bruised cheek. After that, the cold

trickle on my skin seemed to evaporate.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow,” Chubs chanted behind us. “Ow, ow, ow, ow.”

“You know,” Mike said, “it gives me hope that, after every-

thing he’s been through, Chubs is still the same Chubs we all

know and love.”

“Aw, that’s not true,” Liam said. “This is Chubs two-point-oh.

He hasn’t cried once this entire walk.”

“Give him a few minutes.” Greg snorted.

“I’m sure he won’t

let us down.”

“Hey,” I said in a low, warning tone.

“Not funny.”

Chubs was still trailing behind, the gap between us growing

with each mile marker we passed. I stopped and waited for him,

not wanting him to feel like he was being left behind.

“Need some help?” I asked as he limped up to me. “My box

isn’t too heavy.” And his was, I could tell. He was saddled with

grapefruit.

I could see in his eyes that he desperately wanted to trade, even if it was only for a few minutes. Instead, he lifted his chin and said, over the cardboard flap, “I’m fine, though I appreciate your asking.”

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Liam and Mike burst out laughing about something—even

Zu looked back to grin at them, Liam’s

hat falling over her eyes.

It was amazing how much better Liam looked after only a few

hours; his face was animated with a kind of energy I hadn't

seen . . . well, ever.

“What was he like?” I asked quietly.
“When he was in camp?”

Chubs blew out a long sigh. “Well, for one thing, he was a

lot more annoying with his whole, *We're gonna make it, guys,*

we're gonna get out one day Pollyanna
shtick. That's been dying

a slow death now that he's realized just
how sucky everything

actually is.”

He stopped to shift the box in his arms.
“I mean, what do

you want me to tell you? Lee is Lee.
Everyone loved him, even

some of the PSFs. They picked him out
of all of the Blues to be

a runner for the control center of our
camp.”

“Yeah? And what were you like in camp?” I asked, smiling.

“Ignored, for the most part,” he said.
“Unless I was with Lee.”

As if he’d heard his name, Liam turned.
“Hurry up, ladies!

We’re going to be left behind.”

Mike was in the middle of explaining
how he had hitchhiked

from Ohio to Virginia after breaking out
of Caledonia when

Chubs and I finally caught up to them. Zu
tugged the sleeve of

my jacket and pointed through the trees to our left.

I had been so involved in my conversation with Chubs that

I had completely missed the silky blue lake that had suddenly

come into view. The clouds pulled back, revealing the sun high

overhead. The water sparkled under its touch, throwing its light

around the trees that lined its every side. Through them, I could

see I could see a small T-shaped wood

dock at the other end,
and, beyond that, several wood cabins.

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“So it’s more of a place to hide, then,”
Liam was saying. “Can

he help us get in touch with our folks?”

Mike frowned. “I guess, but he usually
asks that you stay and

help with the camp for a few weeks in
return. Plus, why would

you want to go home now? It's much safer here."

I could tell Chubs wanted to press this issue, but Liam

charged on with yet another question. "How long has the Slip

guy had this setup?"

"Two or so years, I think," Mike answered. "Man, I can't wait

until you meet him. You are going to lose your mind."

Chubs rolled his eyes heavenward, and I got the distinct

impression that the two of them were not all that fond of each

other.

“And there are hundreds of kids here just roaming around,

unchecked?” I asked. “How has he been able to stay here so long

without the PSFs catching on?”

Mike had already explained how the camp itself worked. All

of the kids who had gathered there—some who had escaped

from camps or capture, others that had been able to hide out

long enough to avoid it all together—had responsibilities.

“Oh, see, now that’s the beauty of being under the Slip Kid’s

protection,” Mike said. “The PSFs can’t attack him because of

who he is and what he could do to them. Even ol’ Gray is terri-

fied of him.”

“I know who it is!” Liam snapped his fingers. “Santa!”

Zu giggled.

“You’re not too far off,” Mike said.

“This is going to sound

super sappy, so feel free to give me shit
for it, but every day here

feels like Christmas.”

I saw what he meant right away. Once
we reached the clearing

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that, I assumed, had once been used for
campers to set up tents,

we were surrounded by dozens of kids.
To our right, teens were

playing volleyball—with an actual net. I
heard a few shrieks of

laughter, stopping to let a few little girls
rush by in front of me,

playing tag. They were the ones that
caught Zu's attention.

They all looked happy. Up and shiny and
smiley. And clean.

Not covered in cuts and bruises and mud
like we were, but in

decent clothes and shoes. A few kids

lounging under the trees

stopped whatever it was that they were doing and actually helped

us carry the fruit boxes toward a white building marked office

camp/shop without being asked or prompted.

The Office/Camp Shop was the sturdiest of the structures

we had passed so far, built in a more permanent style than the

smaller log cabins with their dark green doors.

“This is where we keep the food,” Mike said, like it was the

most exciting thing we were ever going to hear. “And where

the Slip Kid runs the whole show—I’ll bring you guys in for an

introduction. Get permission for you to stay a while.”

“We need permission?” Chubs asked.

“What happens if he

says no?”

“He’s never said no before,” Mike said, shifting the box onto

his shoulder so he could drop an arm around Chubs's shoulder.

Seeing he had my attention, he grinned ear-to-ear.

“Now you couldn't have been at Caledonia. I would remem-

ber a face like yours.” I think he thought he was being charming

with those dark eyes and dimples. He looked over at Lee, who

was fighting back a smile as he watched my reaction. “Where did

she come from, and where can I find

one?”

“Picked this one up at a gas station in West Virginia, bargain

price,” Lee said. “Last one on the shelf, sorry.”

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Mike laughed again, giving Chubs’s shoulder a squeeze

before he hopped up the steps, ducking under a white sheet that

had been strung up over the building’s

small porch. I glanced at
it, then had to look again.

The enormous black Ψ painted there had
stopped Zu dead

in her tracks, and turned her face a sickly
shade. I couldn't

move—couldn't look away from it. Liam
cleared his throat, his

jaw working, as if trying to shake the
words loose.

It was enough to stop Zu and me dead in
our tracks, at least.

Alarm lit up her face like a candle. Liam gave his friend a con-

fused look.

“What?” Mike asked, seeing our reactions.

“Any reason in particular you’ve decorated this fine establish-

ment with our mortal enemies’ symbol?” Liam said.

It was the first time I had see Mike’s expression drop the

entire time we’d been with him, which was close to two hours.

Something hardened in his eyes,
something strained the muscles

in his jaw. “That’s our symbol, isn’t it?
It’s Psi. It should represent

us, not them.”

“How do you explain the black, then?”
Liam pressed. “The

armbands, the shirts . . . ?”

He was right. Everyone, in some form or
another, had the

color on them. Most were apparently
satisfied with tying a black

band around their arm, but others, and not just the ones that had

hit the truck for supplies, were in head-to-toe black.

“Black is the absence of all colors,” Mike said. “We don’t

segregate by color here. We all respect one another and our abili-

ties, and we all *help* one another understand them. I thought if

anyone would be on board with that, it’d be you, Lee.”

“Oh no, no, I am on board. I am, like,

captain of that ship,”

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Liam said. “I was just . . . confused, that’s all. Black is the color.

Got it.”

The screen door creaked open again. Mike caught it with his

foot. “Coming?”

Inside, I was surprised to feel a wave of heat hit my face

and see the overhead lights on.
Electricity—I remembered Greg

mentioning something about the Yellows
rigging the system to

work, but did they have running water,
too?

The front rooms were filled with piles
of blankets and bed-

ding, a few stacked mattresses, and a
number of unidentifiable

gray plastic tubs. The backroom—the
Shop in the Office/Camp

Shop combo—was to the right of a

small, white-tiled kitchen.

Mike waved to the kids inside, who were turning whatever deli-

cious creation was inside of their pots with long wooden spoons.

The old store's wood shelves were painted a dour green, but

stuffed with a rainbow assortment of canned food and bags of

chips, pasta, and even marshmallows. Liam let out a low whistle

at the sight of the boxes of cereal stacked high over our heads.

I thought Chubs might cry.

We left the fruit on the floor in a shady corner of the room,

near a girl with cropped blond hair and a midriff-baring black

shirt. She was still clapping her hands in delight, bouncing on her

toes. She couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen, and

seemed to have as many piercings in the cartilage of each ear.

“I knew you'd be happy, Lizzie,” Mike said, tossing her a

grapefruit.

“We haven’t had fruit in *ages*,” she said, her pitch rising with

every word. “I hope this all keeps for a few weeks.”

Mike led us out of the room, leaving Lizzie to coo over the

pineapples and oranges. “Let’s go upstairs. He should be done

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meeting with the security team by now.

Hayes handles hits, but

Olivia—you'll meet her—coordinates watch duty around the

perimeter of the camp. If you want, I can talk to her about get-

ting you assigned there."

He looked down at Zu. "But unfortunately for you, my dear,

everyone under thirteen has to sit through lessons."

That caught Chubs's attention. "What kinds of lessons?"

“School stuff, I guess. Math, a little science, some reading—

depends on whatever books we were able to scrounge. It’s

important to the boss that everyone gets the basics down.” Mike

stopped at the top of the stairs and looked over his shoulder. “I

know you never liked using them, but there are lessons on how

to use your abilities, too.”

Chubs cleared his throat behind me. “I’m fine with what Jack

taught me.”

“*Jack* . . .” Mike’s voice trailed off.
“Man, I miss that kid.”

On our walk over, he had explained that there were five kids

from Caledonia living in the Slip Kid’s camp. Mike was the only

one from Liam’s old room, but there were two Blue girls, one

Yellow boy, and a Green who had somehow made it all the way

to eastern Virginia.

The second story of the building was more of an attic; the

entire floor was one open room, but it was a nice one. Mike

knocked on the door, waiting for the “Come in,” before daring

to twist the handle. I heard Chubs let out a nervous squeak and

I was surprised to feel my own heart skip a beat.

The door opened to the middle of the room. To the right was

a white curtain, drawn all the way over

to hide what I thought

was probably the living area. The window behind the curtain let in

enough afternoon light to hint at the shape of a bed and dresser.

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The other half of the room was set up like an office. There

were two bookshelves filled with binders and books of every

shape and size. An old metal desk with

peeling black paint sat

in between. There were two simple chairs in front of the desk,

and a long table pushed to the far left wall, with all sorts of

electronic equipment. A TV was on, set to one of the news

channels. President Gray's face filled the screen, flanked by two

American flags. His mouth moved, but the TV had been muted.

The only sound, aside from Chubs's sharp intake of breath,

was Clancy Gray's fingers striking the
keys of the sleek silver

laptop.

I would have recognized him even if he
had shaved his head

of thick, wavy black hair—if he had
tattooed his cheeks, or

pierced his long, straight nose. I had
spent six years staring up at

every single one of his portraits at
Thurmond, memorizing every

mole, the shape of his thin lips—I was
even intimately familiar

with the peak of his hairline. But it was nothing like seeing the

real thing. Those portraits hadn't captured his dark eyes, and

they certainly hadn't been able to predict how striking he'd turn

out to be as he aged.

“Just a sec—” He glanced up from his screen in our direction

and immediately did a double take.

“Boss?” Mike said. “You okay?”

The president's son rose slowly, shutting

the lid of his lap-

top. The rolled-up sleeves of his white shirt slid down his tan

arms.

This is the Slip Kid? I thought. *Him?* Surprise was an under-

statement. Brain-numbing shock, the kind that reduced my train

of thought to an inching crawl, was an understatement. I didn't

even have a second to collect myself before the next three words

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passed his lips. There was no way I could have, because Clancy

Gray looked straight at me and said the very last thing on earth

I expected.

“Ruby Elizabeth Daly.”

My reaction was way too strong for something as innocent as my

full name. It wasn't like he had spat out three vile cusswords or

screamed, “Kill them now!” or “Lock them up!” I shouldn’t have

stumbled back, tripping over my own boots, but I was nearly to

the door before I even realized it.

Clancy took a step forward, but Liam pushed him back, hard.

“Lee!” Mike sounded scandalized.

Clancy held up his hands. “Sorry—I’m sorry! My bad. I

should have realized how that would sound. I was just surprised

to see you.” He leaned around Liam with an apologetic smile,

and I paused at the door, momentarily stunned by how white

and straight his teeth were.

“I’ve read your file so many times on so many different

networks that I feel like we’ve already met. There are so many

people out there looking for you right now.”

“And which one do you plan on turning her over to?” Chubs

snapped.

I stood, letting Zu keep one arm wrapped around my waist.

Clancy's face flushed at the accusation, his dark eyes flicking

back over to me. "None of them. I just collect information,

watch the networks to see what everyone is buzzing about. And

that just happens to be you, Miss Daly." He paused, rubbing a

hand absently over his shoulder. "Let's see if I remember all of

this—born in Charlottesville, Virginia, but raised in Salem by her

mother, Susan, a teacher, and her father, Jacob, a police officer.

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Attended Salem Elementary School until your tenth birthday,

when your father called into his station to report an unknown

child in his house—”

“Stop,” I muttered. Liam looked over his

shoulder, trying to

divide his attention between me and the boy reciting the sordid

tale of my life.

“—but, bad luck, the PSFs beat the police to your house.

Good luck, someone dropped the ball or they had other kiddies

to pick up, because they didn't wait around long enough to ques-

tion your parents, and, thus, didn't pre-sort you. And then you

came to Thurmond, and you managed to avoid them detecting

you were Orange—”

“*Stop!*” I didn’t want to hear this—I didn’t want anyone to

hear it.

“What’s the matter with you?” Liam shouted. “Can’t you see

you’re upsetting her?”

Clancy, maybe anticipating another hard shove, moved to

the other side of his desk. “I’m excited

to meet her, that's all. It's

not often that you find another Orange."

A spark lit at the center of my chest, spreading quickly up

to my brain. *He is an Orange. The rumors were right. He might*

actually be able to help me.

"But . . . weren't you reformed?" I asked slowly. "Isn't that

why they let you out?"

"You of all people should know they can't reform shit at

Thurmond, Ruby,” he said. “How is good ol’ Thurmond, by the

way? I had the dubious honor of being its first inmate—got to

see them build the Mess Hall brick by brick. Did they really hang

my picture up everywhere?”

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A better question: did he really think I was going to pull up

a chair and shoot the breeze about the

good old days?

Clancy sighed. “Anyway . . . if you’re Ruby, then *you* must be

Lee Stewart. I’ve read your file, too.”

“Anything good in there?” Mike asked with a nervous

laugh.

“The PSFs have been following your every move,” Clancy

said, leaning back in his chair. “Which means you need some

place to lay low for a while, right?”

Liam hesitated a split second before nodding.

“You made a good choice coming here. You can stay as long

as you need.” Clancy rested his hands on his chest. “Now that

I’ve managed to upset everyone, Mike, do you want to take them

to a cabin and get them set up in the rotations?”

Mike nodded. “For the record, you didn’t upset me, boss.”

He laughed, rich and slow. “Okay, good.

Thanks for all of

your hard work today, by the way.
Sounds like it was a good

haul.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Mike said,
moving toward the

door. He waved us after him, but he no
longer looked at us with

the same warmth. “Cabin eighteen is
open, right?”

“Yeah, Ty and his guys went tribal on
us,” Clancy said. “I

don't know that anyone has gone in to clean it since they left,

though, so I apologize if it's a mess."

And then, he was staring at me again, one corner of his lips

turning up, then the other. A warm, fizzling sensation filled the

back of my mind, sending my pulse spiking. I turned away and

broke eye contact, but the image still flooded my mind, spilling

in until I thought I might choke. In my mind's eye, I saw Clancy

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and me alone in the same room, him on one knee, offering a rose

in my direction.

Forgive me? His voice was loud in my ears, echoing as I stum-

bled down the stairs.

How had he done that? Waltzed right through every single

one of my natural defenses. And why was my brain suddenly

alive and reaching out for whoever was
closest, whoever was

stupid enough to let me in?

I lifted my face from where I had buried
it against Liam's

shoulder. When had I done that? When
had we gotten outside—

when had we walked all the way to the
cabin?

Liam's eyes tried to catch mine as I
pulled away. My head

ached, physically *ached* for his. It was
too dangerous to stand so

close to him.

“Not right now,” I whispered.

Liam’s brows drew together, and his lips parted with some-

thing he wanted to say. After a moment, he only nodded and

turned back toward the cabin, bounding up the steps.

I needed to get as far away from them as I could, at least

until the trilling inside of my head died down. There was no plan

or map involved; I just set off down a nearby path. A few kids,

all strangers, called after me in concern, but I ignored them, fol-

lowing the smell of mud and molding leaves until I found the

lake we had passed.

The trees and brush had overgrown the path down to the

T-shaped wood dock, and where there weren't plants in my way,

there was rope, along with a sign that warned do not enter.

I slipped under it and kept heading
down, not stopping

until I sat on the edge of the old sun-
bleached dock and put my

head between my knees, listening to the
sounds of kids laughing

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and yelling in the distance, wondering
when the feelings would

return to my legs long enough for me to
stand, and when the

imprint of Clancy Gray's voice would fade.

Alone, I thought, lying down on the old wood, *finally alone*.

Dinner was served at exactly seven that night. There was no

intercom or alarm system in the camp, but there were cowbells.

Apparently that was a universal call for food, because once the

first bell rang, others echoed back, spreading the noise through

the cabins and trails, all the way down

to where I sat studying

my reflection in the dark water.

It was easy enough to find the action—
two hundred—odd

kids gathered around a raging bonfire to
eat wasn't exactly sub-

tle. My feet slowed the closer I came,
watching as a few of the

older boys threw more logs into the
fire's grasping fingers. Rings

of old logs provided makeshift seats for
those who already had

their food and didn't want to eat alone in their cabin.

The kids we had seen in the kitchen had set up a table full of

what looked like slow cookers, and were making runs between

the office building and the fire to replenish them. Dozens of

kids waited in line for their turn at the pots, their plastic bowls

pressed against their chests in anticipation.

I spotted Liam straight off, standing

rather than sitting on

one of the logs. He had a bowl of chili in each hand and was

scanning the area for something. Chubs would have walked right

by him if Liam hadn't nudged him as he passed. He asked Chubs

something, but I only caught part of his response.

“Uh, no thanks. I read *Lord of the Flies*. I know how this

works—everyone starts dancing around the fire and painting their

faces and worshipping a decapitated pig head and then someone

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gets hit by a boulder and plummets to their death—and, surprise,

it's the fat kid in glasses.” Liam started laughing, but even I could

see how uncomfortable Chubs looked. “I think I’m going to play

it safe and go read—and, hey, there’s Ruby! You two can enjoy

the degeneration of human decency without me.”

Liam whirled around so fast his footing slipped and he came

dangerously close to dropping both bowls on the bushy-haired

girls sitting beside him.

“Have fun,” Chubs said as he hurried past me. I caught his

sleeve and swung him back around.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He shrugged, a sad smile curling the

ends of his lips. “I’m just

not up for it tonight, I guess.”

I knew the feeling. After it being just the four of us alone

for so long, suddenly being around so many people, even if they

were kids like us, was a little stressful. If he hadn’t liked it when

one new person—me—had invaded his world, I could only

imagine what this was doing to his nerves. “Well, if you change

your mind, we'll be here."

Chubs patted my head fondly and continued up the dirt trail,

back to our assigned cabin.

"What's gotten into him?" Liam asked, offering me the

steaming bowl of food.

"I think he's just tired," I said, and left it at that. "Where's

Zu?"

He nodded to the left, where, sure enough, Zu's smiling face

appeared at the center of a small group of boys and girls her age.

When she saw me, she waved. I wondered how it was possible

for her face to be so vibrant. The Asian girl sitting next to her

nodded as Zu gestured to her, as if knowing her every thought

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without her having to whisper a word. When Zu reached over to

knock back the hood of the girl's
"Virginia Is for Lovers" sweat-

shirt, she revealed a long, glossy black
braid.

"Oh my God," I said, making the
connection instantly.

"What wrong?"

"That kid was in your camp," I said. "I
saw her in Zu's night-

mare. They got separated."

"Really?" The dawning realization that
spread across his face

was adorable. “Guess that explains why they tackled one another

to the ground earlier.”

I laughed. “They did?”

“Yeah, they were rolling around like puppies in the grass—

hey, Zu!” She looked our way again.

“Come here a sec. No, bring

your friend—”

When the two girls were on their feet, I was surprised to

see the other girl stood a good four

inches above Zu's head,

though she looked like couldn't have been more than a year

older than her.

Zu took the girl's hand and flounced over to us, grinning.

She was back to wearing the hot pink dress.

"Hi there," Liam said, holding out his hand to the girl. "My

name is Liam, and this is—"

"I know who you are," the girl

interrupted. “Liam and Ruby.”

She crossed her arms over her chest.
“Suzume told me all about
you.”

“*Told you*—told you, or . . .”

“Of course she didn’t *tell* me,” the girl
huffed, earning a

sharp elbow to her side. She turned and
said something to Zu in

Japanese, who, in turn, shook her head
and reached up to tug

the girl’s braid.

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“Okay, fine!” The tall girl turned back to us, flanked by the

campfire. “I’m Hina. Suzume is my cousin.”

“Oh, wow!” I said, looking to Zu. “Are you serious? That’s

amazing!”

She was bouncing on her toes, still smiling.

“And you were at Caledonia together,”

Liam said, slowly.

“Zu, why didn’t you mention it? We could have tried to track

her down. Are you a Yellow, too?”

“I’m a Green,” Hina said, pointing to her full head of hair.

“Duh.”

Zu gave us an apologetic shrug before tugging Hina away,

back to the circle of younger kids who were engrossed in some

kind of card game. Liam turned toward

me with a look of pure

amazement. “Did I just get sassed by a twelve-year-old?”

“I guess it runs in the family,” I said, spinning my spoon

around my bowl. The chili was warm, with a wonderful kick. I

don’t think I’d eaten anything other than the slop they’d served

at Thurmond and junk food in almost seven years, and the fact

that someone had put even the barest amount of effort into it . . .

I had to go back and get seconds, thirds, until I physically could not stuff myself anymore.

Being so close to the fire with a belly full of delicious food was making me feel drowsy and safe. I slid down off the log so I was sitting on the ground, reclining against Liam's legs.

“That reminds me. . . .” Liam said, “Would you believe Zu actually started jumping up and down and clapping when I told

her she had to get up at seven to go do
some good ol-fashioned

book learnin' with the other Cubbies?"

"Cubbies?"

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"Daily lessons. School." He tapped my
nose with the clean

end of his spoon. "Stick around, Ruby
Tuesday, and you'll start

picking up the cool-kid lingo, too."

When we finished eating, Liam set both of our bowls in one of the many plastic tubs floating by. The Blue controlling the one closest to us was a skinny kid, who looked like he weighed about half of what his tub did. I blinked once, twice, wondering if I was imagining it. It was the first time I had ever seen kids use their abilities so . . . frivolously. It was a strange contrast to what was otherwise a picture of normalcy. At

least, what I assumed

normalcy looked like. A few kids
strummed on guitars or used

their log as a drum set. Most were
talking quietly, or playing

card games.

Liam slid down behind me, finding just
enough room

between my back and the old log. The
shimmering air around

the flames combined with the delicious
heat made my muscles

turn to mush. His hand came up to brush the stray strands of

hair off the back of my neck. My body followed its path back,

until I was leaning against his chest, nestled between his knees.

“You okay now, darlin’?” he whispered in my ear. I nod-

ded, my fingers finding the bare skin of his forearms, tracing

the muscles and overlaying veins there. On a discovery mission,

searching for something I hadn’t even

realized I wanted until

now. His skin was so soft, his hands warm and wide, knuckles

bruised and torn with brittle scabs. I pressed my own hand on

top of his, weaving our fingers together.

“I had to be alone for a little while, but I’m okay now.”

“All right,” he whispered. “But next time, don’t go where I

can’t find you.”

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I didn't doze off so much as relax. It seemed like the longer

I sat there, the quieter my head became, the more the aches and

knots in my body worked themselves out, leaving me as soft as

the dirt under us.

Eventually, someone brought out a decades-old boom box

and even the kids with guitars stopped playing in deference to

the Beach Boys. I seemed to be the only one in the entire camp

who didn't dance, but it was fun to watch the others. Zu, in par-

ticular, as she twisted her hips and threw her arms in the air—at

least until she ran up to us and began to tug on our arms. I man-

aged to beg off, but Liam didn't have nearly as much willpower.

They were both laughing when the track switched to "Barbara

Ann," twirling when "Fun, Fun, Fun"

came on. I should have

known something was up when they both turned to me wearing

identical devious looks.

Liam held up a finger in my direction, beckoning me over to

him. I laughed and shook my hands in front of me. “No!”

He grinned—his first real grin in days—and I felt something

tug at my belly button. The sensation was warm, tingling, and

familiar. Liam pretended he was hauling a line in, and Zu actu-

ally stopped her frolicking to act it out with him. Their faces

were flushed and glowing with a sheen of sweat. With nothing

but fine dust and mud between us, I slid right over to them—

right into Liam's outstretched hands.

“No fair,” I whined.

“Come on, Green,” he said. “You could use a good dance.”

Zu spun around us, waving her arms in time to “Wouldn’t

It Be Nice.” I put my hand over Liam’s, letting him drop it over

one of his shoulders. He took my other hand without asking, and

held it lightly in his own. “Step up on my feet.”

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I gave him what I hoped was an incredulous look.

“Trust me,” he said. “Come on, before our song is over.”

Against all my better judgment, I put my feet over his,

waiting for him to wince at my weight.
At least his bones felt

sturdy under mine.

“A little closer, Green; I won’t bite.”

I leaned forward, close enough that my cheek was resting

against his shoulder. Liam’s hand tightened around mine, and

I found my other hand bunching the fabric of his shirt. And I

was embarrassed, because I was positive he could feel my heart

hammering in my chest.

“No spinning,” I said. I wasn’t sure if my head or heart could

take it. Up close, He was so warm, and so beautiful. I was already

dizzy enough.

“No spinning,” he agreed.

When we began to move, it wasn’t really

dancing—just

some glorified swaying. Back and forth,
nice and easy. For once,

my brain was perfectly content to keep
its hands to itself. My

muscles moved slow, like honey. We
were completely out of

sync with the song, and then we weren't
even moving at all.

My cheek rested on his shoulder. The
hand on the small of back

slipped under my shirt and curled
against the skin there.

When the bells rang again, this time signaling lights-out

across the camp, there was an audible groan, loud enough to

get Liam chuckling. I didn't realize how tired I was until we

separated.

“Bed time,” he called, waving Zu over. She stood, brushing

herself off, signaling something to the group of kids she was

leaving.

The fire popped and hissed, buckling
under a steady stream

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of water from a nearby hose. The sound
it made was like an

animal having the life squeezed out of it.
And when the light was

finally gone, settling down into a pile of
unimpressive embers

spread out among the ash, there was
nothing but a screen of

smoke to separate me from where
Clancy Gray sat on the other

side of the pit, watching me with dark
eyes.

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TWENTY-

TWO

That was something Clancy Gray liked to do,

apparently—watch me.

Watch me while I sat out on the porch helping Zu lace her

new tennis shoes before walking with her and Hina to the cabin

serving as the classroom.

Watch me tease Chubs for being the first and only one to get

bitten by a tick.

Watch me wait by the fire pit with Lee
for Mike to arrive

with what our duties would be during
our time at East River.

All this watching from the window on
the second story of the

office, where he appeared to control
everything and do nothing.

Mike had mentioned that everyone older
than thirteen would

be responsible for doing some work, I
just hadn't realized that

the assignments were chosen for you. I didn't mind helping out

in the pantry, organizing and counting our supplies—but I would

have so preferred being out with Chubs in the camp's small gar-

den, or running around the forest with Liam on security detail.

It was strange not to spend my entire day with them.

The kids I worked with were nice enough; more than nice,

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actually. Most had never seen the inside of a camp, but, then

again, I had never cooked a meal, so it wasn't like either party

was winning in the life experience department. What I liked

most was their brand of pluck. Lizzie, for instance, had been

hiding out at East River for close to two years, having narrowly

escaped capture by PSFs who had pulled her parents' car over

in Maryland.

“You just got out and ran?” I asked.

“Like the wind,” she confirmed. “Didn’t have anything on

me at all, ’cept what I was wearing. I tried to meet up with my

parents again, but they never went back to our old house. I got

picked up by a tribe of Greens and brought here.”

That was another thing: most of the kids here were either

Green or Blue, with a small tight-knit group of Yellows that

didn't really socialize outside of their own circle. Lizzie claimed

that there used to be more, but the Slip Kid had given them

permission to head out and form a tribe of their own.

“He gave them permission?” I repeated, marking down how

many boxes of cereal we had left.

“Yeah, and there are other requirements, too.” That, from

Dylan, a small-boned kid who had only recently finished his

Cubbies lessons. He claimed the nickname came from the wood

shelving units Clancy had built to store all of their books and

schoolwork.

“You have to have at least a group of five,” he continued.

“And then Clancy has to determine whether or not it’s safe, and

you have to swear on your life not to reveal anything about the

camp, unless it's to another kid in need, and then you can only

reveal the clue. It's to keep everyone safe. It would kill him if

something happened to a kid because of him.”

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I felt myself soften a little then. It wasn't so much that I

didn't trust Clancy's motivations; he just unnerved me. When

someone takes such an interest in you,
you have to wonder what

it is exactly they're searching for in your
face.

“What are you *doing*?”

All three of us looked over to the door,
where Clancy stood

stiff and still, staring at me. The wind
from the open door behind

him tugged at his dark hair, causing it to
stand on end. Some-

thing inside of me coiled at his
expression, but it wasn't fear.

“We’re sorting,” Lizzie said, confused.
“Is something wrong?”

Clancy snapped out of whatever daze he
had been stuck

in. “Yeah, sorry, it’s just—Ruby, would
you mind coming with

me for a second? I think there was some
confusion on your

assignment.”

I passed my clipboard back to Lizzie,
wondering why her

eyes narrowed at me.

“I was assigned to Storage,” I said,
when we were standing

outside on the porch.

“I didn’t assign you anything,” he said.
“I specifically told

Mike that.”

I’d like to think that I wasn’t the type of
person to be eas-

ily intimidated by other kids—even the
ones that were taller,

stronger, or better armed than I was. So
I’m not sure why it hit

me then that I was talking to *Clancy Gray*. The son of the most

powerful man in the country. A blue-blooded American prince,

who wore his black polo shirt with the collar popped under a

matching cable-knit sweater. He was even wearing a leather belt.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m more than capable of

pulling my weight.”

Out in the sunlight, he was far less intimidating than he had

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been in the shade. And shorter. It was possible his reputation had

added a few imaginary inches, but he was only a bit taller than

I was, which meant both Liam and Chubs stood a nearly a full

head over him. Not that it did anything to knock his title of The

Most Attractive Person I Had Ever Seen.

Clancy was lean but not slight, well-kept

but not groomed,

composed but not comfortable. I thought,
as the wind blew

against us, that he might have been
wearing some spicy cologne,

but that seemed ridiculous.

I was glad we were out on the porch,
where everyone by

the fire pit could see us. I didn't think he
was going to hurt

me, or anything like that—why would
he? I felt my hands clasp

together in front of me, then move to my side, then rise up to

cup my elbows, like they couldn't figure out what they wanted

to be doing.

I hadn't forgotten my whole purpose in coming here, but

I couldn't bring myself to ask for his help. He clearly had a

good grasp on his own abilities if he was voluntarily diving into

people's minds—the question should have come as naturally as

breathing.

If he had these kids following his every whim and order, it

had to be because he was a good guy, right? People didn't help

other people just for their health. Clancy had the kind of confi-

dence that made him the sun at the center of East River's galaxy.

Everything and everyone orbited around his light.

So why couldn't I bring myself to ask? Why were my hands

still shaking?

“I know you probably won’t ever come around to liking me

after our introduction,” he said, “but I am sorry. It didn’t occur

to me that you were keeping that information secret.”

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“It’s fine,” I said. “But what does that have to do with my

work assignment?”

For a few moments, he didn't say anything at all. He just . . .

stared.

“Will you stop?” I muttered, feeling both flustered and

annoyed at once. “If I say you're forgiven, will you stop doing

that?”

His mouth turned up in a handsome grin. “No.”

Clancy, who apparently had never been taught about respect-

ing someone's personal space, took a step forward, and I took a

step back, my feet sinking into the sticky mud. Instead of back-

ing off, he seemed to take it as a challenge, and came toward me

again. For whatever reason, mostly the flutter of nerves in my

guts, I let him.

“Listen,” he said, finally. “The reason I told Mike not to

assign you anything is because I'm hoping that you'll come work

with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on, you heard me.” His hand closed over my arm

again and it was like a bee had been set loose inside of my skull.

My brain seemed to lurch full speed back into life, flooding with

milky-white images of the two of us sitting in front his desk,

staring at each other as a fire devoured everything around us.

The images *he* was flooding into *my* mind.

I don't know how he did it, but it was so *real*. The image was

burning me up from the inside out, blistering my lungs. Pockets

of acrid smoke bubbled up under my skin, until it felt like I was

about to burst open. My vision burned to black at the edges. Fire

bloomed on my clothes, singeing my hair.

This is not real, this is not real, this is

NOT REAL—

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Clancy must have let go, or I must have found a way to twist

away, because just as quickly as the fire came, it went back out,

dispersing in three shaky exhales.

“You can’t block me,” he said, his eyes wide. “Do you even

know how to use your abilities? The file the League had on you

made it sound like you could control it.”

Wasn't it obvious? I shook my head.
That's why I'm here, I

wanted to say. *That's why I need you.*

His gaze flicked down over me, from head to toe and back up

again. When he spoke, his voice was soft. Sympathetic. “Look, I

know how it is. You don't think I struggled with this, too? How

lonely it is to not be able to touch someone the way you want

to, how terrifying it is to be trapped in
somebody else's head

without knowing the way out? Ruby,
everything I've learned I

had to teach myself, and it was awful. I
want to save you from

that. I can teach you things, tricks—how
to use your talents the

way they're meant to be used.”

I hoped he couldn't see the way my
hands were shaking. Oh

my God, he had offered—I hadn't even
had to ask—and I still

couldn't say a damn thing.

Clancy's posture relaxed, and when he touched me again,

flicking my braid back over my shoulder, there was no ill will

behind it. "Think about it, okay? If you decide you want to, just

come to the office. I'll clear my schedule for you."

I pressed my lips together, biting down hard on my tongue.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to know how to use

your abilities,” Clancy added. “That’s the only way we’re ever going to beat them.”

Beat who?

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“There are so few of us left,” he said. “Until you showed up

in the system, I actually thought I was the only one.”

“Well, there’s at least one more. His name is Martin—”

“And he’s with the Children’s League,” he finished. “I know.

I accessed their report on him. Creepy kid. When I said *us* I

meant the non-psychotic Oranges.”

I snorted.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, finally. I was pinned under his

dark gaze again; the hair on my arms standing on end, like a

whisper of electricity had run over it. I took an unknowing step

closer to him.

“Listen to your gut,” Clancy said, turning to head back inside

the Office. A cluster of kids called out to him from where they

were setting up lunch near the fire pit and, ever the president’s

son, he smiled and waved at them real pretty.

Listen to your gut.

So why was it at odds with my head?

I made a beeline for the wood dock I had

discovered the afternoon

before, needing to find some way to
wash out the jitters racing

through my heart. My mind felt tangled
with the possibilities.

Clancy Gray had just offered me
everything I could have

asked for. A way to avoid repeating
what had happened to my

parents and Sam. A way to be with
Liam, to find Grams, to not

live in constant fear of what I could do
to them. So why hadn't

my *yes* come tumbling out, then?

I ducked under the rope tying off the path to the lake and

made it all the way down the trail before I realized anything was

amiss.

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“*Crap*, ” I said when I saw him.

“Oh no—no, no, no,” Chubs said. The goofy grin dropped off

his face and he stopped throwing bread crusts out to the ducks

gathered in the water. “This is *my* secret hideout. No Rubys

allowed.”

“I found it first!” I huffed, plopping down next to him.

“You most certainly did not.”

“Try a week ago, while you were unpacking.”

He balked at that. “Well . . . fine. But I got here first

today.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on Garden duty?”

“Got tired of hearing some girl coo about how smart the Slip

Kid is for making them plant carrots.”
He leaned back. “Aren’t

you on Storage duty?”

I looked down at where my hands had clenched into fists.

When I didn’t answer, Chubs set bread bag aside and sat up

straight.

“Hey, are you all right?” He put a cool hand to my forehead.

“You look like you’re going to be sick. Are you experiencing any migraines or dizziness?”

That was an understatement. I croaked out a laugh.

“Oh.” He pulled his hand away. “*That* kind of head trouble.”

I lay back against the rough wood and threw my arm over

my eyes, hoping the darkness might help dampen the headache.

“You said Jack taught you how to use your abilities?”

“Pretty much,” he said. “That was the only way I was ever

going to learn—if some other kid taught me, I mean. It just took

a while to decide.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought that if I didn’t use them, they’d eventually

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go away,” Chubs said, quietly. “I thought everything might go

back to normal. There’s scientific evidence that if we stop using

parts of our brains, those sections will eventually cease to func-

tion, you know.” After a moment, he asked, “Did Clancy offer to

help you with your abilities?”

I nodded. “I told him I’d think about it.”

“What’s there to think about?” Chubs
smacked me on the

stomach with his book. “Didn’t you say
that you didn’t know

how to control it?”

“Well, yeah, but—” *I’m afraid of how
much I don’t know.*

“You need to be able to control it,
otherwise it’ll always con-

trol you,” he said. “It’ll scare you and
manipulate you until you

go crazy, die, or they find the cure. And
guess which one of those

things will probably happen first.”

The lunch bell sounded—two rings, for second meal. Chubs

stood and stretched, throwing the rest of the bread out into the

water.

“You really think they’re going to find a cure?” I asked.

“My dad used to say that anything was possible when you

put your mind to it.” His mouth twisted into a humorless smile.

At the mention of his father, my stomach clenched.

“You still haven’t had a chance to send them a message.”

“I’ve asked around, but there’s only one computer in this entire godforsaken place, and only one person gets to use it.”

That’s right. The silver laptop on Clancy’s desk.

“Did you ask him if you could use it for a few minutes?”

“Yeah,” Chubs said, as the fire pit came

into view. It looked

like they were handing out sandwiches and apples. “He said

no. Apparently it’s a ‘security risk’ if someone other than him

touches it.”

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I shook my head. “I’ll ask tomorrow. Maybe I can convince

him.”

“Could you?” Chubs grabbed my arm, his face lightening

considerably. “Will you tell him that we have a very important

letter to deliver, but we need to be able to look up Jack’s father’s

new address? Tell him we’ll do anything —no, tell him that I will

personally lick every single pair of shoes he owns clean.”

“How about I just tell him that it’s the whole reason we came

here in the first place,” I said, “and

leave your tongue out of it?”

Chubs waited until I had taken my sandwich from the table

before pulling me away. I thought he might want to eat back

at the cabin or even the dock, but we wandered until we found

Liam.

He and a few of the other guys on the security team were

on a break from their rounds, and had found themselves a nice

clearing in the trees. It was just wide enough to square off into

two small teams for a quick game of hover ball, otherwise known

as football with no hands. Chubs and I found an old tree trunk

to share, ignoring the small group of female spectators who had

gathered to cheer the teams on.

A tall redhead with an explosion of freckles on his face levi-

tated the old football at the start of a play. He ran alongside it,

trying to keep both it and himself out of the reach of the others.

Liam, at one point, had the football an inch in front of him, but

his hands were too slow and his footwork too bad to catch it

when it was tossed to him.

“Keep your eye on the ball, butterfingers!” I called. Liam’s

head whipped around in our direction. Just as his gaze locked on

mine, Mike, who had the football at that point, mowed him over

to get to their makeshift end zone.

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Chubs and I cringed as Liam hit the ground, knocking his

head back against one of the old trees' roots.

“Wow,” I said. “He wasn’t kidding about sucking at sports.”

“It’d be funny if it weren’t so damn sad.”

The other boys were too busy laughing to keep the ball in

the air. Liam stayed on the ground, his face flushed red, but his

entire body shaking with laughter. He lifted his shirt to wipe the

sweat off his face, giving me, along with every other girl present,

a glimpse of skin.

This time, I was the one blushing.

One of the guys I didn't recognize jogged over to Liam

and helped him up, patting him on the shoulder. They laughed

together like they had known each other since preschool.

But that was Liam for you—he joked about Zu making

friends at the drop of a hat, but he was the same way. But Chubs

and I were perfectly content to sit by ourselves, watching, wait-

ing, but not dipping our toes into the ocean. Maybe we had just

gotten too used to be alone to be that way—and maybe that

needed to change.

The next morning, at exactly nine twenty-one, I found myself

standing outside of Clancy Gray's office, my hand raised and

ready to knock. The only thing preventing me, besides the nerves

hula-hooping my guts, was the conversation happening on the

other side of the door.

“—sure we have the kind of numbers to do that. If I sent the

amount of kids we'd need, there wouldn't be enough left here to

maintain watch.” It was a girl’s voice, soft but not sweet. Olivia,

most likely, if they were talking about security.

“I get what you’re saying, Liv, but it would be a waste to

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miss this opportunity,” Clancy was saying. “We’re getting low on

medical supplies and Leda Corp has stopped running as many

trucks up through our area.”

“Are you going on another one of your trips?” she pressed.

“Isn’t that when you usually pick up tips about shipments?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just . . . you haven’t gone on one in almost a year,” Olivia

said. “And you used to go all the time. I know we haven’t been

hurting for supplies, but maybe if you met with your source . . .”

“No,” Clancy said, with finality. “I can’t leave the camp any-

more. It’s not safe.”

The floorboards creaked. “Did something come up on the

PSF scanner?” came Hayes’ gruff voice.

“They heard about the fruit stunt, obviously,” Clancy said. “It

would have been hard to miss, considering you mutilated that

driver.”

“Why d’ya have to say it like that?”

“Because you should have just left him there like I told you

to. I appreciate you wanting to spread the symbol, but couldn't

you have spray-painted it on the truck?”

“Are you worried this'll be bad for our *image*?” Olivia's voice

dripped annoyance.

“Most people are going to have a hard enough time accept-

ing that we're not monsters without reports about us maiming

innocent people,” Clancy said. “So, please, keep spreading the

black. Keep using the symbol. Just . . . try for some subtlety.”

“Some what tea?” Hayes asked.

“I’m sorry to cut our meeting short, but it seems like you

both have things under control and I have someone waiting for

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me,” Clancy said. I pulled myself away

from the door. “Liv, plan

the hit. I’ll worry about our numbers.”

I took a few steps back down the staircase, but it was point-

less to pretend that I hadn’t been listening. The door opened,

and the girl—Olivia—was the first to appear. She was tall and

willowy, with legs for days and a tan that made her skin glow.

I shook my head and turned to allow her and Hayes to

squeeze by. Olivia was probably about my age, but she looked so

much older. She looked like what I imagined twenty would feel

like. When I looked up again, Clancy was leaning against the

doorframe, grinning.

“You came.” He waved me inside and guided me toward his

desk. Sitting down in one of the chairs, I had a fleeting look at

the other side of his room, where the curtain had been restrung.

Clancy took his usual seat behind his desk, rocking the chair

back as he smiled. “What made you change your mind?”

“It’s . . . like you said,” I mumbled. “There are so few of us

left.” *And I want to know how I can be around the people I love and*

not be terrified of erasing myself.

“I read on League’s network that they weren’t able to find

any other Oranges aside from you and Martin,” Clancy said.

“Most of the Reds were killed, apparently. That puts us at the head of the pack.”

“I guess,” I said. Another thought occurred to me. “How

do you have access to the League’s network? And the PSFs?” I

gestured around the room. “*Any* of this?”

“I have friends everywhere,” Clancy said, simply. His fin-

gers drummed against his desk. “And my father leaves me alone

because he wouldn't be able to stand the outrage if I expose the

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fact that there is no rehabilitation program, not for people like

you and me.”

“Me and you,” I repeated.

Clancy ran a hand through his hair. “The first thing you need

to understand, Ruby, is that we're not like the others. Me and

you . . . everyone classified as Orange.
We're different. Special.

No—no, wait, I see you rolling your
eyes, but you have to lis-

ten, okay? Because the second thing you
have to understand, is

that everyone—my father, the camp
controllers, the scientists,

the PSFs, the Children's League—
they've been lying to you this

entire time. We're special not because
of what we are, but what

they can't make us into."

“You’re not making any sense,” I said.

He stood up and came around the desk to sit next to me.

“Would it help if I told you my story first?” My eyes flicked up to

meet his. “If I do, you have to promise that it stays between us.”

Keeping secrets. That, I could do.

“All right,” he said, “give me your hand. I’m going to have

to show you.”

When I had slipped into other minds,

there had always been a

queasy feeling of sinking involved in it.
More often than not,

I found myself dropped in the middle of
a swamp of dimly lit

memories and unrestrained feelings with
no map, no flashlight,

and no easy way of finding the way out.

But there was nothing frightening about
Clancy's mind. His

memories were bright and crisp, full of
blooming images and

colors. It felt like he had taken my hand there, too, and was

guiding me down a long hallway of windows into his past. We

only stopped long enough for me to glance inside each of them.

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The office that pieced together around me was plain, stuffed

full of gunmetal gray filing cabinets, but little else. It could have

been anywhere; the white paint was fresh enough that it bubbled

on the wall. But I recognized the beginnings of crescent-shaped

machine in its back corner and the man staring me down from

across the card table serving as his desk. He was plump and bald-

ing at his hairline—and a permanent fixture in the Infirmary. I

watched his lips move in a soundless explanation, my eyes drift-

ing down to the crisp stack of papers on

the desk in front of him.

My eyes kept drifting down to his hand
resting against the table,

weighing down a sheet of once-folded
paper that was trying to

curl back in on itself. There at the top of
it—the White House

stationery. The words went into crystal
focus, and I felt my eyes

jump over them, drinking them in with
disbelief. *Dear Sirs, You*

*may have my permission to run tests
and experimental treatments on*

*my son, Clancy James Beaumont Gray,
provided these do not leave*

visible scars.

The lights in the office grew brighter and
brighter, bleach-

ing out the memory. When they faded
again, I was in a much

different room in the Infirmary, this one
all blue tiles and beep-

ing monitors. *No!* I thought, trying to jerk
free of the Velcro

restraints that held me down against the
metal table. I knew

what this place was.

The overhead lights were drawn down closer to my face by a

gloved hand. At the corner of my vision, I saw the scientists and

doctors in their white scrubs, setting up machines and computers

around me. My jaw was clenched shut around the leather muzzle

they had strapped to the back of my head, and hands kept my

head still as wires and monitors were hooked up. I struggled

again, twisting my neck far enough to
catch sight of a table lined

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with scalpels and small drills; I saw my
reflection in the nearby

observation windows—young, pale with
terror, a mirror image

of the portraits that would later hang
across the camp.

The harsh light from above grew and
swelled, eating the

scene. When it faded, the memory had changed again. My eyes

fell first on the hand I was shaking, then slid up to the unfocused

eyes of the same scientist I had seen before. The men hovering

around us all had that murky quality to their expressions—blank

smiles, blanker eyes. I squared my shoulders, a small thrill of

victory working its way through my center as I moved through

the main gate to the waiting black car.

The man in the suit that

welcomed me in with a perfunctory pat
on the shoulder wasn't

the president but he appeared in nearly
every memory that fired

by next, ushering me onto stages in
school auditoriums, outside

domed state capital buildings, in front of
cameras at the centers

of small towns. Each time, I would be
handed the same set of

note cards to read, be faced with the
same expressions of hope

and deep grief from the crowd. Always,
my lips began to form

the same words, *My name is Clancy
Gray, and I am here to tell you*

*how the camp rehabilitation program
saved my life.*

Another light, this time from a camera's
flash. When the

shock of it faded, I was looking up into a
face that was an older,

weathered version of my own. The
photographer flipped the

monitor around for us to see the portrait,

and I was no longer

seeing myself as a boy, but a young man
—fifteen, maybe even

sixteen. As the photographer set up his
equipment again, this

time across the room, I put a hand on the
president's back,

guiding him around the couches, to the
great dark wood desk.

The rosebushes were scratching intently
at the windows, but I

directed his focus to the sheet of paper
waiting there for him, and

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compelled him to pick up the pen. When
he finished signing, he

turned to me with an unfocused gaze and
a numb, unknowing

smile.

Weeks must have passed, months, maybe
even years—I felt

the exhaustion creep through me,
wrapping itself like a heavy

chain around my center. It was dark

now; I couldn't place the

time of night, though I saw that it was a hotel room, and not a

particularly good one. I was staring up at the ceiling, half buried

under the covers, when a figure seemed to peel itself out from

the shadows of the closet. It was fast, almost too much for me

to keep up with. A man in a black mask, the metallic gleam of

a gun—I threw my covers up off me, and kicked my leg out,

sending the attacker stumbling back. The shot went off from his

gun with a combustion of light and little sound. The smell of it

scorched my nostrils.

I was flipped onto my back, one of the man's forearms braced

against my neck, crushing the fragile rings of cartilage. My hands

lashed out, hitting the rough carpet, the nightstand, and, finally

his face. Not even the terror pulsing through every inch of me

kept me from crashing into his mind.

STOP! I felt my lips form the word, but I couldn't hear

myself. *STOP!*

And the man did, with the blank look of someone whose

skull had just been cracked open and exposed to freezing air. He

sat back, his gun on the floor at his side.

I was coughing and hacking, trying to bring air into my

lungs, but I grabbed the gun and stuffed it

into the waistband of

my pajamas. I stopped long enough to grab my winter coat from

where it had been thrown across the room's desk chair, and then

I was outside, in the hallway, staring at the place where a man

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should have been posted outside my door to guard me. And I

knew, I *knew* what was going on. I knew

what would happen to

me if someone were to find me alive in the morning.

I was running down the hotel's stairs, out through the

kitchens, out back past the Dumpsters and through the park-

ing lot. Running, my chest on fire, hearing the sound of voices

shouting after me, boots pounding on the pavement. Running

for the trees, the darkness—

“Ruby— *Ruby!*”

I came back to myself in Clancy’s office bit by bit, with a

headache severe enough that I had to put my face between my

legs to avoid throwing up all over myself.

“They tried to kill you,” I said, when I finally found my

voice. “Who?”

“Who do you think?” Clancy’s voice was dry. “That man was

one of the Secret Service agents who were supposed to be guard-

ing me.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” I pressed the back of my

hand to my forehead, squeezing my eyes shut against the dizzy-

ness. “If they were carting you around and using you to explain

the rehab program, then why . . . ?”

“Because he figured out that I hadn’t been rehabbed at all,”

he said. “My father, I mean. The only reason they let me out of

Thurmond is because I made them think that I *had* been cured.

But I got too ambitious. I tried to play my father by influenc-

ing him, and I got caught.” Clancy trailed off for a moment.

“He was worried that the truth about the camps would get out,

I’m sure, but he couldn’t just take me out of the public eye, not

when he’d been the one to thrust me into

it. No, I think in his

mind, it was easier to just get rid of me
altogether, before I could

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make trouble. I can only imagine what
kind of spin he'd put on

my murder to get back in the sympathetic
graces of his fellow

Americans.”

I stared at him for a long while,
speechless.

How did you survive that life? I wanted to ask. *How are you*

you, and not the monster they would have turned you into?

“After I got out that night I met Hayes, and then Olivia, and

then others. We found this place and went to work, and all the

while my father couldn't put a bounty out on me, not without

exposing the truth about me and his rehab program. He had to

make up some lie about me attending

college to get the press

off his back.” Clancy smiled then. “So, you see, I did win in the

end.”

He rose from his chair, reaching out a hand. I took it with-

out being conscious of it, feeling some calm wash over me as

he squeezed my fingers. My head was silent. I felt myself lean

forward.

“When I heard your story, I knew I had

to meet you. I had

to make sure that you knew the truth about what was going on,

so you wouldn't be caught in the dark the way I was."

"The truth?" I looked up, startled. "What do you mean?"

Clancy didn't release my hand; he only sat on the edge of

his desk in front of me. "The woman who broke you out of

Thurmond—the League agent? What did she tell you about the

White Noise they used that day?”

“That the camp controllers had embedded a frequency in it

that only Oranges, Reds, and Yellows could detect,” I said. He

must have known about that—they used the same method to

broadcast the location of the camp.

“That they were trying to

pick out any of the dangerous ones that were still hiding out.”

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Clancy released my hand and reached back to turn his laptop

so it faced us. On the screen was a snapshot of my face on the

morning they had brought us into camp, but the text beside it

wasn't my history.

“Read the second paragraph aloud.”

I looked up at him, confused, but did as he asked. ““Camp

Controller Harris discovered the

discrepancy in the Calm Control

at 05:23 the following morning, after noticing an underlying fre-

quency that had been added without his consent.”” I paused,

licking my dry lips. ““Upon further investigation of the record-

ing devices in the Mess Hall, he came to the conclusion that the

outbreak of violence there that resulted in the use of the Calm

Control at approximately 11:42 was directly provoked by under-

cover operatives from the terrorist group the Children's League.

He believes these same operatives planted an identification fre-

quency in the Calm Control. Psi subjects 3285 and 5312 who

were taken from camp boundaries at approximately 03:34 by a

Children's League operative, are now believed to have been mis-

takenly identified as Green upon their initial classification. . . .”

“Keep going,” Clancy said, when my

voice trailed off.

““Subjects 3285 and 5312 are believed to be highly danger-

ous. Orders have been issued for their immediate recapture and

reprocessing’ — *reprocessing?*” My eyes flew up again. “But the

way this is written . . . they didn’t know . . . they didn’t . . . Are

you trying to tell me that they had no idea I was an Orange until

after I got out?”

Clancy nodded. “It sounds that way.”

“Then I wasn’t in any danger after all? They wouldn’t have killed me?”

“Oh, you were definitely in danger,” he said. “They had all of

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the pieces and it just took one curious mind to put it all together.

But if you’re asking whether or not you would have been caught

if the League hadn't planted the frequency—then, the answer to

that is no, probably not.”

“Then why did they do it?” I demanded.

“It seems like a huge

risk to take to only get a few kids.”

“A few extremely valuable, *rare* kids,”

he corrected. “Kids

that would have been killed otherwise.”

Seeing my expression, he added, not unkindly, “You didn’t

really think they let any of the kids like us live, did you? Not

Oranges. Yellows, yes, because their threat can be contained, but

not Oranges.”

I passed a hand over my face. “What about the Reds, then?

They were killed, too?”

“No,” Clancy said. His voice became

quiet, hesitant. “They
had a much worse fate.”

I waited for him to continue, hands
twisting in my lap.

“The president’s classified program.”
Clancy crossed his arms
over his chest, leaning back. “Project
Jamboree. Dear old Dad’s
been training himself a special army
using all of the Reds they
took from the camps. So you can see
why . . .” He cleared his

throat. “You can see why the League would be interested in find-

ing any particularly dangerous kids for their own.”

I shook my head, dropping my face into my hands. Of all of

the scenarios I had imagined—of all the things I thought had

happened to those kids—this was too insane for me to have ever

dreamed up.

“How could they force them into this?” I asked, my voice

sounding hollow to my own ears. “Why did they agree?”

“What other choice do they have?” Clancy asked. “They were

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made to think that if they didn't cooperate, something would

happen to their families. They underwent a special conditioning

program to make them think that they were needed and cared

for absolutely. Before my father and his advisers figured out I

was influencing them, I was able to supervise enough of the

program to ensure that they *would* be cared for—better than if

they had been in camps, at least.” He shook his head. “Don’t be

afraid for them. They’ll get out from under my father’s control

one day.”

And they’re not dead, I thought; there’s that.

“Ruby.”

I looked up, feeling cold down to my guts.

“Let me show you what I know,” he whispered, his other

hand rising to brush the hair off my cheek. The clenched mass

of nerves in my stomach eased at the touch, and I felt what few

suspicious I had left about him unwinding. We were the same,

in the ways that mattered. He wanted to help me, even though

I had nothing to offer him in return.

“No one will be able to hurt you or change you if you can

fight them off,” he said, softly.

It wasn't depression that drove me forward—it wasn't even

self-pity. It was a pure, distilled strand of hatred, weaving its way

through my core. I thought the Slip Kid would be able to help

me reclaim my old life, but now I knew that wasn't enough. I

needed him to help me protect my future.
When I spoke, my

words burned the air between us.

“Teach me.”

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TWENTY-

THREE

Just because Clancy had all that power,
it didn't

mean he actually used it. It was strange
to me that someone

who could influence the thoughts of
others had been born with

a personality that naturally drew people
to him. I witnessed it

firsthand, when he offered to give me a
tour of the camp.

Clancy waved at the few kids in black
around the fire pit.

His presence sent a buzz through the air.
Smiles bloomed on

every face we passed, and there wasn't
a single person that didn't

wave at us or call out some kind of
greeting, even if it was just

a quick, "Yo!"

"Do you ever talk to anyone of them
about what you've been

through?" I asked.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, as if the

question had startled him. I watched as he tucked his hands in

the back pockets of his pants, his shoulders slumping with his

thoughts.

“They’ve put their trust in me,” he said, with a small, sad

smile. “I don’t want to worry them. They have to believe I can

take care of them, otherwise our system wouldn’t work.”

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This “system” was something else. It’s one thing to carve the

Psi symbol into the side of buildings and string up banners over

porches, but to actually internalize the message?

My first true example of this came when the girl in charge

of the camp’s gardens stomped up to us on the main trail and

demanded that Clancy punish three kids who she believed had

been stealing fruit under her nose.

It took me two seconds of listening to Clancy talk the situa-

tion out to realize that the way of life at East River wasn't built

on a foundation of hard and fast rules, but rested almost entirely

on his good judgment and what everyone under him perceived

to be fair.

The accused were three Green boys,
only a few months out

of Cubbies. The girl in charge of the
Garden had left them sitting

in the dark dirt like ducks in a row. Each
wore black shirts, but

their jeans were in different states of
disarray. I stood off to the

side as Clancy knelt in front of them,
completely unbothered by

the wet earth staining his own pressed
pants.

“Did you steal that fruit?” Clancy asked

gently. “Please tell
me the truth.”

The three boys exchanged looks. It fell
on the larger one

sitting in the middle to answer. “Yes we
did. We’re very sorry.”

I raised my brows.

“Thank you for being honest,” Clancy
said. “Can I ask you
why?”

The boys were silent for a few minutes.
Finally, through some

coaxing, Clancy got the truth again. “Pete has been really sick

and hasn’t been able to come to meals. He didn’t want anyone

to know, because he thought he’d get in trouble for not coming

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to Cleaning Duty this week and he—he didn’t want to let you

down. We’re sorry, we’re *so sorry*.”

“I understand,” Clancy said. “But if Pete

is really sick, you
should have told me.”

“You said at the last camp meeting that
the med stuff was
low. He didn’t want to take any
medicine, in case someone else
needed it.”

“It sounds like he does, though, if he’s
too weak to come
to meals,” Clancy pointed out. “You
know that when you take
food from the garden there’s a chance

that it could throw off the

meals we have planned for everyone.”

The boys nodded, looking miserable. Clancy looked up at the

kids gathered around us and asked, “What would you like them

to do in return for taking the fruit?”

The girl in charge opened her mouth but another, older boy

stepped up and leaned the rake in his hands against the simple

fence surrounding the garden. “If they’re

willing to help weed for

a few days, a couple of us will take turns sitting with Pete and

making sure he gets meals and medicine.”

Clancy nodded. “That sounds fair. What does everyone else

think?”

I thought the girl in charge was going to stamp her foot in

anger when everyone else agreed on that “punishment.” She was

deeply unhappy with the outcome, if the red in her cheeks was

any indication. “This isn’t just a one-time problem, Clancy,” she

said, walking us out of the garden. “People think they can just

come in here and take what they want, and it’s not like we can

lock it like the storeroom!”

“I promise I’ll put it on the agenda at our camp meeting next

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month,” Clancy said with one of his smiles. “It’ll be right at the top of new business.”

That seemed to satisfy her, at least for now. With one curious

look flung in my direction, the Empress of Vegetables turned on

her heel and marched back into her domain.

“Wow,” I said, “she’s a real gem.”

He shrugged, absentmindedly fiddling

with his right ear.

“She has a valid point. If we start running low on food in the

storeroom, we have to lean on the gardens, and if that’s been

picked over we’re in trouble. I think everyone here has come to

understand how interconnected life is at East River. Hey—do

you mind if I stop by and visit Pete?”

I smiled. “Of course not.”

The little boy was buried under a mound

of blankets—if the

bare mattresses around it were any indication, the other boys had

gladly donated theirs to his pile. When his flushed face finally

emerged from the covers, I said hello and introduced myself.

Clancy stayed to speak with him for a good fifteen minutes, but I

waited outside in the fresh air, watching the comings and goings

of the camp. Kids waved and smiled at me, like I had been there

for years, not a few days. I waved back,
something tightening

in my chest. I don't know when it had
dawned on me, or if it

had been a slow, creeping realization,
but I had begun to under-

stand that black—the color that I had
trained myself to fear and

hate—was the same thing that allowed
these kids to feel a small

measure of pride and solidarity.

“You’ll never feel alone here,” Clancy
said, shutting the cabin

door behind him. We walked to the laundry building next, then

made a stop by the wash houses to test the faucets and make

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sure the lights were still working. Every now and then, someone

stopped Clancy to ask a question or air a complaint, but he was

never anything other than patient and understanding. I watched

him unravel a misunderstanding between cabinmates, take sug-

gestions for dinner, and give his opinion on whether the security

team needed more kids assigned to it.

By the time we reached the cabin that served as the Cubbies'

classroom, I was dead on my feet. Clancy, however, was ready to

give his weekly lesson on U.S. history.

The room was small and crowded, but well lit and decorated

with colorful posters and drawings. I spotted Zu and her pink

gloves even before I saw the teenage girl at the front of the room

tracing a finger down the length of the Mississippi River on an

old map of the United States. Hina sat next to Zu, of course,

frantically scribbling down notes. I suppose it shouldn't have sur-

prised me, but the kids actually cheered with Clancy appeared in

the doorway. The girl relinquished the

front of the room to him

immediately.

“Alllll right, alllll right,” Clancy began.

“Who can tell me

where we left off?”

“Pilgrims!” a dozen voices chimed in.

“*Pilgrims?*” he continued. “What are those? How about you,

Jamie? Do you remember who the pilgrims were?”

A girl about Zu’s age sat straight up.

“People in England

were being mean to them because of their religion, so they sailed

to America and landed at Plymouth Rock.”

“Can anyone tell me what they did after they got there?”

About ten hands shot in the air. He picked a little boy close

to him—he might have been a Green, but he could just as easily

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been a Yellow or Blue. My usual method of distinguishing kids

from one another was failing me now that we were all mixed

together. Which, I suppose, was the point.

“They set up a colony,” the boy answered.

“You got it. It was the second English colony, after the one

set up in Jamestown in 1607—not too far from where we are

now, actually!” Clancy picked up the

map the teacher had been

using and pointed out both places.

“While they were on the

Mayflower, they created the Mayflower Compact, which was an

agreement that guaranteed everyone would cooperate and act in

a way that would be beneficial to the colony. When they arrived,

they faced a lot of hardships. But they all worked together and

created a community where they were free from the English

crown's rule and could practice their faith openly." He stopped

pacing for a moment, casting his dark eyes out over his audience.

"Sound familiar?"

Beside me, Zu was all wide eyes. I was sitting close enough

to see the freckles on her face, but, more importantly, feel

the happiness radiating off her. I felt my own heart lift. Hina

leaned over to whisper something in her ear, and her smile only

grew.

“Sounds like us!” someone called, from the back of the room.

“You bet,” Clancy said, and talked for the next hour and a

half about how the pilgrims interacted with the native tribes,

about Jamestown, about all the things my mother used to teach

about at her high school. And when he had used up all his time,

he took a small bow and motioned for me to follow him outside

amidst all the groans and complaints
from the Cubbies. We were

both still chuckling as we walked to the
fire pit, where they were

just starting to set up for dinner. I felt a
number of eyes latch

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onto us immediately, but I didn't care. I
actually felt a small thrill

of pride.

“So?” Clancy said, as we stood beside

the Office's porch, lis-

tening to the bells calling everyone to dinner. "What do you

think?"

"I think I'm ready for my first lesson," I said.

"Oh, Miss Daly." A smile curled at the edges of his lips. "You

already had your first lesson. You just didn't realize it."

Two weeks passed like a page tearing from an old book.

I spent so many hours of so many days
locked inside Clancy's

room, pushing images into his mind,
blocking him from trying to

do the same, talking about the League,
Thurmond, and White

Noise, that we both fell out of sync with
the camp's schedule. He

had his daily meetings, but instead of
asking me to leave, he had

me wait on the other side of the white
curtain, where we were

now conducting most of our practice

sessions.

There were times he had to go out and inspect the cabins, or

handle an argument, but I almost always stayed up in that musty

old room. There were books and music and a TV at my disposal,

which meant I never once had the opportunity to be bored.

I still saw Chubs at some of our meals, but Clancy often had

food brought to us. Zu was even harder to track down, because

when she wasn't in class, she was with Hina or one of the older

Yellows. The only time I really spent with the two of them was at

night, before the camp's lights were shut off. Chubs, more often

than not, was a ghost—always working, looking for ways to

catch Clancy's attention by stitching up the kid who'd split her

lip or suggesting a more efficient way of harvesting the garden.

The longest I sat with him was when he

took out my stitches.

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Zu, for her part, delighted in showing me what she had

learned in school, and the tricks the other Yellows had taught

her outside of it.

After a few days, she stopped wearing her gloves. It only

really hit me one night, while she was brushing out my hair. I

had pulled away to go switch off the lights, but she beat me to

it—she snapped her fingers, and the overhead light blinked out.

“That’s amazing,” I gushed, but it would have been a terrible

lie to say I didn’t feel a pang of jealousy in how much progress

she had made. I had only been able to block Clancy out of my

mind once, and not before he had found out about what had

happened to Sam.

“Interesting” had been his only comment.

While I saw Zu and Chubs every day, Liam was a completely

different matter. The security team had him scheduled for the

second watch—five p.m. to five a.m.—all the way at the far west

end of the lake. He was usually too tired to stumble back to the

cabin after his shift, and spent most of his days sleeping in the

tents they had set up near that entrance. I saw him once or twice

talking animatedly to a crowd at breakfast or visiting with Zu at

Cubbies, but it was always from the window of Clancy's room.

I missed him to the point of a real, physical ache, but I

understood that he had responsibilities. When I had a thought

to spare, it usually went to him, but I was so focused on our les-

sons that it was hard to let my mind drift to anything else for

too long.

Clancy laughed, drawing my attention back to him from the

window, and I suddenly wasn't sure *how* I could let my thoughts

wander. He was wearing a white polo shirt that emphasized the

natural glow of his skin, and pressed khaki pants casually rolled

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at the ankle. Whenever he was out with others, he was properly

buttoned up, his clothes clean and ironed within an inch of their

lives—but not with me.

Here, we didn't have to put on any show. Not for each other.

When we first started these lessons, it had been from either

side of his ridiculous desk; it felt like I was squaring off against

a school principal, not being guided through a Psi lesson by my

freak guru. Next, we had tried the floor, but after a few hours

of sitting, my back felt like it was ready to crumble. He had

been the one to suggest sitting on his narrow bed. He had taken

one end and I had taken the other. Then, we started inching

closer. Bridging the distance on his red quilt, nearer to each other

with each lesson, until one day I snapped out of whatever haze

Clancy's dark eyes had put me in and realized our knees were

pressed up against one another.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, when I turned back toward him. “Can we go from the top?”

He found everything about me amusing, apparently. “Take

it from the top? Are we rehearsing for a play? Should I get Mike

in here to start building props?”

I’m not sure why I laughed at that—it wasn’t even all that

funny. Maybe trying to throw my brain at his for the last twenty

minutes had made me loopy. The only thing I seemed sure of

was how big and reassuring his hand felt as it took mine and

squeezed.

“Try again,” he said. “This time, try to imagine that those

invisible hands you were telling me about are actually knives.

Cut through the haze.”

Easier said than done. I nodded and closed my eyes, trying

to fight back the flood of color in my cheeks. Every time he used

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my lame way of explaining how my brain seemed to work, I felt

embarrassed, even a little bit ashamed. He had laughed the first

time I made the comparison, waved his fingers in front of my

face like he was casting a spell over me.

He had tried a number of different

methods to try to dem-

onstrate how to do it. We'd gone down to the pantry so I could

watch him slip into Lizzie's mind and, for no other purpose than

to make me laugh, ask her to cluck like a chicken. Clancy had

tried to show me how easy it was to affect the moods of multiple

people at once, settling an argument between two kids without

saying a single word. At one point, we'd sat on the stoop of the

Office and he'd read me the thoughts of everyone who passed

by—including poor Hina, who was, apparently, harboring a des-

perate crush on Clancy.

The truth was, he could do everything and anything. Block

me out, push in an image, a feeling, a fear. Once, I was sure, he

had even passed on a dream to me. I didn't want to feel like I

was disappointing him, not when he was giving me so much of

his precious time—the thought made everything inside of me

clench with fear. He told me to take it slow, that it had taken

him years to master all of this, but it was impossible *not* to want

to rush through the lessons, to get a grip on my abilities as soon

as possible. It seemed to me that the best way to repay his kind-

ness was to master myself to the point where I could stand beside

him and feel pride, not shame, in what I

could do.

Until I could unlock his secrets, we were never going to be

equals. He had called me his “friend” several times, during our

lessons and in front of other kids, and it surprised me how much I

recoiled at the term. Clancy had hundreds of friends. I wanted to

be more than that—I wanted him to trust me and confide in me.

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Sometimes, I just wanted him to lean closer, to tuck my hair

behind my ear. It was a repulsively girly thought, though, and

I wasn't sure what dark corner of my mind it had come crawl-

ing out of. I think my head was playing tricks on me, because

I knew what I really wanted was for *Liam* to do that—do more

than that.

But every time I tried to slip into Clancy's mind, I was

thrown back. Clancy had so much control over his powers that

I didn't even have time to feel the usual disorienting rush of

thoughts and memories. Every single time, it was like he had

drawn a white curtain around his brain. No amount of tearing

could bring it down.

That didn't mean I didn't try, though.

Clancy smiled, reaching over to brush my hair back over my

shoulder. His hand lingered there, sliding over to cup the back of

my neck. I knew he was staring at me, but I couldn't bring my

eyes up to meet his, even as he leaned closer.

“You can do this. I know you can.”

My teeth clenched until I felt my jaw pop. A muscle twitched

in my right cheek. I tried drawing the hundreds and thousands of

wandering fingers together, focusing them into something sharp

and lethal enough to penetrate his wall. I squeezed his hand,

increasing my grip until I'm sure he felt pain, and threw the

invisible dagger toward him, diving in as fast and hard as I could.

And still, the moment I brushed up against that white wall, it

felt like he had reached over and slapped me across the face. He

sighed and dropped his hand.

“Sorry,” I said, hating the silence that followed.

“No, I’m the one that’s sorry.” Clancy shook his head. “I’m a terrible teacher.”

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“Trust me, you are not the problem in this equation.”

“Ruby, Ruby, Ruby,” he said, “this isn’t an equation. You

can’t solve it in three easy steps,

otherwise you wouldn't have
accepted my help, right?"

I looked down as he began to rub his
thumb over my

upturned palm. A slow, lazy circle. It
was strangely calming, and

almost hypnotizing to watch.

"That's true," I began. "But you should
know I haven't

exactly been . . . honest."

That got his attention.

“The others—they were looking for you because they thought

you were some magic man that could get them home. But I

wanted to look for you because I was banking on the rumors that

you were an Orange, and that you might be willing to teach me.”

Clancy’s dark brows drew together, but he didn’t let go of

my hand. Instead, he rested his other palm on the sliver of space

between our crossed legs. “But that was

before I told you what

the League was planning for you,” he said. “What did you want

me to help you with? No—let me guess. Something to do with

what happened to your parents, right?”

“How I erased myself,” I confirmed.

“How to keep it from

happening again.”

Clancy closed his eyes for a brief moment, and when he

finally opened them, his eyes seemed

darker than before, almost

black. I leaned in closer, picking up on a strange mix of sadness,

guilt, and something else that seemed to be seeping through his

pores.

“I wish I could help you with that,” he said, “but the truth is,

I can’t do what you can. I have no idea how to help you.”

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I have no idea how to help you. Of course. Of course he didn't.

Martin was an Orange, too, but he didn't have the same abilities

I did. I wonder why I'd assumed the Slip Kid would.

"If you . . . tell me about it, and explain how you think it

works, I—then I might be able to figure something out."

It wasn't so much that I couldn't talk about it; it was that

I didn't want to. Not right then. I knew

myself well enough

that I could predict the choked words
and teary explanation that

would follow. Every time I let myself
think about what had hap-

pened, I always came out the other end
exhausted and shaking,

feeling every bit as scared and hopeless
and horrific as I did when

those moments had actually occurred.

He watched me from under those dark
lashes of his, a look of

understanding quick to come. His thumb hovering over the pulse

point in my wrist. “Ah. It’s a Benjamin. I should have expected

that, I’m sorry.” Seeing my look of confusion he explained, “Ben-

jamin was my old tutor back—well, back before everything went

to hell. He passed away when I was very young, but I still can’t

talk about it. Still hurts.” One side of his mouth curled up in

a rueful smile. “Maybe you don’t have to

say anything at all,

though. We *could* try something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like you blocking me this time, not the other way around.

I bet it’ll be easier for you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re not vicious enough to put up a good offense—

trust me, that’s a compliment.” He waited for me to smile before

continuing, “But you are guarded. You don’t show your cards to

anyone. There are times that you’re impossible to read.”

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“I don’t mean to be,” I interrupted. Clancy only waved me off.

“It’s not a bad thing,” he said. “In fact, it’ll help you.”

Well, it certainly hadn’t helped me fend off Martin.

“Can you sense when someone is trying to break into your

head?” he asked. “There’s a tingling sensation. . . .”

“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about. What should I do

when I feel it?”

“You have to push right back up against them, throw them

off whatever track they might have been on. In my experience,

the things you really want to protect, like memories or dreams?

They have their own natural defenses.
You just need to add
another wall.”

“Every time I tried to get into your head,
it was like a white
curtain blocked me.”

Clancy nodded. “That’s the way I do it.
When I feel the sen-
sation, I push back the image of that
curtain and I don’t let up,
no matter what. So what I want you to do
is bring to mind some

kind of secret or memory—something you wouldn't necessarily

want me or anyone else to see—and I want you to drop your

own curtain down to protect it.”

I must not have been doing a good job of hiding my hesi-

tation, because he took both of my hands in his again, lacing

our fingers. “Come on,” he said. “What’s the worst that could

happen? I see some embarrassing moment? I think we’re good

enough friends now that you can trust me
when I say I won't tell

a soul about any falls or public puking.”

“What about streaking and eating
playground sand?”

He pretended to consider it for a
moment, grinning. “I sup-

pose I could refrain from sharing that
with the entire camp at

dinner.”

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“What a fair, just leader you are,” I said.
After a moment,

I added, “Do you really consider me a
friend, or are you just

saying that because you want to see me
get my four front teeth

knocked out when I tried to play
soccer?”

Clancy shook his head and laughed. His
favorite stories

always seemed to be the ones that
involved me trying to pretend

I was a boy, or the fast food binges my

dad used to take me on

when my mom was out of town at a teacher's conference. They

were so completely foreign to his experience, I realized, that I

must have seemed like an alien.

“Of course I consider you my *friend*—actually,” he began,

his voice low. When he glanced at me again, his dark eyes were

burning with a kind of intensity that made me feel like my head

was full of air, ready to float away. “I consider you a lot more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You may have been looking for me, but let’s just say that I

was waiting for you. It’s been a long time since I felt like some-

one understood what I was going through. Being an Orange . . .

you can’t compare it to what the others are. They don’t under-

stand us or what we can do.”

It's only us , came a small voice in my mind, *it's just the two of us.*

I squeezed his hands. “I know.”

His attention seemed to wander, his eyes carrying over to the

other side of the room, toward his computer and TV. I thought

I detected a glimmer of sadness in his eyes, a real kind of pain,

but just as quickly, it was gone, replaced

by his usual confident
expression.

“You ready to try?”

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I nodded. “I promise I’ve been trying.
Please—please, don’t
give up on me.”

I was surprised when I felt his hands
pull free from mine.

Stunned, when I felt them glide up my

bare arms and over my

shoulders. I didn't stop him. This was the thing about Clancy—

the thing I was quickly coming to terms with. With him, I didn't

have to be afraid, not of what I could do intentionally or by mis-

take. I didn't have to throw up every defense I possessed to keep

my brain's wandering hands still, because Clancy was more than

capable of keeping me out of his head.

But Liam . . . he was something precious, something I could

break with a single misstep. Someone I couldn't be with, not

right then, not the way I was.

Clancy leaned forward to begin his work. I leaned forward,

too, right up against his chest, where it was warm and smelled

of pine and old books and thousands of possibilities I had never

known.

I didn't block him on the first try—I didn't even block him on

the fifth try. It took three days and his witnessing almost every

sour, cheek-reddening memory in my head for me to finally

throw up some kind of defense.

“Think deeper,” he told me, “Think about something you

wouldn't want anyone else to know. Those memories will pro-

voke your strongest defenses.”

There wasn't anything left that he hadn't
already seen. I

swear, the kid could have been a brain
surgeon for how sharp

and accurate his pokes and prods were.
Every time I brought

to mind a memory or thought and tried to
put an invisible wall

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around it, my defenses crumbled, as
flimsy as waxed paper. Still,

he didn't get frustrated.

“You can do this,” Clancy kept repeating, “I know you can.

You're capable of more than you'll admit to yourself.”

It was his strange badgering for some kind of juicy memory

that finally produced my first actual result.

“Does it have to be a memory?” I asked.

He seemed to consider this. “Maybe you should try some-

thing else this time. Something you imagine.” It could have been

my mind playing tricks, but his face suddenly appeared much

closer to mine. “Something you want. Or . . . someone?”

The way he said it made me think it was a question, a seri-

ous one cloaked by a casual, nonchalant voice. I kept my face

impassive.

“Okay,” I said. “I think I’m ready.”

Clancy didn't look so sure. But I was.
This particular fantasy

had been creeping up on my dreams for
weeks, invading the slips

of time I wasn't holed up practicing my
abilities.

It came to me in the middle of our third
night at East River,

right at the hour that separated day from
night. I startled awake

in bed, confused as I listened to Chubs
snore and Zu toss and

turn. Every inch of my skin had tingled

as I tried to process what

I had just seen, if any of it had actually happened—if any of it

might actually happen.

This was a dream I could never share,
one I carried deep

inside my heart, tucked so far down that
I hadn't even realized

it was there until it sprang out of me,
fully formed.

I must have dreamed we were in spring.
The cherry blossom

trees at the end of my parents' street in Salem were in full bloom.

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We drove past them in Black Betty—
Liam and I, sitting up front

together, listening to a Led Zeppelin
song that might not have

even been real. Outside of my parents'
house were white bal-

loons, tied off on either side of the white
fence's gate, floating

arrows that pointed us up to the open front door. Liam took my

hand, wearing exactly what he had worn the day I had met him,

and together we walked straight down the house's main hallway,

through the pale yellow kitchen, until we found the door to the

backyard and everyone outside waiting.

Everyone. My parents. Grams. Zu. Chubs. Sam. All sitting

around a blanket my parents had spread out over the grass, eat-

ing whatever it was my dad was grilling.
Mom was running

around, tying up more balloons, her
hands still stained with dark

dirt after planting all of the new, pale
flowers that flooded over

what once had been a yard of plain
grass. We said hello to every-

one, I hugged Sam, I pointed out the
birds up in the trees to Zu,

and introduced Chubs to my mother.

And then, Liam bent down and kissed
me, and there were no

words to describe that.

Clancy's intrusion came like all the others had before, first

with a tingle, then with a roar. I had been so lost in thinking

about the dream that I hadn't even felt him take my hand to

start that trial run.

I liked Clancy a lot. More than I ever expected. But he didn't

have a place in this dream. There was nothing there I wanted to

share with him.

I clenched his hand back, hard, and
threw everything I had

into sending my other set of hands out
from inside me, like a

shove.

His curtain strategy hadn't worked for
me, but this one?

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Using offense as defense? This one was
maybe a little too

effective. Even before I opened my eyes, I felt Clancy jerk back,

sucking in a hiss of what sounded like pain.

“Oh my God,” I said, when I finally shook the haze from my

mind. “I’m so sorry!”

But when Clancy looked up, he was smiling. “Told you,” he

said. “Told you that you’d figure it out.”

“Can we do it again?” I asked. “I want to make sure it wasn’t

a fluke.”

Clancy rubbed at his forehead. “Can we give it a rest for a

little while? I feel like you just tackled my brain.”

But Clancy didn’t get a rest. Almost as soon as the words had

left his mouth, we both heard a very different kind of warning.

There was a shrill wail from the other side of the room, one I had

never heard before, almost like a car alarm. He winced, tucking

his head down to escape the noise, even as he jumped up from the bed.

He made his way to his desk, flipping open his laptop lid. His

fingers flew as he typed in his password, the blue-white screen of

the laptop illuminating his pale face. I came to stand behind him

just as he clicked open a new program.

“What’s happening?” I asked. “Clance?”

He didn’t look up. “One of the camp’s

perimeter alarms was

triggered. Don't worry—it might be nothing. We've had animals

step a little too close to the wires before.”

It took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. Four

different color videos, one in each corner of the screen; four

different viewpoints of the camp boundaries. Clancy leaned for-

ward, bracing his hands on either side of his laptop.

Clancy reached across me to get to the wireless black radio

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sitting on the other side of his desk. He never once took his eyes

off the screen.

“Hayes, do you read me?”

There was a moment of silence before Hayes’ gruff, “Yeah,

what’s up?” came crackling through the speaker.

“The southeast perimeter alarm was triggered. I’m watching

the feed now, but—” I think what he was going to say was, *I*

don’t see anyone or anything, but his next words had me ducking

under his arm to take a look at the screen myself. “Yeah, I see

a man and a woman. Both in camo—unfriendlies, by the look

of it.”

And there they were. They looked well into middle age, but

it was hard to be sure. Both were wearing what could only be

described as hunting attire, head to toe camouflage. Even their

faces appeared to have been painted brown.

“Got it. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks . . . get them to back off, will you?” Clancy said

carefully, then turned the volume of the radio all the way down.

Southeast perimeter—good, not Liam’s area. I let out a

grateful sigh.

My eyes were still on the screen when Clancy shut the laptop

lid. “Let’s get back to work. Sorry for the distraction.”

I could feel my surprise betray me. “Don’t you need to go

out there?” I asked. “What’s Hayes going to do to them?”

Clancy only waved me off. Again.

“Don’t worry about it, Ruby. Everything is under control.”

One crack might not be enough to bring a fortress's defenses

down, but it was enough to splinter into two cracks, and then

three, and then four. After the initial breakthrough, it became a

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mission of mine to find different ways to slip into Clancy's mind.

I never got to stay for very long before I was unceremoniously

tossed out, of course; but every small victory spurred me on to

achieve another, and then another. I could catch him when his

thoughts were focused on something else, trick him into trying

to protect one memory when I was really going after another. It

surprised Clancy, but I thought it also, in a secret way, excited

him, too. Enough, at least, to have me start practicing on others.

It was like running downhill in a way;

the momentum car-

ried me through all sorts of experiments,
big and small. I made

a spectacular mess of dinner one night
when I pulled each of the

six kids working on it aside and planted
six very different ideas

about what they were supposed to be
making for the meal—all

at the same time. I had one girl so
convinced her name was

Theodore that she began to cry whenever
anyone told her other-

wise. It became so easy, in fact, to convince someone to do what

I asked, or suggest that they had done something they really

hadn't, that Clancy told me it was time to move on to trying

to do the same without having to touch the unsuspecting test

subject first.

I was getting there, slowly, and maybe not entirely surely,

but there was something almost delicious about feeling the same

powerful swell of abilities that had once terrorized me corked

and controlled. Every aspect of them became sharper, easier.

But on the Tuesday that followed, we were interrupted again.

One of the older Yellows, a girl named Kylie, came pounding

on Clancy's door. She didn't wait to be let in; I actually fell off

the bed with the force of her entrance.

“What's this about you denying our request to leave?” Tan-

gles of dark curls flew around her face.
“You let Adam leave,

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you let Sarah’s group leave, you even let
Greg and his guys go,

and you and I both know they have the
collective brainpower

of a fly—”

The floorboard squeaked as I took a step
back toward the

bed. Clancy had left the curtain open

when he went to answer

the door, so Kylie had a full view of me. She whirled back toward

Clancy, who had put two pacifying hands on her shoulders. “Oh

my God! Are you in here fooling around? Did you even *look* at

my proposal? I spent days on that!”

“I read it three times,” Clancy said, motioning me forward

with his hand. He looked at her with the same calming smile

and patience he had shown me since our lessons began. “But I’m

happy to discuss why I had to decline now. Ruby—tomorrow?”

And just like that, I found myself outside in the morning

sunshine.

The spring weather was still sporadic—cold and dismal one

day, perfectly warm the next. Spending two weeks holed up with

Clancy had made keeping up with its bipolar tendencies even

harder. I stripped my sweatshirt off and pulled my hair up in a

messy bun. My first thought was to check in on Zu, but I didn't

want to interrupt her lessons. I tried to find Chubs in the gar-

dens, but the girl in charge told me—in her bossiest voice—that

she hadn't seen him in a week, and she was going to rat him out

to Clancy for the punishment he deserved.

“Punishment?” I repeated, bristling, but

she didn't elaborate.

I found him in the next logical place.

“You know,” I called as I stepped onto the dock, “bread is

actually bad for ducks.”

Chubs didn't so much as look up. I sat down next to him,

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but it only prompted him to stand up and stalk away, leaving his

bag and book behind.

“Hey!” I called. “What’s your problem?”

No response.

“Chubs— *Charles!*”

He whirled back around. “You want to know what my *prob-*

lem is? Where do I even start? How about that it’s been almost

a month, and we’re still here? How about the fact that you and

Lee and Suzume are all off making

friends and skipping around

even though we're supposed to be
working to earn a way to get

home?"

"Where is this coming from?" I asked.
Maybe he hadn't fit in

as naturally as Liam and Zu had, but I
saw him talking to other

kids as he worked. He seemed okay—
maybe not happy, but,

then again, when was he ever? "This
place really isn't that bad—"

“Ruby, it’s horrible!” he burst out.
“*Horrible!* We’re told when

to eat, when to sleep, what to wear, and
we’re forced to work.

How is this any different from camp?”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re the
one that wanted to

come here! I’m sorry it’s not living up to
your high and mighty

expectations, but it works for us. If
you’d just try, you could be

happy here. We’re safe! Why are you in
such a hurry to leave?”

“Just because your parents didn’t want you, it doesn’t mean

that the rest of ours don’t. Maybe you’re not in a hurry to get

back, but *I am!*”

He might as well have shot me straight through the chest; I

felt all of the blood leave my heart as one of his hands came up to

clutch his dark hair. “I’ve been working so hard, I’ve been *trying*,

and God, you didn’t even ask him, did you?”

The Darkest Minds

“Ask him—?” But I knew. As soon as the words left my

mouth, I knew exactly what promised I had neglected to keep.

The anger in me deflated. “I’m so sorry, I’ve been so wrapped up

in lessons that I forgot.”

“Well, I didn’t,” he said, and left me standing alone in the

sunlight.

An hour later, I was under a stream of warm water, hands pressed to my face.

The camp's wash rooms—one for boys, one for girls—were about as glamorous as an outhouse. The floors were beveled concrete, the shower stalls wood planks and plastic curtains crawling with black mold. We used the rooms every night to brush our teeth and wash our faces, and, once or twice a week, to shower.

But today, without floral shampoo and conditioner perfuming

the air, I realized the cavernous room smelled like sawdust.

I stayed in there until I heard the bells signal the end of

lunch. I still hadn't formulated a plan for the rest of the day

when I walked outside—and into the one person I hadn't real-

ized I was desperate to see.

Liam stumbled back a few steps at impact, his wet hair cling-

ing to his cheeks, longer than I remembered.

“Oh my God,” I said with a laugh, pressing a hand to my

chest. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry about that.” He smiled, extending a hand toward me.

“Hey—I don’t think we’ve had the chance to meet. I’m Liam.”





TWENTY-

FOUR

I don't know how long I stood there,
staring

at his hand, bile rising in my throat as
fast and steady as a scream.

Oh my God, no, I thought, taking a step
back. *No, no, no*

nonono . . .

“See, you look exactly like a friend of
mine, Ruby, but I

haven't seen her in *ages*, so I'm . . .” His

voice trailed off. “Okay,
was that joke really that bad?”

I turned around, pressing my face against
my towel so he

wouldn't see my tears.

“Ruby?” He looped his own towel
around my waist and drew

me to his side. “That was the Liam
Stewart way of saying, *Hi,*

darlin', missed you something fierce.
Oh, wow, bad enough to

make you cry?”

He smoothed his hands down over my hair. “Okay, that’s

it—” He bent down, and before I could stop him, lifted me over

one shoulder.

Liam didn’t let me wiggle free until we were back at cabin

eighteen. He dropped me on the folded futon that Zu and I had

been sharing, making a quick stop at his bed for a blanket.

The Darkest Minds

“I’m not cold,” I said, when he wrapped it around my

shoulders.

“Then why are you shaking?” Liam sat down next to me. I

turned so my face was resting in the crook of his neck and I was

breathing in his clean, woodsy smell.

“I’m just pissed at myself,” I said when I found my voice. “I

told Chubs I’d ask Clancy if he could

use his laptop, but I got

distracted and forgot.”

“Hmm . . .” Liam’s fingers were busy untangling my wet

hair. “I don’t think he’s upset at you. I think he’s upset that I’m

keeping us here. It’s just reinforcing his fears about not getting

home.”

“How do I make it up to him?”

“Well, for one thing, you could ask about the computer,”

he said, his other hand taking mine.
“Though I still don’t really

understand how you’re in the position to
ask to borrow it. I feel

like I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“You haven’t,” I said. “You’re always
on watch.”

He laughed. “It’s lonely sitting up in a
tree without you.”

“I want to hear about what you do all
night,” I said. “Have

you tried talking to anyone about freeing
the camps yet?”

“I brought it up with some of the guys on my watch, and

Olivia. She’s trying to get us in to see Clancy about it. I think . . .

I think it’s going be great, I really do. It *could* work.”

“Clance said that the western gate is the one that used to

give them the most trouble,” I said, twisting to look up at him.

“You’re being careful, right?”

Liam went very still beside me, so still that he seemed to

forget to breathe.

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“Clance, huh?” he said in an unnaturally light voice. “I guess

you are in the position to be asking favors.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Liam sighed. “Nothing, sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come

out like that. It’s great that you guys are friends.” I tried to look

up at him, but he was looking at the other end of the cabin,

where a set of drawers with our things rested against the wall.

“So he’s been giving you lessons?”

“Yeah,” I said, wondering how much, if anything, I should

hold back. “He’s been teaching me how to keep others from pry-

ing into my head.”

“What about tricks to keep you from slipping into others’

heads?” Liam asked. “Is he helping you with that, too?”

“He’s trying to,” I said. “He said that if I strengthened my

control over my abilities that would come naturally.”

“Well, you can always practice that with me,” he said, resting

his forehead against mine. I felt the trickle start at the back of

my mind, the warning before the flood. Clancy had told me that

when I felt it coming on, I needed to

break all physical contact

and imagine a white curtain sweeping
between me and whom-

ever I was with.

But I didn't want to do either.

I felt his lips travel from my forehead,
whispering something

against my eyelids, my cheeks, my nose.
His thumbs stroked

the length of my jaw, but even they
stilled as I pulled back and

turned away from him.

“What are you so scared of?” he
whispered, his voice laced
with hurt.

Had this boy really once just been a
stranger?

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Had I really once thought that I'd be able
to live a life
without him in it?

“I don't want to lose you.”

He made a noise of frustration, his eyes clear and bright as he

spoke. “Then why are you the one that keeps letting go?”

I never got the chance to answer. A moment later, Hina

burst through the cabin door, Zu in tow, and told us they were

leaving.

“Okay, okay, slow down,” Liam said. Zu was darting around the

cabin, collecting her things, as Hina’s mouth ran a mile a min-

ute. I wasn't sure whom I was supposed to be paying attention

to—my friend or the girl she had, apparently, elected to speak

for her. Every time Hina opened her mouth, Liam and I reverted

back to the same state of shock.

Zu. Leaving.

Leaving.

I caught her on her way to the drawers, steering her to the

futon and forcing her to sit. She must not

have picked up on our

shock, because her face was bright and glowing. I studied it, the

way her smile seemed to crackle with her own brand of electric-

ity, and felt something inside of me shrink in defeat.

“Us and three others,” Hina said, breathlessly. I wondered

if she had run all the way over from class. “Two Blues and a

Yellow. Kylie *finally* got permission to leave the camp.”

Liam twisted around to look at Zu when he said, “And go . . .

for a hike?”

Zu made her *Are you serious?* face.

“Help me out here. Tell me what *you* want to say.”

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Hina was finally silent and for a moment, one crazy second

really, I thought Zu was actually going to open her mouth and

have out with it. Liam's entire body tensed, as if he was expect-

ing the same thing. But Zu only slipped her notebook back out of

her pink duffel bag and wrote in her neat, looping handwriting.

When she flipped it over, she was looking him right in the eye.

I want to go with them to California.

I know I should have been happy for her. I should have been

celebrating the fact that she was finally able to come out and tell

us exactly what she wanted. I just never imagined what she'd

want would be a future without us.

“I thought Clancy turned down Kylie’s request to leave?” I

asked Hina

“He did, but she said she finally wore him down.”

“What’s in California?” Liam asked, leaning against a cabin

wall.

“My parents have a house there,” Hina

explained, “and

they’re waiting for us. The West Coast government isn’t going

to turn us back over to the camps.”

“What about Zu’s parents?” I asked.
“They—”

To her credit, Hina knew what I was trying to ask without

having me to ask it. “My father has not been on speaking terms

with my uncle for some time.”

“Zu, that’s a long trip,” Liam began

uncertainly. “What if

something happens? Who else is going?
That Talon kid?”

She nodded, and all of a sudden her eyes
were on me. I tried

to give her an encouraging smile, but I
was worried I might burst

into tears instead. We all waited as she
scribbled out another

hasty note and showed it to Liam again.

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The Darkest Minds

You don't have to worry about me anymore. Isn't that good?

“I like worrying about you.” Liam put a hand on her head.

“When would you be leaving?”

Hina at least had the decency to look guilty. “We actually

have to leave right now. Kylie is worried Clancy might change

his mind. He wasn't . . . all that happy.”

“That's a little fast,” I choked out.

“Have you really thought

about this?”

Zu looked right at me when she nodded. The next note was

for both of us. *I want to be with my family. I just don't want you to be mad at me.*

“*Mad?*” Liam shook his head. “Never. Ever. You’re my girl,

Zu. We just want you to be safe. It would kill me if anything happened to you.”

There was a knock at the door. Talon, an

older Yellow with

his hair woven into intricate dreadlocks,
appeared first, followed

by a wide-eyed Chubs. Liam stood.

“Good,” he said. “I was hoping to talk to
you.”

Talon nodded. “I figured. Kylie and
Lucy are here, too.”

She stuck her head inside and waved.
“Do you want to talk
outside?”

Liam’s hand reached out and touched the

small of my back.

“Help her pack?”

“Are you nuts?” I heard Chubs say. “You barely know these

people!”

“Excuse me,” Hina protested, her hands on her hips. “In case

you’ve forgotten, she’s my *cousin*.”

I’ll miss you, too. Zu stopped piling her things into her pink

suitcase and tore the sheet of paper out for Chubs to keep. He

sat so suddenly that he almost missed the futon. For several

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moments, he couldn't do anything other than stare at her. I

knew the feeling.

“Did Kylie say why you guys had to leave tonight?” I asked,

sitting beside Chubs.

Zu only shrugged.

“I mean . . . are you guys just going to *walk* to California?”

Chubs said, his voice rising with each word. “Do you have some kind of plan?”

“Maybe you’ll find a new Betty,” I said, but the moment I

uttered her name Zu stopped packing and shook her head. The

next note took some time for her to write.

No, there’s only one Betty.

“And apparently she wasn’t enough for you,” Chubs said,

with a shocking amount of hurt. “I guess everything is replace-

able, even us.”

Zu took a deep breath, walking over to him with her pink

bag at her side. He tried to look away, but she was standing right

in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck. All he could

do was hug her back, his face hidden in the fabric of her jacket.

The camp's bells began to ring, a frenzied sound that didn't

cease until it had driven everyone outside. I let Zu and Hina lead

us, pushing a path through the gathered kids. This was the first

time their black garb seemed remotely appropriate.

Kylie handed a piece of paper to Lee and he nodded at what-

ever she was telling him. Lucy was next to them, as tiny and

quiet as ever, but she reached up and

patted Liam on the shoul-

der in what I guess was supposed to be a reassuring way. All

happy pretenses were gone. The only way to describe the look

on his face was stricken.

“—borrow that pen?” he asked Talon. The boy began to pat

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down his black cargo pants, searching the pockets until he came

up with a blue-capped pen. With it in hand, Liam knelt down in

front of Zu and tore off half the sheet of paper Kylie had given

him.

I wished I could have seen what he had written there, but it

wasn't for my eyes. When he was finished, he folded the paper

over several times and pressed it into her palm.

The bell fell silent. Everyone's eyes shifted to the right, where

Clancy appeared at the head of the path, Hayes towering beside

him. His face, which I had grown used to seeing relaxed and

proud, was pinched with what was either annoyance or anger.

“Kylie has decided to go tribal and will be leaving immediately.”

A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd.

“She will only take these four with her,” he shouted over the

noise. “There will be no more requests

to leave granted until our

numbers are full. Is that understood?”

Silence.

“Is that understood?”

Chubs jumped beside me at the noises and shouts confirming

that, yes, it was.

Clancy turned sharply on his heel without another word,

heading back in the direction of the office. As soon as he reached

the white building, the kids around us seemed to exhale the col-

lective breath they had been holding, turning to each other with

confused whispers.

“That was weird.”

“Why didn’t he give them bags, like he usually does?”

“He’s worried if our numbers get down too low, there won’t

be enough people here to protect the camp.”

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

My eyes floated up toward the office
until they fixed on Zu

waving me over.

No gloves, I thought, watching her hand
fall back to her side.

Hopefully never again.

“Do you really have to leave now?” I
asked when I reached

where she and Liam were standing. The
clusters of kids swarmed

Kylie and the others, wishing them good luck and offering up

blankets and bags of food.

Zu put on a brave smile, wrapping her arms around my

center.

“Please be safe,” I told her.

The next note was for me, and me alone.
When all this is

over, will you come find me? There's something I want to tell you,

but I don't know how to say it yet.

My eyes traced every inch of her face. It was so different

from the girl I had met only a few weeks ago. If she had changed

this much in so little time, how could I even be sure I'd recog-

nize her years down the line, after the dust of all this hell finally

settled?

“Of course,” I whispered. “And I’ll miss you every day until

then.”

Just before they stepped off the trail and into the untamed

forest, Zu turned and gave us one last wave. Beside her, Hina did

the same. Then, they were gone.

“She’ll be okay,” I said. “They’ll take care of her. She should

be with her family. Her real one.”

“She should be with *us*.” Liam shook his head, his breath

catching in his throat.

“Then maybe we should follow her.”

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Liam and I turned back. Chubs was trailing behind us, his

eyes hidden as the drooping sunlight caught his glasses.

“You know we can’t,” Liam said. “Not yet.”

“Why not?” Chubs advanced toward us, his voice losing all

semblance of calm it held before. Feeling the curious eyes on us,

I drew them both off the main path.

“Why *not*?” Chubs repeated. “Clearly we aren’t going to get

the help we need to track down our parents *or* Jack’s. It’d be

better for us to just go now, before anyone misses us. We could

still catch up with her.”

“And do what?” Liam asked. He ran a frustrated hand

through his already mussed up hair.

“Wander around until we

just so happen to stumble on them? Hope that we don't get our

asses caught and thrown back into camp? Chubs, it's *safe* here.

This is the place we're supposed to be—we can do so much good

from here.”

I saw, maybe even before Liam did, that this was the wrong

thing to say. Warning alarms went off in my mind at the sight of

Chubs's nostrils flaring and his lips twisting with anger. I knew

that whatever was about to leave Chubs's mouth would not only

be sharp, but cruel.

“I get it—I get it, Lee, okay?” Chubs shook his head. “You

want to be the big hero again. You want everyone to adore you

and believe in you and follow you.”

Liam tensed. “That’s not—” he began, angrily.

“Well, what about the kids who followed you before?” He

slapped around the pocket of his trousers before pulling out a

familiar folded piece of paper. Chubs's grip on the letter nearly

crushed it. "What about Jack, and Brian, and Andy, and all of

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them? They all followed you, too, but it's easy to forget about

them when they're not around, isn't it?"

"Chubs!" I said, stepping between them

when Liam advanced,
his right fist swinging up.

I'd never seen him look so perfectly
furious before. A wave

of crimson washing up from Liam's
throat to his face.

"Can't you just admit you're doing this
to make yourself feel

better, not to actually help anyone else?"
Chubs demanded.

"You think . . ." Liam almost couldn't
get the words out.

“You think they’re not in my head every goddamn second of

every goddamn day? You think I could ever forget something

like that?” Instead of hitting his friend, Liam hit himself, banging

his fist against his forehead until I finally caught his arm. “Jesus

Christ, Charles!” he said, his voice breaking.

“I just . . .” Chubs stalked past us, only to stop and turn back

again. “I never believed you, you know,”

he said, his voice shak-

ing, “when you talked about us getting out of camp and getting

home safely. That’s why I agreed to write my letter. I knew most

of us wouldn’t make it, with you in charge.”

I stepped forward the same moment Liam did, holding my

hands out in front of me to keep him from doing something I

knew he would regret. I heard Chubs storm away behind me,

heading back in the direction of our cabin. Liam tried to take

another step forward, but I pressed back against his chest. Liam

was breathing hard, his fists balled up at his sides.

“Let him go,” I said. “He just needs to blow off steam. Maybe

you should think about doing the same.”

Liam looked like he was about to say something, but instead,

he let out a frustrated grunt, spun on his heel, and started toward

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the nearby trees, in the exact opposite direction Chubs had taken.

I leaned back against the trunk of the nearest tree and shut my

eyes. My chest was too tight to do anything other than take in

shallow, short breaths as I waited.

It was nearly dark by the time he emerged, rubbing his face.

The skin on both hands was torn and

bleeding from smashing

them into something solid. His face was drawn in the twilight, as

if the flush of anger had been ripped out of him and he'd been

left with nothing more than gray sadness. I held out an arm to

him as he came near, wrapping it around the solid warmth of his

waist. His arm settled down over my shoulders and pulled me

close, pressing his face against my hair. I took in a deep breath of

his comforting smell—wood smoke, grass, and leather.

“He didn’t mean it,” I said, walking him over to a fallen log.

He was still shaking, and looked unsteady on his feet.

Liam didn’t sit so much as collapse down onto it, leaning

forward to brace his elbows against his knees. “Doesn’t make it

any less true.”

We sat for a long time—long enough for the sun to disappear

behind the trees, and then below the horizon. The silence and

stillness between us became unbearable. I lifted my hand and

guided it lightly down the length of knobby bones between his

shoulder blades.

Liam sat up slowly, turning to look at me. “Do you think he’s

okay?” he whispered.

“I think we should probably go check,” I said.

I don't know how we made it back to the cabin, only that

when we arrived, Chubs was sitting on the porch, silent tears

streaming down his face. I could see the apology written there,

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the wretched guilt, and was surprised to find my heart could

break even that bit more.

“It's over,” he said as we sat on either

side of him. “It’s all
over.”

We didn’t move for a long time.

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TWENTY-

FIVE

It shouldn't have surprised me that Liam threw

himself back into watch duty, but it took a generous amount of

coaxing from the others for his mind to refocus on the camps. I

sat by his side more than once as he and Olivia talked through

possible ways of breaking through camp defenses, offering sug-

gestions here and there as they discussed how to bring up their

ideas with Clancy.

The thing about enthusiasm—especially Liam's particular

brand—was that it was catching. There would be nights I would

simply sit back, watching, as he became more and more ani-

mated with his hands as he spoke, as if trying to shape his ideas

out of the air for the rest of us to see. His words were coated

with such unyielding hopefulness that it visibly inflated everyone

around him. By the end of the first week, interest in the project

had spiked to such a level that we had to move the meetings

out of our small cabin, to the fire pit. Now, when Liam went

anywhere, it was always with a loyal pack of kids around him,

trying to catch his ear.

Chubs and I were less enthusiastic about getting back into

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the swing of things. He forgave me,
maybe because a miserable

person can only stand to be alone with
their misery for so long.

He never went back to work at the
Garden, but that girl, the

bossy one, never ratted him out, either.

I went back to lessons with Clancy. Or
at least tried to.

“Where is your head at today?”

Not invading his, that was for certain.
Not even cracking it.

“Show me what you’re thinking about,”
he said, when I

opened my mouth. “I don’t want to hear
about it. I want to

see it.”

I glanced up from the pool of sunlight
spilling from his win-

dow to the floor. Clancy leveled me
with a look of annoyance

that I had only seen him wear once, after
realizing one of the

remaining Yellows couldn't zap one of
the camp's few washing
machines back to life.

Never at me, though.

I closed my eyes and reached for his
hand again; I brought

to mind the memory of Zu's backpack
disappearing into the wild

thicket of trees. Over the past few
weeks, fewer and fewer of

our conversations had involved words.
When we wanted to get

a point across, we shared it our own way—spoke in our own

language.

But not today. His mind might as well have been encased in

concrete, and mine might as well have been made of jelly.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. I couldn’t even muster the strength to

feel disappointed. I could feel myself slipping into strange funk,

one in which every little noise or sight outside the window was

enough to distract me. I just felt tired. Confused.

“I do have other things I could be doing,” he continued,

something simmering beneath his words.

“I have rounds to make

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and people to talk to, but I’m trying to help *you*. I’m here with

you.”

At that, my stomach did a strange flop. I

sat straight up

against his headboard, ready to apologize again, when he rolled

off his bed and moved across the room to his desk.

“Clancy, I really am sorry.” By the time I came to stand in

front of the desk, he was already typing away at his laptop. He

let me stand there, in silent, gut-twisting worry, for what felt like

nearly an hour before he bothered to look up from whatever he

was doing. He seemed tired of pretending now, too. Annoyance

had taken a sharp turn into anger.

“You know, I really thought that letting your Yellow go

would help you focus, but I guess I was wrong.” Clancy shook

his head. “I was wrong about a lot of things, apparently.”

I bristled, but I’m not sure if it was because of the way he

said *your Yellow* or the implication that I wasn’t capable of mas-

tering the things he was trying to teach me.

I needed to leave. If I stayed a second longer, I might say

something that would ruin our friendship. I might tell him that

Zu had a name, that of course I'd be worried about her out in the

world without me there to protect her. He should have realized

that I could have spent the last few weeks spending time with

her, but instead I had agreed to work

with *him*. Spend time with

him. Comfort and support *him*.

Maybe I had learned a lot, and maybe I had a better grip on

my abilities, but staring at him, my fists clenched and shaking,

I couldn't justify it. What was the point of being holed up with

someone who didn't believe in me when I had people out there

who did?

I turned sharply on my heel and stalked

toward the door. As

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I opened it, Clancy called, “That’s right, Ruby, run away again.

See how far you get this time!”

I didn’t look back and I didn’t stop, though some part of me

recognized that this might be it—that I was walking out on the

one chance I had to learn how to manage my abilities. Some-

time in the last ten minutes, my head had disconnected itself

from the stubborn muscle beating in my chest and, honestly, I

wasn't sure which was guiding me outside and away from him.

But what I did know, with dead, absolute certainty, was that I

didn't want him to see the way my face crumpled, or for him to

glimpse whispers of guilt and sadness circling around inside of

my head.

I couldn't hide anything from him, but this was the first time

I had ever wanted to.

It took a few days for me to realize that Zu leaving wasn't the

only event that had shifted the rotation of the earth. Once Chubs

had pointed out East River's similarities to camp life, I couldn't

go back. Where I had seen kids in jeans and black T-shirts, I

was now seeing uniforms. Where I had seen kids waiting in line

for their food, I was now seeing the Mess Hall. When the lights

turned out in the cabins at nine p.m. sharp and I watched a few

members of the security team stroll past our window, I was back

in Cabin 27, staring up at the belly of Sam's mattress.

I began to wonder if the supposedly dead security cameras in

the office and around the facilities were actually on.

I did try to go see Clancy a few times to

apologize, but he

always sent me away with a stern “I don’t have time for you

today.” I got the sense he was punishing me, but I wasn’t sure

what I had said or done to warrant it. In any case, it quickly

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became clear that I needed him in my life more than he needed

me. That, combined with my stinging

pride, made me feel even worse.

It was a Wednesday, only an hour before Liam and the others

were meeting to discuss a new camp liberation strategy, before

Clancy was finally ready to see me.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” I told Liam, squeezing his hand

at breakfast. “I’ll just be a few minutes late.”

But when I walked into Clancy’s office

and saw the state of

it, I wondered if I should have come at all.

“Hey, come in—just watch your step. Yeah, sorry about the mess.”

Mess? *Mess*? His office looked like someone had detonated

a bomb and unleashed a pack of wild wolves to pick over the

salvageable remains. There were piles of paper everywhere, print-

outs, torn maps, boxes . . . and then there was Clancy himself, his

hair falling into his face, wearing the same rumpled white shirt I

had seen the day before.

In the weeks I had known him, I had never seen Clancy as

anything less than impeccable. It was actually a little scary how

put-together he was. I'm sure some of it had to do with the way

he was raised. That even if his father hadn't taught him himself,

some crotchety old nanny had waxed poetic on the value of tuck-

ing your shirt in, polishing your shoes, and combing your hair.

He looked like he was fraying at the edges.

“Are you okay?” I asked, shutting the door behind me.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re trying to coordinate a hit for med supplies.” Clancy

settled down into his chair, but was back on his feet a moment

later, when his laptop began to chime.
“Hang on just a sec.”

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I toed one of the paper piles on the floor,
trying to peek at

what was written on it.

“Those are reports of the usual nightly
activity at a nearby

truck stop,” Clancy said, as if reading
my thoughts. His fingers

flew over the keyboard. “And League

intelligence about PSFs in

that area. It seems that Leda Corporation is now employing the

government to protect their shipments.”

“Why the PSFs?” I asked.

Clancy shrugged. “They’re the largest military force the

government has now, and, thanks to dear old Dad, the most

organized.”

“I guess that makes sense.” I leaned back, but staring at the

glowing symbol on the laptop lid reminded me of Chubs. “Can

I ask you a favor?”

“Only if you let me apologize first.”

I sat back in my chair and studied my hands. “Can’t we just

forget it ever happened?”

“No, not this time,” he said. “Hey, will you look at me?”

The expression on his face alone made my heart swell to

twice its usual size. It was dangerous

how handsome he was, but

today his pained look was absolutely lethal.

He does care, a little voice in my head whispered. *He cares*

about you.

“I’m sorry for losing my temper,” he said. “I didn’t mean the

things I said about your friend Suzume, and I definitely didn’t

mean to imply that you haven’t been trying.”

“Then why did you say that?”

Clancy rubbed a hand over his face.

“Because I’m an idiot.”

“That’s not an answer,” I told him, shaking my head. *You*

really hurt me.

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“Ruby, isn’t it obvious?” he said. “I like you. I’ve only known

you for, what, a month? And you’re probably the only real friend

I've had since I turned ten and figured out what I was. I'm an

idiot for getting so upset that you were focused on someone else

when I wanted you to be focused on me.”

I was almost too stunned to move.

“I didn't let Suzume and the others go because I thought it

would help you focus. I let her go because I thought it would

make you happy. I didn't even stop to think that, yeah, of course

you'd be worried about her, especially after how hard you

worked to protect her.”

He more than cares about you.

I had to look away now. Play the situation off. My brain had

turned to mush, and my heart wasn't much better. “I *guess* I

could forgive you. . . .”

“But only if I do you that favor?” I could hear the smile in

his voice. “Sure. What?”

“Well . . . I know you don’t allow it, but I was hoping you’d

make an exception in this case,” I said, finally looking back at

him. “My friend . . . he needs to use your computer to try to

contact his parents.”

Clancy stopped smiling. “Your friend Liam?”

“No, Chu—Charles Meriwether?”

“The one who’s been skipping Garden duty?”

Okay, apparently that girl *had* ratted him out.

Clancy was silent as he shut the laptop and stood. “I’m really

sorry, Ruby, but I thought I made it clear that no one else could

leave.”

“Oh, no!” I said, forcing a laugh. “He just wants to check in

with his parents to make sure they’re all right.”

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“No,” Clancy said, moving around so he was sitting on the

edge of the desk in front of me. “He wants to make arrange-

ments to leave and take you with him. Don’t try to cover for

him, Ruby. It’s the same for everyone. I don’t doubt for a second

that he’s desperate enough to tell his parents the location of this

camp.”

“He would never,” I said, getting riled up on Chubs’s behalf.

“Really.”

“You were there when we had intruders a few weeks ago.

You saw how easy it could be for someone to slip past our

defenses. What if they hadn’t triggered the alarm? We would

have been in serious trouble,” Clancy’s face was dark, worried.

“If Charles wants to contact his parents, tell him he needs to fill

out a request with instructions on how to do it, just like every-

one else. I have to base my decisions on what might threaten the

camp's security—no matter how much I want to help you help

your friend.”

It was no good. Chubs would rather not contact his parents

at all than grant a stranger access to his only means of safely

communicating with them.

“*Though,*” Clancy said after a moment, sitting down next to

me and kicking his legs up on the desk.

“There is something that

could persuade me.”

I couldn’t look at him.

“Fifteen minutes, Ruby. You teach *me*.”

What could I possibly know that he didn’t?

“Do you think you could walk me through how you erase

someone’s memory? I know it’s not

something you're proud of,

and I know it's caused you a lot of pain
in the past, but it seems

like a useful trick and I'd be interested
to learn it."

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"Well . . . I guess?" I said. Like I could
deny him after all

that he had done for me. But it wasn't
something I knew how to

teach. I'd barely managed to figure it out

for myself.

“I think understanding how you do it will also help me figure

out how to prevent you from accidentally doing it again. Sound

good?”

That sounded great, actually.

“If you’d let me,” he continued. “I’d like to walk through

your memories and see if I can find any clues. I just want to

confirm a suspicion I have.”

I don't think he expected the request to give me pause, but

it did. He had been in my head multiple times, seeing things I'd

never spoken about to anyone. But I'd been able to keep him

from seeing the things that really mattered, the dreams I wanted

to protect.

I kept thinking about what Liam had said before, when he

told me about his sister. *Those memories are mine.*

But if I wanted a future with my family
—with Liam—then

I had to relinquish my control. I had to
let Clancy in if it meant

I could avoid the same thing happening
in the future.

You can trust him, said the same voice
at the back of my

mind. *He's your friend. He would never
overstep.*

“Okay,” I said. “But only those, and,
afterward, Charles gets

to use your computer.”

“Deal.”

Clancy knelt in front of me, hands
cupping my jaw, fingers

weaving through my hair. I tried not to
squirm at his proximity

and his assumption that I would be fine
with it. We’d sat this

close before, but somehow this felt
different.

“Wait,” I said, sitting back. “I told Liam
and the others I’d

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meet with them about something. Can we maybe do this later?

Or even tomorrow?"

"It'll only take a second," Clancy promised, his voice sooth-

ing and low. "Just close your eyes and think about the morning

you woke up on your tenth birthday."

Come on, that same voice said, *come on*, *Ruby . . .*

I swallowed hard and did as he asked,

imagining myself back

in my old room, with its blue walls and enormous window. Bit by

bit, the room reassembled itself. Blank walls bloomed with cross-

stitch samplers Grams had sewn, pictures of my parents, and a

map of D.C.'s metro system. I could see all six of the stuffed ani-

mals I slept with on the floor next to my bright blue comforter.

Even things I had completely forgotten—the lamp on my small

desk, the way the middle shelf of my
bookcase sagged—suddenly

came back into clear focus.

“Good.” Clancy sounded far away, but I
felt him near, closer

and closer. His breath was warm across
my cheek, an unexpected

touch. “Keep . . .” He sounded
breathless. “Keep thinking. . . .”

I saw his face through a glossy haze, his
dark eyes burning

the shimmering air. I saw only him,
because for those few pass-

ing moments, he was the only thing that seemed to exist in my

world. Every part of me felt slow and warm, like honey. Clancy

blinked once, then again, as if to clear his own cloudy gaze, to

remember what he was supposed to be doing. “Just keep . . .”

And then his lips—his lips were so close, smiling against mine.

Fingers wove their way through my long hair, thumbs gliding

along my cheeks. “You—” he began, his

voice hoarse, “You are—”

At the slightest pressure, something hot
and dark sparked

there, sending a wave of desire straight
into my core. His hands

slid down over my neck, my shoulders,
down my arms, down . . .

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And then there was nothing gentle about
it.

His lips pressed against mine hard, with

enough force to drive

them apart, to steal breath, and sense,
and the feel of the bed

under me. The skin of his face was
smooth and cool against mine,

but I was warm—too warm. The fever
that swept up over me

made my body go limp, and I was
pressed back against the bed,

sinking into the pillows there like I was
falling through clouds.

The blood had left my head, and all that
was left there was a

low, throbbing pulse. My hands came up to tangle in his shirt—I

needed to grasp something, to hang on before I fell too far.

“Yes,” I heard him breathe out, and then his mouth was on

mine again, his hands at the hem of my top, edging it up over

my stomach.

You want this, a voice whispered, *you want this*.

But it wasn't my voice. I wasn't saying that—was I? In that

instant, a flash of his black eyes gave way to a light blue. That

was I wanted, what I really wanted. My mind felt slow, drugged

with the strain of thought. *Liam*. But here was Clancy. Clancy

who helped me, my friend, beautiful in a way that made me lose

trains of thought, Clancy who more than liked me. . . .

Who was also an Orange.

My eyes flew open as his hands slipped up to my neck, his

fingers tightening slightly around the skin there. I tried to pull

back, but it felt like he had flooded my veins with concrete. I

couldn't move. I couldn't even shut my eyes.

Stop, I tried to say, but when his forehead found mine, the

pain that exploded behind my eyes was enough to make me

forget everything.





TWENTY-SIX

The computer's frantic beeping woke me from a

dreamless sleep, tugging me out until my eyes drifted open. I

was lying in darkness.

My body felt heavy, and though someone had pulled off my

sweater, my shirt was plastered to my skin with a thin sheen of

sweat. If I had been alone, I might have taken it off, or at least

kicked my jeans off my legs to let my
body breathe, but I knew

better. I was still in his room, and if I
was here, then so was he.

The light on Clancy's dark wood dresser
was on and I could

hear the voices of kids below at the fire
pit. Night, already? It was

insane that my blood could run as frigid
as winter at the same

moment my heart started to squeeze out a
panicked rhythm.

The creaking of the old mattress was

drowned out by the TV.

For a while, I did nothing but listen to President's Gray baritone

voice give his nightly address. My legs seemed to be the last part

of my body willing to wake up.

“—assure you that jobless rate has declined from thirty percent

to twenty percent in this past year alone. I gave you my word that

I would succeed where the false government would not. As much

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*as they would like you to believe they
have influence on the world*

*stage, they can barely control their
terrorist branch, this so-called*

Children's League—”

The TV set turned off with a hiss of static. Footsteps.

“Are you awake?”

“Yes,” I whispered. My throat felt sore, my tongue swollen.

The bed dipped as Clancy sat down beside me. I tried not to wince.

“What happened?” I asked. The sound of the voices below grew louder, getting trapped between my ears.

“You passed out,” he said. “I didn’t realize . . . I shouldn’t have pushed so hard.”

I raised myself up on my elbows in a vain attempt to pull

away from his touch. My eyes were fixated on his lips, the white

teeth gleaming beneath them. Had I imagined it, or had he—?

My stomach clenched. “Did you find anything out? Did it

prove your theory?”

Clancy sat back, his face unreadable. “No.” He stood again,

and began to pace between the window and the white curtain.

I caught a glimpse of the other side of the floor, and was unsur-

prised to find that it was awash in the
blue light of the open

laptop.

“No, see, I’ve been going over this again
and again in my

head,” Clancy said. “I thought maybe
you erased their memories

intentionally because you were angry or
upset, but you didn’t go

all out and erase their entire memories,
just . . . *you*. And again,

with that girl Samantha. Samantha Dahl,
age seventeen, from

Bethesda, Maryland. Parents Ashley and Todd. Green, photo-

graphic memory . . .” His voice trailed off. “I’ve been thinking

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around and around and around in circles,
trying to understand

how you do this, but walking through
your memories doesn’t tell

me what’s going on inside of your head.
No cause, only effect.”

I wondered if he even realized he was rambling, or that I had

managed to get myself off the bed, with my only thought to get

the hell out of that room and away from him. The pain came

back to me in pieces.

What did he do to me? I brought a hand to my forehead. My

head ached like all the other times he had been inside of it, but

the pain was sharper. He hadn't just looked in, he had made me

want him—made me want to kiss him.

Hadn't he?

“It's late,” I said, interrupting him. “I need to . . . I need to

go find the others. . . .”

Clancy turned his back on me. “Find *Liam Stewart*, you

mean.”

“Yes, Lee,” I said, taking a few slow steps back toward the

door. “I was supposed meet him. He's going to be worried.” The

white curtain caught in my hair as I passed it.

Clancy shook his head. “What do you even know about him,

Ruby? You’ve known him for, what, a month? A month and a

half? Why are you wasting your time with him? He’s a *Blue*, and

not only that, but he—he had a record, even before camp. Even

before he killed all of those kids. A hundred and forty-eight.

Over half of their camp! So you can cut

all of your bullshit and

hero worship, because he doesn't
deserve it. You're too valuable
to be screwing around with him."

He whirled around just as my hand
touched the door and
slammed it shut.

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"What is your problem?" I yelled. "So
what if he's a Blue?"

Aren't you the one that keeps going on about how we're all

Black and how we should respect each other?"

The smile that curled his lips was as arrogant as it was

beautiful.

"You need to accept the fact that you're Orange and that

you're always going to be alone because of it." A measure of

calm had returned to Clancy's voice. His nostrils flared when

I tried to turn the door handle again. He slammed both hands

against it to keep me from going anywhere, towering over me.

“I saw what you want,” Clancy said. “And it’s not your par-

ents. It’s not even your friends. What you want is to be with him,

like you were in the cabin yesterday, or in that car in the woods.

I don’t want to lose you, you said. Is he really that important?”

Rage boiled up from my stomach,

burning my throat. “How

dare you? You said you wouldn’t—you said—”

He let out a bark of laughter. “God, you’re naive. I guess

this explains how that League woman was able to trick you into

thinking you were something less than a monster.”

“You said you would help me,” I whispered.

He rolled his eyes. “All right, are you ready for the last les-

son? Ruby Elizabeth Daly, you are alone
and you always will

be. If you weren't so stupid, you would
have figured it out by

now, but since it's beyond you, let me
spell it out: *you will never*

be able to control your abilities. You
will never be able to avoid

being pulled into someone's head,
because there's some part of

you that doesn't want to know how to
control them. No, not

when it would mean having to embrace

them. You're too imma-

ture and weakhearted to use them the way they're meant to be

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used. You're scared of what that would make you."

I looked away.

"Ruby, don't you get it? You hate what you are, but you were

given these abilities for a reason. We both were. It's our *right* to

use them—we have to use them to stay ahead, to keep the others

in their place.”

His finger caught the stretched-out collar of my shirt and

gave it a tug.

“Stop it.” I was proud of how steady my voice was.

As Clancy leaned in, he slipped a hazy image beneath my

closed eyes—the two of us just before he walked into my memo-

ries. My stomach knotted as I watched my eyes open in terror,

his lips press against mine.

“I’m so glad we found each other,” he said, voice oddly calm.

“You can help me. I thought I knew everything, but you . . .”

My elbow flew up and clipped him under the chin. Clancy

stumbled back with a howl of pain, pressing both hands to his

face. I had a half a second to get the hell out and I took it, twist-

ing the handle of the door so hard that the lock popped itself out.

“Ruby! Wait, I didn’t mean—!”

A face appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Lizzie. I saw

her lips part in surprise, her many earrings jangling as I shoved

past her.

“Just an argument,” I heard Clancy say, weakly. “It’s fine,

just let her go.”

I burst outside, completely out of breath.

My feet were

drawn toward the fire pit, but I forced myself to stop and recon-

sider. There were so many people still out, gathered around the

food tables. I wanted to find Liam and explain why I hadn't been

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there, to tell him what had happened, but I knew I was a mess. I

needed to calm down, and there was no

way I could do it here.

There were too many potential questions. I needed to be alone.

So of course when I backed up a few steps, I managed to

walk right into Mike.

“Hey, there you are!” His hair was pulled back into a pony-

tail, a black bandana tied around his head. I could smell gasoline

on him, and something metallic. “Ruby? You okay?”

I bolted, heading past the Office, down the path to the

cabins. Eventually, I found what I thought was the path we had

walked Zu out on, but it turned out to be nothing more than an

old side trail, overgrown and unforgiving to bare skin. Fine. It

would do. There was no one around. That was my only criterion.

I walked until I lost the light from the fire pit, clawing at

my T-shirt, trying to pull it away from

my skin. It smelled like

his room. Like evergreens and spice and old, decaying things. I

pulled it over my head and threw it as hard and far as I could,

and still—still—I couldn't shake the smell. It was everywhere:

my hands, my jeans, my bra. I should have run straight for the

lake, or even the showers. I should have tried to soak his venom

out.

Calm down, I thought. *Calm down!* But I couldn't pick

apart exactly what was pulsing through me. Anger, for sure,

that I had been lied to, that I had fallen for it. Disgust, for the

way he had touched me and invaded even the pores of my skin.

But something else, too. An ache inside of me that expanded and

twisted, turning me to stone.

Liam was standing right in front of me, and I had never felt

so alone.

“Ruby?” His hair was pale silver in this light, curled and

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tangled in its usual way. I couldn't hide from him. I had never

been able to.

“Mike came and got me,” he said, taking a careful step

toward me. His hands were out in front of him, as if trying to

coax a wild animal into letting him approach. “What are you

doing out here? What’s going on?”

“Please just go,” I begged. “I need to be alone.”

He kept coming straight at me.

“Please,” I shouted, *“go away!”*

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on!”

Liam said. He got a better look at me and swallowed, his adam’s

apple bobbing. “Where were you this

morning? Did something

happen? Chubs told me you've been gone all day, and now you're

out here like . . . *this* . . . did he do something to you?"

I looked away. "Nothing I didn't ask for."

Liam's only response was to move back a few paces back.

Giving me space.

"I don't believe you for a second," he said, calmly. "Not one

damn second. If you want to get rid of me, you're going to have

to try harder than that."

"I don't want you here."

He shook his head. "Doesn't mean I'm leaving you here

alone by yourself. You can take all the time you want, as long as

you need, but you and me? We're having this out tonight. Right

now." Liam pulled his black sweater over his head and threw it

toward me. “Put it on, or you’ll catch a cold.”

I caught it with one hand, and pressed it to my chest. It was

still warm.

He began to pace, his hands on his hips. “Is it me? Is it that

you can’t talk to me about it? Do you want me to get Chubs?”

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I couldn’t bring myself to answer.

“Ruby, you’re scaring the hell out of me.”

“Good.” I balled up his sweater and threw it into the dark-

ness as hard as I could.

He blew out a shaky sigh, bracing a hand against the nearest

tree. “*Good?* What’s good about it?”

I hadn’t really understood what Clancy had been trying to

tell me that night, not until right then, when Liam looked up and

his eyes met mine. The trickle of blood
in my ears turned into

a roar. I squeezed my eyes shut, digging
the heels of my palms

against my forehead.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I cried. “Why
won’t you just leave

me alone?”

“Because you would never leave me.”

His feet shuffled through the underbrush
as he took a few

steps closer. The air around me heated,

taking on a charge I

recognized. I gritted my teeth, furious with him for coming so

close when he knew I couldn't handle it. When he knew I could

hurt him.

His hands came up to pull mine away from my face, but I

wasn't about to let him be gentle. I shoved him back, throwing

my full weight into it. Liam stumbled.

“Ruby—”

I pushed him again and again, harder each time, because

it was the only way I could tell him what I was desperate to

say. I saw bursts of his glossy memories. I saw all of his brilliant

dreams. It wasn't until I knocked his back into a tree that I real-

ized I was crying. Up this close, I saw a new cut under his left

eye and the bruise forming around it.

Liam's lips parted. His hands were no longer out in front of

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him, but hovering over my hips. “Ruby .
..”

I closed what little distance was left
between us, one hand slid-

ing through his soft hair, the other
gathering the back of his shirt

into my fist. When my lips finally
pressed against his, I felt some-

thing coil deep inside of me. There was
nothing outside of him,

not even the grating of cicadas, not even the gray-bodied trees.

My heart thundered in my chest. *More, more, more*—a steady

beat. His body relaxed under my hands, shuddering at my touch.

Breathing him in wasn't enough, I wanted to inhale him. The

leather, the smoke, the sweetness. I felt his fingers counting up

my bare ribs. Liam shifted his legs around mine to draw me closer.

I was off-balance on my toes; the world

swaying dangerously

under me as his lips traveled to my cheek, to my jaw, to where

my pulse throbbed in my neck. He seemed so sure of himself,

like he had already plotted out this course.

I didn't feel it happen, the slip. Even if I had, I was so

wrapped up in him that I couldn't imagine pulling back or letting

go of his warm skin or that moment. His touch was feather-light,

stroking my skin with a kind of
reverence, but the instant his lips

found mine again, a single thought was
enough to rocket me out

of the honey-sweet haze.

The memory of Clancy's face as he had
leaned in to do

exactly what Liam was doing now
suddenly flooded my mind,

twisting its way through me until I
couldn't ignore it. Until I was

seeing it play out glossy and burning like
it was someone else's

memory, and not mine.

And then I realized—I wasn't the only one seeing it. Liam

was seeing it, too.

How, how, how? That wasn't possible, was it? Memories

flowed *to* me, not *from* me.

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But I felt him grow still, then pull back.
And I knew, I knew

by the look on his face, that he had seen it.

Air filled my chest. “Oh my God, I’m sorry, I didn’t

want—he—”

Liam caught one of my wrists and pulled me back to him,

his hands cupping my cheeks. I wondered which one of us was

breathing harder as he brushed my hair from my face. I tried to

squirm away, ashamed of what he’d seen, and afraid of what he’d

think of me.

When Liam spoke, it was in a measured,
would-be calm

voice. “What did he do?”

“Nothing—”

“Don’t lie,” he begged, “please don’t lie
to me. I felt it . . .

my whole body, God, it was like being
turned to stone. You were

scared—I *felt* it, you were scared!”

His fingers came up and wove through
my hair, bringing

my face close to his again. “He . . .” I started, “he asked to see

a memory, and I let him, but when I tried to move away . . . I

couldn’t get out, I couldn’t move, and then I blacked out. I don’t

know what he did, but it hurt—it hurt so much.”

Liam pulled back and pressed his lips to my forehead. I felt

the muscles in his arms strain, shake. “Go to the cabin.” He

didn’t let me protest. “Start packing.”

“Lee—”

“I’m going to find Chubs,” he said. “And the three of us are

the hell out of here. *Tonight.*”

“We can’t,” I said. “You know we can’t.” But he was already

crashing back through the dark path.

“Lee!”

I went back to find his sweater and pulled it on, but not

even that could keep away the chill as I followed him out of the

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woods, back in the direction of the cabin and fire pit.

When I got to the cabin, Chubs was already there, propped

up on his bed reading. He took one look at me and snapped his

book shut. “What in the world happened?”

“We’re leaving,” I told him. “Get your things—what are you

staring at? Move!”

He jumped down off the bed. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“What’s going on?”

I had only just finished telling him everything that had hap-

pened with Clancy when Liam came bursting through the door.

He took one look at the two of us together and let out a shaky

breath. “I got worried when I couldn’t find you,” he told Chubs.

“Are you ready?”

I pulled on a baggy T-shirt and took Liam’s jacket when he

threw it to me. Chubs tied up his shoes, snapped his suitcase

shut, and didn’t put in a word of protest as we switched off the

cabin lights and headed out into the darkness.

The smell of smoke from the fire pit followed us down the

main trail longer than the light or the voices from it. I caught

Chubs looking back toward it over his shoulder, just once; the

distant orange glow reflected in the lenses of his glasses. I knew

he wanted to ask what we would do next, but Liam hushed

us both, and started down a side trail that I had never seen

before.

It was well-worn, but narrow enough that we had to walk

single file. I kept my eyes on Liam's shoulders until he reached

back to take my hand. The trail grew darker the farther we

walked into the thick layers of young trees.

And then we were out, and there was light—so much of it,

that for a moment I had to hold up a hand to cover my eyes. I

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felt Liam tense and stop, his hand tightening around mine until

it hurt.

“Told you,” I heard Hayes say. “Told you he’d try to get out this way.”

“Yes, good call.”

“*Damn*,” I heard Chubs swear behind me, but I was too

shocked to do anything other than step out from behind Liam,

and see where Clancy, Hayes, and the cluster of boys from Watch

stood blocking our only way out.





TWENTY-

SEVEN

There was a single moment when no one moved

at all.

I recognized where we were now that the area was lit up with

flashlights and lanterns. I had seen it once before, on Clancy's

computer screen. This is where, days before, the skiptracers

had tried to slip through the camp's wire

fences and Hayes had

“taken care” of them. Much like how he seemed poised to take

care of us now.

The boys in front of us stood where the path met the silver

wire marking East River’s boundaries. Clancy was at the center,

looking infinitely more pulled together than he had a few short

hours ago.

“I think we need to have a talk,” Clancy

said, his voice pleas-

ant. “It seems like something dangerous is about to happen.”

“We’re heading out,” Liam said, the anger in his voice barely

contained. “And we don’t want trouble.”

“You can’t just *go*.” Hayes pushed his way to the front of

the group, looming at Clancy’s side like a cannon waiting to be

aimed. “We have a system here, and you haven’t earned your keep yet.”

The words had just left his mouth when we heard the sound

of footsteps and voices crashing through the dried brush of the

other, bigger trail behind them. Olivia appeared first, followed by

Mike and four of the other kids Liam had been working along-

side the past month. They reacted the exact way we had—first,

cringing away from the light, then stopping short in shock.

“What’s going on?” Olivia demanded, cutting around the line

of kids in black until she was standing right in front of Clancy.

“Why didn’t you radio me?”

“Hayes and I have it under control.” Clancy crossed his arms

over his chest. “You should head back to your posts.”

“Not until you tell me what’s happening —” She whirled

around to face us, taking in our bags.
“Are you *leaving*?”

“Lee,” Mike said, making the connection at the same time.

“What are you doing?”

“It seems that Liam Stewart is staging another breakout,”

Clancy said, “or at least was attempting to. Looks like it’ll be just

as successful as the last.”

“Go to hell,” I cut in, grabbing Liam’s arm before he could

have a go at Clancy. He was shaking with anger, but we were

outnumbered—didn't he see that?

“Ruby,” Clancy said quietly, with all of the familiarity of the

kid I had thought was my friend. “Come on, can we at least talk

things through?”

Yes, a voice whispered in my ear. Wouldn't that be for the best?

The tightly wound anger in my chest began to unravel, slowly at

first, then in a strange, cool rush. My fingers slid from Liam's.

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All of a sudden, it did seem like that was the best option—the

only option. I had been so angry and afraid before, but this was

Clancy.

It was *Clancy*.

I took a step toward him, toward that smile. I could . . . I

could forgive him, couldn't I? It would be easy. Everything with

Clancy was easier. My feet moved on their own, knowing exactly

where I needed to go. Where I was supposed to go.

But Liam didn't let me, and Chubs wasn't about to, either.

I felt the latter's hands grab my backpack. The moment Liam

stepped back in front of me Clancy disappeared from sight, and

I couldn't remember why it had felt so

important to go to him,

to let him walk me back to camp.

“*Stop it!*” Liam yelled. “Whatever you’re doing to her, *stop it!*”

“He’s not—” Mike began, looking between his friend and

Olivia. I saw her just beyond Liam’s shoulders, her face a grim

mask. Behind them, the other kids from Liam’s watch detail

were abuzz, unsure of where to look.

“I’m not doing anything,” Clancy said,

his voice taking on

an edge of ice. “You’re the one that’s
jealous of the relationship

she and I have.”

The boys around him began to nod in
agreement, their faces

strangely expressionless.

“You’re the one that’s trying to break the
rules here,” he

continued. “Because it is a rule, isn’t it,
Liv? If you want to leave,

you have to ask me, right?”

She hesitated, but nodded.

Liam's arm dropped from in front of me slowly. His brows

drew together, and he seemed to incline his head toward Clancy,

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as if listening to something the rest of us couldn't hear. I felt,

rather than saw, the tension leave the lines of his shoulders. He

took a step back, and then another away

from me, one hand

going to his forehead. “Sorry . . . I just . . . I didn’t mean . . .”

“You’re happy here, aren’t you?” Clancy asked, pleasantly.

“There’s no reason why you can’t go back to feeling that way.

There are rules here. You know them now, and you won’t break

them again, will you?”

“No,” Liam said, his voice hoarse. He was staring at me,

but eyes had taken on a milky quality that I recognized at once.

And so, apparently, did Chubs. His own eyes narrowed, zeroing

Clancy with pure, razor-sharp fury.

“Let me tell you what I think about your fucking *rules*,” he

said, his voice dripping with venom as he pushed past Liam. “You

sit up in your room and you pretend like you want what’s best

for everyone, but you don’t do any of the work yourself. I can’t

tell if you're just a spoiled little shit, or
if you're too worried

about getting your pretty princess hands
dirty, but it sucks, you

are fucking awful, and you sure as hell
don't have *me* fooled."

The full force of Clancy's cold gaze fell
on Chubs, but he went

on, undaunted. "You talk about us all
being equals, like we're

one big happy rainbow of peace and all
that bullshit, but you

never once believed that yourself, did

you? You won't let anyone

contact their parents, and you don't care about the kids who are

still trapped in camps *your father* set up. You wouldn't even listen

when the Watch kids brought it up. So what I want to know is,

why *can't* we leave?" He took another step forward, cutting off

Clancy before he could start speaking. "What's the point of this

place, other than for you to get off on how great you are and toy

with people and their feelings? I know what you did to Ruby.”

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The others stood by in silence, but the longer Chubs spoke,

the clearer their eyes became; Mike, in particular, shook off

Clancy's influence with a look like he was about to be sick. The

other kids' eyes flicked around, nervous and unsure.

Clancy had been perfectly still the entire time Chubs had

torn into him, but now that Chubs was finished, Clancy leaned

in close, as if he were about to whisper a secret to him. Only,

when he spoke, his voice was loud enough for us all to hear. “I

toyed with more than her feelings.” His eyes flicked to Liam’s

face. “Didn’t I, Stewart?”

The sweep of furious crimson that washed up over Liam’s

throat to his face was enough to tell me exactly what kind of

image Clancy had pushed into his head.

“Don’t!” I screamed, but it was too late for that.

What happened next passed so fast that half of us gathered

there must have missed it. Liam raised his fist, ready to launch

it into Clancy’s smug face, but his hand got no farther than his

shoulder. Every part of him—every muscle, every joint, every

sinew—went board-straight, like he had received a great electric

jolt. He froze, and a breath later, Liam was on the ground, and

Hayes's fists were slamming into his face.

“Stop!” I begged, ripping free of Chubs's grip. I knew what

Clancy had done to him, and why he couldn't even raise a hand

to protect his face. I saw a spray of blood hit the dirt and it was

more than I could take.

It was more than any of us could take.

“Clance,” I heard Olivia say, “that’s enough. You made your

point. *Hayes*—you’ll kill him!”

Again and again and again, on whatever surface of skin he

could find, Hayes drove his fist into Liam, like he could pound

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his fury into him. The blows didn’t stop until Clancy put a hand

on his shoulder, and even then, Hayes made sure to get one last

punch in across the face. He heaved Liam up by the front of his

shirt, and when Clancy nodded to him, Hayes slammed Liam

back against the ground and stood up, leaving him a limp mess

of raw skin facedown in the dirt.

The moment the two of them were out of sight, Chubs and

I both lurched forward, pushing through the circle of kids that

closed around him. We got maybe two steps before Mike blocked

us from going farther.

“Don’t,” he said. “You’ll only make it worse.”

“What are they going to do to him?” Chubs said.

“Go back to your cabin,” he told us. “We’ll take care of him.”

“No,” I said, “we’re not leaving without him.”

Mike rounded on me. “I don’t know what the hell you said to

him or made him think, but Lee was happy here. This is exactly

what he needed, and you've screwed him over—”

“Don't you dare,” Chubs snapped. “Don't you *dare* blame

her for this. Your head is so up the Slip Kid's ass you can't see

anything that's going on around you!”

Mike bared his teeth. “We all put up with you at Caledonia

because Liam asked us to, but I don't have to do that here.”

“Whatever,” Chubs said. “Do you think I care about that?”

The only thing I care about is what’s going to happen to Lee—

you know, the one that put everything on the line to get us out

in the first place?” His words had the desired effect. Mike paled

in the darkness. “You can have your stupid Slip Kid, but don’t

expect us to let you keep Lee.”

We threw ourselves forward again, trying to claw our way

through to reach him. A pair of arms
wrapped around my chest,

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another around my legs, and it didn't
matter how hard or loud

we were screaming, the kids dragged us
away from him all the

same.

Chubs and I sat on Liam's bunk, not
speaking, not moving, not

doing anything but watching the cabin

door. Through the win-

dows, we saw curious faces—gawkers and guards alike, all trying

to figure out exactly what had happened. Lights-out had come

and gone, but it wasn't like either of us was going to be able

to sleep. Judging by the two figures in black standing directly

in front of our door, it didn't seem like we'd be able to leave,

either. Not after our failed escape attempt, and certainly not

after Chubs had rained down a verbal hailstorm on Clancy.

“Where did you learn to talk like that?” I finally asked, but

he only shrugged.

“I tried to imagine what Lee would have said and went from

there.” Chubs rubbed the top of his head.

“Did I really say he had

pretty princess hands?”

I let out a strangled laugh. “All that and more.”

The seconds ticked by at half the speed of my thoughts.

“Why weren’t you affected?” I wondered aloud. “He did try it on you, didn’t he?”

“He *tried*, I definitely felt it. Little did he know . . .” Chubs

tapped his forehead. “Steel trap. Nothing gets out *or* in.”

I had a fleeting thought that what he was saying could very

well be true, and that it might even explain why his was the only

head I had managed to avoid slipping into, but we heard a loud

shuffle of steps on the path and everything else flew straight out

of my own head.

Olivia and another kid came stumbling in, one of Liam's

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arms over each of their shoulders. His face was turned down,

and I could see where mud had caked

into his hair. The rain had

started about an hour after we had left him.

“Lee,” Chubs was saying, trying to get him to rouse. “Lee,

can you hear me?”

We helped them lay him out on the futon. It was dark

enough in the room that I didn’t see the extent of his beating

until Olivia set a flashlight lantern down on the floor beside him.

“Oh my God,” I said.

Liam’s face turned in my direction, and for the first time,

I realized he was actually awake—his eyes were swollen shut.

I let my hand fall on the arm hanging off the side of the futon,

and moved it so it was across his chest. The breath escaped his

lips in wheezing sighs. There was a thick layer of gummy, dried

blood caked around his nose, his mouth, down to even his chin.

Daylight would reveal the rest of the bruises.

“He needs antiseptic,” Chubs said, “bandages, something—”

“If you two come with me,” Olivia replied, “I’ll walk you to

the supply room. No one will be out to bother us.”

“I’m not going to leave him,” I said, still crouched beside

Liam on my knees.

“It’s all right.” I barely felt Chubs’s hand on my shoulder as

he brushed by.

The screen door creaked open and shut behind us; I waited

until I heard the shuffling footsteps of the other kid follow them

out before I looked back down at Liam's face. I moved my fin-

gers, feather-light across his face, as gently as I could. When I

came to his nose, he let out a sharp hiss, but he didn't try to twist

away until I brushed his swollen split lip.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I don't know if I had ever cried as much
as I had in the

past month. I had never been like the
other girls in my cabin at

Thurmond, who cried every night, and
then again every morn-

ing when they realized their nightmare
had been real. I wasn't

even a crier as a kid. But there was no
way to hold them back

now.

“Do I . . . look as pretty as I feel?” His voice sounded groggy,

slurred. I tried to get him to open his mouth, to make sure all

of his teeth were still there, but his jaw was too tender for me

to touch it. I leaned forward to press my lips against where my

hands had been.

“Don’t,” he said, one eye just barely cracked open. “Not

unless you mean it.”

“You shouldn’t have gone after him.”

“Had to,” he managed to mumble out.

“I’ll kill him,” I said, anger flaring up inside of me. “I’ll *kill* him.”

Liam started to chuckle again. “Ah . . . there she is. There’s

Ruby.”

“I’ll get you out of here,” I promised. “You and Chubs. I’ll

talk to Clancy, I'll—"

"No," he said. "Stop—it'll make things worse."

"How could things possibly get any worse?" I asked. "I

messed everything up for you. I ruined everything."

"God." He shook his head, mouth twisting into a shadow of a

smile. "Did you know . . . you make me so happy that sometimes

I actually forget to breathe? I'll be looking at you, and my chest

will get so tight . . . and it's like, the only thought in my head

is how much I want to reach over and kiss you.” He blew out a

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shaky breath. “So don’t talk about getting me out of here, because

I’m not leaving, not unless you’re part of the package, too.”

“I can’t go with you,” I said. “I won’t put you in that kind

of danger.”

“Bull,” he said. “Nothing’s going to be worse than being apart.”

“You don’t understand—”

“Then *make* me,” Liam said. “Ruby, give me one reason why

we can’t be together, and I’ll give you a hundred why we can.

We can go anywhere you want. I’m not your parents. I’m not

going to abandon you or send you away,

not ever.”

“They didn’t abandon me. What happened to them was my

fault.” The secret had slipped out of me like a long exhale, and

I’m not sure which of us was more surprised by the admission.

Liam settled into silence, waiting for me to continue. It

occurred to me then that this was it. This was really the moment

I was going to lose him. And all I could think about was how

much I wished I had kissed him one last time before he started

fearing me for what I was.

I leaned my head down on the cushion beside his. In a whis-

per, because I wasn't brave enough to say it any louder, I told

him about going to bed the night before my tenth birthday, about

how I woke up expecting my usual birthday pancakes. About the

way they locked me in the garage like some wild animal. And

when that story was over, I told him about Sam. How I had been

her Chubs until I wasn't, until I was nothing at all.

My throat burned when I was finished. Liam turned his face

toward mine. We weren't even a breath apart.

“Never,” he said after awhile. “Never, never, never. I am

never going to forget you.”

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“You won’t have a choice,” I said.

“Clancy said I won’t ever

be able to control it.”

“Well I think he’s full of it,” Liam said.

“Listen, what I saw

in the woods, when you . . .”

“When I kissed you.”

“Right. That . . . that really happened, didn’t it? What he—

what that asshole—did. That happened to you. He kept you

there, frozen, like he did to me.”

Yes, but also no. Because a small part of me had wanted him

to do it. Or had he only made me want him, played my emotions

with a single touch? I nodded, finally, my insides still squirming

with revulsion at the memory of his skin against mine.

“Come here,” said Liam softly. I felt his fingers’ light touch

run along the crown of my head, feather-soft as they came down

to cup my cheek. When I lifted my face, he met me halfway and

kissed me. I was careful not to touch his face, only his shoul-

der and arm. When he pulled back, I seemed to follow, my lips

searching for his.

“You want to be with me, right?” he whispered. “Then *be*

with me. We’ll figure it out. If nothing else, I trust you. You can

look inside my head and that’s all you’ll see.”

His warm breath spread over my cheek like another kiss.

“Mike worked it out. He’s going to try and find a way to sneak

us out, and then you, me, and Chubs? We’re gonna hit the road.

We’re going to find Jack’s father, we’re going to find a way for

Chubs to reach his parents, and then we’re going to talk about

what we want to do.”

I leaned over and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You really

don't hate me," I breathed out. "You're not scared—not even a little?"

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His battered face twisted with what I thought was supposed to be a smile. "I'm scared to death of you, but for a completely different reason."

"I'm a monster, you know. I'm one of the dangerous ones."

“No you aren’t,” he promised. “You’re one of us.”

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TWENTY-

EIGHT

Chubs returned a few minutes after Liam faded

into a restless sleep. He stirred again when we began cleaning

the cuts and gouges on his face, reaching for my hand at the

first touch of stinging antiseptic. When I felt his grip began to

relax, and saw his eyelids flutter shut again, I finally released

the breath I had been holding.

“He’ll live,” Chubs said, seeing my expression. He was stuff-

ing away the rest of the supplies in my backpack. “He’ll have a

wicked headache in the morning, but he’ll live.”

We took turns sleeping, or at least pretended to. My body

was thrumming with anxious unspent energy, and I could hear

Chubs muttering to himself, as if trying to work through the

night's events.

And then came the sound of feet slapping
against the con-

crete steps of the cabin once more, and
we gave up pretending

altogether.

“Lizzie—” I heard one of the boys
outside our door say. “Are

you—”

She pushed past them, throwing the
screen door open so

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hard that it slammed against the wall. Liam startled awake, more

confused and disoriented than he'd been before.

“Ruby!” Lizzie was looking straight at me, her face ashen.

Her hair had caught in her dozens of piercings, but it was the

blood on her hands that stopped the flow of blood to my head.

“It’s Clancy,” she gasped, clutching my arms. “He just . . . fell

and starting shaking all over like crazy
and bleeding, and I didn't

know what to do, but he told me to get
you, because you'd know

what was going on—Ruby, please,
please help me!”

I stared at her hands, the wet blood.

“It's a trick,” Liam croaked from the
futon. “Ruby, don't you
dare . . .”

“If he's really hurt, *I* should go,” Chubs
told Lizzie.

“Ruby!” she cried, like she couldn’t believe I was standing

there. “There was so much blood— Ruby, please, *please*, you have to help him!”

He really thought I was stupid, didn’t he? Or did he just

think his influence extended that far—that I could ever forget

what he had done to Liam and go rushing to his side? I shook

my head, anger rippling over my skin. Too *immature* and *weak*-

hearted to use my abilities, was I?

We'd see about that.

Liam pushed himself up into a sitting position. "You know

him," he was saying, "don't do it, don't —"

"Show me where he is," I said, over Chubs's protests. I turned

to him. "You have to stay with Liam, understand?" *You have to*

watch him because I can't. "I'll take care of everything."

I would get us out. Not Mike, not a burst of random luck— *I*

would get us out, and seeing Clancy's face slack with my influ-

ence would be well worth the effort it would take to break into

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his mind. Hadn't he taught me everything I needed to know to

do it?

“Ruby—” I heard Liam say, but I took

Lizzie's arm and

guided her outside, past the confused kids, past the cabins. Out-

side, the temperature had dropped almost twenty degrees.

Fat tears dripped down her chin. "He's in Storage—we were

talking about—about—"

"It's okay," I told her, putting an awkward hand on her back.

We ran through the garden and up the office's back steps. She

fumbled to put her key in the lock, only to have it jam. I had

to kick it in; Lizzie was too far gone to do anything but sprint

inside. The hall and kitchen were empty. The whole building

smelled like garlic and tomato sauce. Everyone must have been

out setting up for dinner.

Everyone except Clancy, who stood in the middle of the stor-

age room, leaning against a shelf of macaroni boxes.

Lizzie ran to the back right corner of the room and dropped

to her knees. She pawed at the ground, her trembling hands

clutching only air. “Clancy,” she cried, “Clancy, can you hear me?”

Ruby is here now— *Ruby*, come here!”

My stomach turned violently, and I was surprised by how sad

it made me feel to have my worst suspicions confirmed.

Why does it have to be like this? I thought, looking at him.

Why?

“You came, you really came,” Clancy said in a bored, flat

voice. He sounded like he was reciting the words from a script.

“Thank you, Ruby. I appreciate your help in my hour of need.”

“Why are you just standing there?” Lizzie wailed. “Help him!”

“You’re sick,” I said, shaking my head. Clancy came toward

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me, but I moved to the opposite end of the room, where Lizzie

had her face buried in the ground. “Stop it, I’m here. There’s no

reason to keep torturing her.”

“I’m not torturing her,” Clancy said. “I’m just playing

around.” And then, as if to prove his point, he barked, “Liz,

shut up!”

She stopped mid-gasp. A trickle of blood escaped her lip from

where she had bitten it. I took her hands, turning them over. The

blood was coming from *her*, from two neat cuts across her palms.

“What do you even want?” I asked, whirling around. “I’ve

told you everything, and what I didn’t say, you went ahead and

saw!”

It was only then that I noticed what Clancy was wearing.

Nice, pressed black slacks, a white button-down shirt without so

much as a speck of dust on it, and a red tie, trailing down over

his stomach in the exact same way the blood was dripping down

Lizzie's chin.

“I’m just keeping you in here for a little while,” he said, “then

we can go.”

“And where, exactly, are we going?” My eyes fixed on the

shelf behind his head, the one full of metal spoons and mixing

bowls.

“Anywhere you want,” he said. “Isn’t that what that Blue

promised you?”

I tried to stay calm, but the way he spat the word out—

Blue—rankled my already frayed nerves. I don’t know if Lizzie

sensed the sharp change in my mood, but Clancy did. He was

smiling, that perfect Gray smile, the same one that had followed

me across Thurmond's grounds.

Good, I thought, let him think I'm helpless. Let him think that

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there was no real threat from me, not until he was flat down on

the ground, unable to even remember his own name.

“Do you have a better offer?” I asked.

“What if I did?”

“I’d find that hard to believe,” I said, inching closer, trying

to distract him, “considering you care so little about me. If this

situation had been reversed, you wouldn’t have come running,

would you have?”

He shrugged. “I would have come. I just would have walked.”

“Please let Lizzie go,” I said. It scared me the way she was

acting, like a little kid. What was it about being Orange that

turned people into such monsters?

“Why? If she stays you won’t think about trying anything,

because it might mean her getting hurt, or worse.” He said it so

casually that I actually thought he was kidding.

“How can you be sure?” I hoped my voice sounded stronger

than it felt in my throat. “I don’t know her that well.”

“I’ve seen your memories. You’re what
shrinks call ‘overly

empathetic.’ You won’t do anything if it
means hurting others—

not intentionally at least.”

He said it with the utmost confidence,
which made the shock

on his face when I lunged at him that
much sweeter. For once,

he hadn’t predicted my response, hadn’t
pulled me under his

sway. I slashed across his face, heard
him grunt as my nails bit

into his cheek.

The connection was instant and powerful. It seemed that

some part of what he had said was true, after all. I needed to

want to use my abilities. I had to *want* to have control over them.

And God, did I want to. I wanted to tear his brain to shreds.

The images that churned up from the dark waters of his head

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were so unlike like what I had seen before. Instead of the bright

glare and the sharp, controlled edges, they were sketched in a

kind of watery charcoal. Unfocused, fuzzy. I saw faces, bloated

and distorted, rise up from the murky surface. His mind had gone

limp; I felt like I could reach both hands up and reshape him.

“Let her go,” I said, my grip on his throat tightening. I threw

the image of him sending Lizzie away,
and a moment later he

was mumbling the words, “Lizzie, go . . .
outside.”

She bolted for the door, and I felt a thrill
run through me.

He was shaking under my hands, his
eyes blinking, but I held

on to him.

“Now,” I said. “Now you’re going to let
us go, too.”

But even as the words left my mouth, I
felt the unraveling.

I gripped harder, my fingers digging into his skin. *Not yet*, I

begged, *not yet, I need—I need to—*

As quickly as I had slipped in, I was thrown out, and that

damn white curtain swept between us. I tried to throw myself at

it again, but Clancy's hand lashed out to snatch my wrist and I

felt every muscle in my body thicken to stone.

“Nice try.” Clancy let me fall to the ground like a board and

actually stepped over me to examine his scratched cheek in a

pot's reflective surface. "Didn't even draw blood."

I couldn't even move my jaw to tell him off.

"Good to see my lessons were of some benefit to you," Clancy

snarled, raking a hand through his disheveled hair. He turned

back to face the shelves, hiding his face, but I saw his hands

clench at his side, bunching up the fabric

of his pants. I hadn't

ruined him, but I had rattled him. "I like to see my students

applying themselves, but don't mistake a few weeks of practice

for years of it."

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I focused on trying to untangle whatever mental block he

had thrown on me. I started with my toes, imagining them mov-

ing one by one. And . . . nothing.

Maybe I could erase people's memories,
but he could turn

them into living stone.

The first scream came only a second
after I heard the first

whirring engines. An unnatural wind
stirred up the trees out-

side. Their branches scratched against
the side of the building,

insistent, as if to get our attention. I saw
Clancy cringe at the

high-pitched shriek of sirens, too, but he
straightened himself up

from his core. His face was lit with
eagerness, and that's what

frightened me most of all.

“That's it, then,” he said, brushing his
jacket off. “They're

finally here.”

I couldn't squeeze my eyes shut. The air
was burning them,

and then the air itself was burning. The
telltale smell of smoke

filtered in through the open windows.
Gunfire, more screaming,

more struggling. I imagined myself
moving, on my feet and run-

ning for the door, to the others, to safety,
but I got no farther

than a blink. But that was something. I
could work with that.

“You’re okay,” Clancy told me as he sat
back down next to

me. One of his feet began to tap out a
rhythm against the stool.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The blood roared in my ears. The kind of yelling that was

coming from outside didn't sound human; more like live animals

having their skin torn clear off the bone. It sounded like pain,

and terror, and desperation. The pitch of the metallic whine

coming through the walls increased in intensity as each minute

ticked on.

Rabbits need dignity and above all the will to accept their fate.

The Darkest Minds

I felt, rather than heard, the footprints thundering down the

hall. I couldn't tell how many there were. They were all moving

in perfect time. The storage room door burst open in an explo-

sion of smoke and heat.

I had never been so grateful for anything in my life as I was

that I was looking at his face when the

PSFs barged in. The

anticipation there gave way to blank incomprehension and then

to pure, unadulterated rage. Whatever Clancy had been expect-

ing, it wasn't two Psi Special Forces soldiers.

He didn't even have to touch them. "Shut up!" Clancy hissed,

throwing a hand out in their direction. "Get out! Tell your supe-

rior that there was no one here!"

The man in front, his body hidden under layers of fabric and

body armor, held a gloved hand against the device in his ear and

said, in a monotone voice, “Building clear.” The signal he gave

to the other two was a simple, mechanical wave. As they jogged

out of the room, I realized that they were the ones that had been

letting off the smoke.

That the fires had started with them.

“Damn it—God *damn it!*” Clancy was shaking his head. A fist

flew out and smashed into the nearby shelf, its impact drowned

out by the rattling of gunfire outside. “Where are my Reds?

Why didn’t he send *them?*”

He brought a bruised knuckle to his lips and began to suck

on it, pacing the short length of the room. His breath came out

in short bursts, and seemed to reflect the rapid turning of his

thoughts.

My Reds. His—the way that he spoke
about them left no

doubt in my mind what the implication
was there. Project

Jamboree, his father's program.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

No, I thought, not his father's.

I could see the different shards of the
fractured full picture

in front of me now. When he had first explained the program, I

hadn't known him all that well, or seen what he was capable of

doing—not enough to piece together the clues he had uninten-

tionally left for me to uncover.

There really wasn't a single person in the world that was

immune to his abilities, not even President Gray.

Clancy was still stalking across the room like a caged pan-

ther, the muscles of his back rippling with each spray of gunfire.

Then he stopped, looking up at the windows and the smoke that was swirling against them.

“Who told you, you bastard?” he said, in a low enough voice

that I wasn’t sure he knew he was speaking aloud. “Which one

of them broke my influence and figured it out? I was *so* careful.

So goddamn careful—”

He turned on his heel and stalked back toward me, and I saw

the truth of it all written on his face. The same hand that bled

with newly split skin had been the same one to coax his father,

his advisers, anyone and everyone it took, to consider Project

Jamboree. Hadn't he said that before his father realized he was

controlling him, Clancy had had some hand in making sure the

program ran smoothly, and that the kids

were treated well?

He had clearly could have done more than that. If he had

all of East River under his sway, what's to say he couldn't have

controlled a small army of Reds, too?

Clancy must have seen the realization in my eyes, because

he let out a low, humorless laugh. "I forget sometimes, you

know, that he's not stupid. Even after he finally figured out I

was manipulating him, he never put it together that Project

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The Darkest Minds

Jamboree came from me. I made sure of it after I escaped—I

even left East River to check on them from time to time, to

make sure my influence was still there. I timed the leak of East

River's location *perfectly* with the end of their training program.”

One hand came up to fist in his hair, and there was some-

thing breaking in his voice when he spoke again. “I grew up

idolizing him, but when I saw what he really was—what he

could do to his *own son*—” His words choked off slightly. “*Who*

was it? Who tipped him off? How would he have known to send

the PSFs instead? I should be controlling my Reds right now—

and we should all be marching up

toward New York to take him
down—”

Clancy bent suddenly, grabbing the front
of my shirt and

hauling me up from the floor. He shook
me, hard enough that I

almost bit my tongue clean off, but he
didn't say a single word.

The bullets and screams outside didn't
touch his stony features,

or his thoughts. Smoke began to crawl
along the floor, roll-

ing, heaving, seizing everything in its path. With no warning,

Clancy's hands released my shirt and glided up my shoulders in

a lover's caress; his fingers closed around my neck, and I was

sure, so damn sure, that he was either going to kiss me in his

rage, or kill me.

More footsteps, lighter than before, but no less urgent.

Clancy looked up, annoyance creasing his forehead.

I didn't see what happened next, only the aftermath. Clancy

went flying back into the shelves, hard enough that there was an

audible crack as his head connected with the back wall. His body

tore down the shelves of pasta and flour, landing in a messy pile

on the floor.

450

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

Chubs's upside-down face appeared

over mine. His glasses

were scratched and bent and his face and shirt was stained with

soot, but he didn't look like he was hurt.

“Ruby! Ruby, can you hear me? We need to run.” Why did

he sound so calm? Gunfire roared in my ears, an endless stream

of tiny pops and explosions. “Can you move?”

I was still too stiff to do anything other than shake my head.

Chubs gritted his teeth and slipped his arms under my arm-

pits, making sure he had a good hold. “Hold on, I’m getting us

out of here. Move when you can.”

Outside the safety of the Office, there was no escaping the

noises. My heart lurched to life, pounding against my rib cage.

Tear gas and smoke coated the air in thick layers. Everywhere

there was fire—on the ground, climbing the trees, dropping onto

cabin roofs. My face and chest felt like they had caught, too. The

wind blew the fire so close to us that Chubs had to pat my jeans

down so I wouldn't go up in flames. He grunted, and I knew he

was struggling to keep us going under my weight. I wanted to

tell him to drop me, to take the letters in Liam's jacket and run.

Liam. Where is Liam?

Through the swirling ash I saw the lines of black uniforms

marching the kids from camp down the path to the cabins. I

saw a girl thrown out of her cabin and into the dirt, only to be

yanked up by her hair. Two kids I recognized from the camp's

security detail raised their guns at the Reds, who blew them

away in a cloud of fire.

“STOP WHERE YOU ARE!”

The air was knocked from my chest as Chubs dropped me to

throw that same soldier up into the tree.
When his arms circled

451

T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

my chest again, we were moving faster
than before.

And then we were falling, tumbling
down the hill. Chubs let

out a surprised croak as we rolled,
picking up brush and embers

along the way. The back of my hand
smacked against a tree, but

I couldn't see where we were going. The smoke blinded me.

I came to a slow stop at the base of the hill, sinking face-first

in the muddy bank. My hands and legs all convulsed as the feel-

ing began to return to them.

I felt hands on the back of my jacket. Chubs dragged me on

my back, choking and coughing.

We are going to die. We are going to die. We are going to die.

*Rabbits need to accept their fate,
rabbits need dignity and above*

*all the will to accept their fate, their
fate, their fate, their fate—*

The water was freezing and swallowed
me whole. Shock cut

straight through my limbs, waking them
with a slap. I struggled

against the water, flapping my arms to
break to the surface. The

orange-stained sky was waiting as I
broke into the night, cough-

ing up water and poisoned air.

Chubs found me again. One hand clung
to a wood post, the

other reached out for me. *The dock*, I
thought, *our dock*. I kicked

toward him and let Chubs draw me
under the cover of the old

wood. The helicopters flying overhead
beat the lake into a frenzy

of waves and patterns. I could barely
keep my head above the

bobbing cold water, but I was alert
enough to see the search-

lights from above dancing over the

lake's surface.

I kept one arm around Chubs's shoulders
and used my free

hand to reach up and grab hold of the
dock's algae-slick sup-

ports. He did the same, and waited until
the sound of boots and

guns had cleared from overhead before
whispering, "*Oh my God.*"

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I moved my arm to draw us closer

together, and hugged him

as hard as my soft muscles could. We didn't dare to speak, but

I felt him shake his head. He knew what I was trying to say, I

knew what he wanted to ask, and neither of us could find the

words to choke out amid the smoke and screams.





TWENTY-

NINE

My legs were half frozen when we were finally

brave enough to move. It had been silent for some time; since

the sun began to warm the sky. The helicopters disappeared first,

then the sound of gunfire. Between the two of us, there was

only breathing and whispered fears about what had happened

to the others—to Liam.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We split up. He could be anywhere.”

I had wanted to get us out of the water two hours before,

but we kept hearing the sound of falling trees and the crackling

remnants of the terrible firestorm.

My muscles were so stiff that it took me three times as long

to pull myself onto the dock than it normally would have. Chubs

collapsed beside me, shaking with each cold breeze that slashed

over our wet clothes. We crawled our way back up the path,

staying low to the ground until we were sure, positive beyond

measure, that we were the last ones left.

Most of the cabins were gone—piles of charred wood and

stone. A few still stood, burned out and hollow or missing their

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

roofs. Ash flew around us like snow,
collecting on our hair and

sticking to our wet clothes.

“We should go to the Office,” I said.
“Get inside. We can

gather up supplies and then try to go out
and search for Lee.”

Chubs’s feet slowed beside me, and I
saw for the first time

how red his eyes were. “Ruby . . .”

“Don’t say it,” I warned, my voice

sharp. It wasn't an option.

“Don't.”

I didn't want to think about Lee. I didn't want to think about

Zu or the other kids who had gotten out of camp. We had to

keep moving. If I stopped now, I knew I would never be able to

start again.

The front rooms were clear. The boxes and tubs had been

removed. I forced Chubs to walk behind

me when I slipped into

the storage room, but it was empty.

“Maybe they got him,” Chubs said, rubbing his head.

I grimaced. “When have we ever been that lucky?”

Upstairs, the bedroom was perfect. Before he left, Clancy

had made his bed, put away the stacks of paper and boxes, and,

it appeared, dusted. I ripped the white curtain back, joining the

two halves of the room while Chubs
fussed with the TV, clicking

the power button on and off.

“They cut the electricity,” he said.

“Want to bet they cut the

water, too?”

I collapsed down in Clancy’s office
chair and pressed my face

against the dark wood. Chubs tried to
peel Liam’s wet jacket off

my shoulders, but I wouldn’t let him.

“Thank you for coming to find me,” I

said, closing my
eyes.

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The Darkest Minds

“You dumbass,” said Chubs affectionately. He patted me on the back. “Always running right into trouble.”

When I didn’t move, I felt his hand still on my shoulder.

“Ruby?”

“Why did he do this?” I whispered. Everything in this room

reminded me of Clancy, from the smell to the way he had orga-

nized the books by color on the shelves.

“He just threw them all

to the wolves . . .”

Chubs squatted down beside me, his knees cracking like an

old man’s. His hand never left my arm, but he seemed to strug-

gle with what he wanted to say next.

“Far be it from me to even approach untangling that hellhole

of a mind,” he said, carefully. “But I think he just liked being

in control. In charge. It made him feel powerful to manipulate

people because he knows outside of this place he’s just as vulner-

able as the rest of us. There are some people like that, you know?

The darkest minds tend to hide behind the most unlikely faces.

He put on a good leader act, but he

wasn't like . . . he wasn't like

Lee—or Jack. He didn't want to help kids because he believed

everyone deserved to feel strong and protect themselves. Clancy

was only ever thinking of himself. He would never have jumped

in front of another person and . . . he would never have taken

a bullet.”

At that, I sat up. “I thought Jack was shot escaping?”

Chubs shook his head. “Jack was shot protecting me, and he

protected me because—” He took a deep breath. “Because he

thought I couldn’t protect myself. He didn’t realize how much

he had taught me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, feeling tears prick at the back of my

eyes. “For everything.”

456

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“Me too,” he said after a minute, and I didn’t need to look

back to know that he was crying, too.

The laptop was stored in the top drawer of his desk, the note

taped to the top of it glaringly yellow.

Ruby,

I lied before. I would have run.

—CG

“Chubs!” I called, waving him over. The power-on chime was

oddly sweet. Little bells.

“He just left it here?” Chubs asked, tapping his fingers against

the desk. “Is the wireless card still there?”

It was, but Clancy had taken care to wipe everything else

from the computer. Only the icon for the Internet was left, sit-

ting in the middle of the screen.

“Why does the clock in the corner say fifteen?” Chubs asked,

sitting down in the chair. I leaned over to see what he was point-

ing at. The battery life. We only had fifteen minutes.

“That *asshole*,” I fumed.

Chubs shook his head. “It’s better than nothing. As long as

the connection holds, we can use it to try to figure out a way

out of here. We can even look up Jack’s father’s new address.”

“And post your message to your parents,” I said, feeling a

frail wave of happiness cut through me.

“It’s okay, I’d rather use these . . . fourteen minutes to find

Jack’s dad,” he said. “I might even be able to put a call through

to him if the computer has a microphone.”

He didn’t dare to try to call his own parents.

457

The Darkest Minds

“Seriously,” I began. “It’ll take you two

seconds to post the

message. Do you remember it?”

“Enough to make it work,” he said.

I moved around the room listlessly,
listening to him type,

taking in the room’s stale smell. My feet
drew me over to the

side of Clancy’s bed, where I finally
stopped, my anger at him

overwhelming even the anxiety I felt.

The window was coated in soot and
protested bitterly when I

tried to throw it open. The flood of fresh
air that rushed in made

it worth the fight; I leaned forward,
bracing my arms against

the sill. The camp was spread out before
me in piles of ash and

scorched earth, but it was all too easy to
imagine where the clus-

ters of kids had once stood, waiting to
get their food by the fire

pit. When I closed my eyes, I could hear
the laughter and radio

drifting up to me, taste the spice of chili

and wood smoke on the

air. I saw Liam below, the firelight turning his hair pure gold as

he bent his head in quiet conversation with the others.

And when my eyes opened, I was no longer just imagining

him.

I tore out of the room, ignoring the way Chubs's voice fol-

lowed me. I stumbled down the stairs, trying to take too many

at once, flew through the entryway and out the door that was

barely hanging from its frame.

He was down the trail, back toward the cabins, struggling to

get around the maze of fallen trees and buildings. His battered

face was twisted with grief and fear, and he could barely limp

through the wreckage.

“Lee!” The word exploded out of me. He dropped the charred

wood from his hands and struggled over
the tree, blindly fighting

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

his way through its leaves and branches.
Seeing me. Believing

and not believing it all at once. “Oh my
God!” I threw my arms

around his neck and nearly took us both
down

“Thank you,” he was whispering, “thank
you, thank you. . . .”

And then he was kissing my face, every inch of it he could find,

wiping away the tears and soot, chanting my name.

Liam wasn't the only one who escaped, but he was the only one

that came back.

He had relived the night for us as we sat in Clancy's office,

eating what food was left in the supply room. Chubs had the

laptop at his side, checking every few minutes for a message

from his parents, or rechecking the address he had found for

Jack's dad.

When the fighting had broken out, it was enough of a sur-

prise that most of the Watch kids couldn't get to the cabins from

the outer gates in time to make a real difference. The ones who

were off duty came to our cabin and forced him—"Carried me,

is more like it," Liam said, bitterly—away, running for one of the

hidden side trails that had been marked for this exact purpose.

They moved until morning, not stopping until they reached that

same stretch of highway that they had picked us up on.

“There were maybe twenty of us at most,” he said, gripping

my hand. “All in bad shape. Liv and Mike found a working car

and piled the ones that were scary bad into the back to go find

a hospital, but . . .”

“What about the rest of them?” I asked.

“They split.” Liam rubbed at his eyes and winced. The skin

there was still tender, blooming to black.

459

T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

“And why didn’t *you*?” Chubs demanded. “What the hell is

the matter with you that you’d come back here, knowing that

there could still be PSFs?”

Liam only snorted. “You think that mattered to me for a

second when there was a chance the two of you were still here,

too?”

We didn’t have time to waste; we all knew the PSFs well

enough to know that there was a chance they would double back

and check for survivors. The two of them went to work imme-

diately in the supply closet, trying to figure out how much food

we could carry with us. I tried to be useful, too, but I could feel

my attention drifting upstairs, to Clancy's desk.

I finally gave into my restlessness and left the two of them

locked in an argument over canned food. I made my way back

upstairs, patting the inside pocket of Liam's jacket to make sure

Jack's and Chubs's still-damp letters were there.

There were two minutes left of the

laptop's battery. The

power icon was flashing, warning that reserves were low. The

screen dimmed and the lights in the keyboard switched off. I

typed as fast as I could, searching the online White Pages for

Ruby Ann Daly, Virginia Beach.

No results.

I tried again, just with her name. A listing did pop up, but

it was for Salem. I hadn't lived there in

close to a decade, but I

recognized my parents' address when I saw it.

A minute and fifteen seconds. I looked in the Web site his-

tory for the site Chubs had talked about, the one that let you

make calls, and typed in the phone number. I lost two seconds

with each ring.

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

I don't think I wanted to talk to her so much as to hear her

speak. Going to her wasn't an option for me anymore. There

were more important things to take care of. But I needed to

know that she was still out there—that there was one more per-

son in the world who remembered me.

It clicked. My heart jumped up into my throat, my fingers

curling against the desk.

My mother's voice.

*Hello, you've reached the residence of
Jacob, Susan, and Ruby*

Daly . . .

I don't know why I started to cry then.
Maybe I was exhausted.

Maybe I was tired of how hard
everything had become. I was

happy that the three of them were
together, that Mom and Dad

had fixed their family and replaced one
Ruby with another. The

thing I'd realized most over the past few days was how important

it was for us to take care of one another and stick together. And

they were taking care of each other. Good.

Good.

But it didn't mean that I wasn't going to close my eyes and

pretend, if only for a few minutes, that I was the Ruby who still

lived on Millwood Drive.





THIRTY

Hours later, when it was just the three of us

back on the road, we finally had a chance to tell Liam exactly

what had happened to us the night before.

“Thank God, Chubs found you,” Liam said, shaking his head.

“You knew him better than any of us, and you still went.”

“I really thought I could control him,” I said, leaning my

forehead against the cool window. “I’m an idiot.”

“Yes, you are,” Chubs agreed. “But you’re *our* idiot, so be

more careful next time.”

“Cosigned,” Liam said, hooking his fingers over mine on top

of the armrest.

We’d found the car abandoned along a side road a few miles

west of East River, and picked it only because it still had a quar-

ter tank of gas. Driving in this car was nothing like driving in

Betty. Chubs's long legs dug into the back of my seat, and the

car smelled like old Chinese food. Still, it was running. After a

while, it would become ours.

“There's another one,” Chubs said, tapping on his window.

I opened my eyes and craned my neck back, catching a quick

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

look at the white pole. On top of it was a white box, and on top

of that was a small antenna. Cameras, everywhere.

“Maybe we should get off the highway,” Liam suggested.

“No!” Chubs said. “We’ve seen two whole cars since we

got on the sixty-four, and it’ll take us twice as long to get to

Annandale if we get off again. They’ll be watching for Betty,

anyway, not this car.”

Liam and I shared a look. “Tell me again what your mom’s

message said?”

“She said to make a reservation at my aunt’s restaurant and

wait for them in the kitchen,” Chubs said. “I did that from East

River, so we should be set to meet them there tonight. My aunt

will probably even feed us.”

“Let’s drop you off first, then,” Liam

said.

“No,” Chubs said. “I want to deliver Jack’s letter.”

“Chubs . . .”

“Don’t *Chubs* me,” he snapped. “I owe Jack a lot. I want to

do this.”

The address for Jack’s father was a Days Inn motel, far away

from Annandale’s neighborhoods of sprawling homes. Liam

seemed to think that it had been

converted to a temporary hous-

ing complex for the workers rebuilding D.C., but there was no

way to prove his theory until a rickety old bus pulled up along-

side our car in the parking lot and unloaded a dozen dust-covered

men, clutching neon vests and hard hats.

“Room one oh three,” Liam said, leaning over the steering

wheel. He squinted with his good eye.

“The guy in the red shirt.

Yeah, that's him—Jack looked a lot like him.”

The man was short and square, with a graying moustache
and a wide nose.

463

T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

Chubs reached between us and plucked the wrinkled letter
out of my hand.

“Slow down, Turbo,” Liam said, clicking the car locks on.

“We haven’t even checked to make sure he’s not being watched.”

“We’ve been out here for almost an hour—do you *see* any-

one? The only other cars in the parking lot are empty. We lay

low, like you wanted, and it worked.” He reached over and

pulled the lock up manually. Liam stared at him for a moment,

before relenting.

“All right; just be careful, will you?”

We watched him scurry across the parking lot, glancing

around. Making sure there really was no one out watching room

103. He tossed a *told you so* look over his shoulder.

“Nice,” Liam said. “Real nice.”

I reached over and rubbed his shoulder. “You know you’ll

miss him.”

“It’s insane, isn’t it?” he said, with a light laugh. “What am I

going to do without him telling me how dangerous it is to open

canned food the wrong way?”

Liam waited until Chubs had raised his hand and knocked

before unbuckling his seat belt to lean over and give me a light

kiss.

“What was that for?” I said, laughing.

“To get your mind on the right track,” he said. “After we take

him home, we have to figure out how to

find Zu and the others

before the PSFs do.”

“What if—”

The door to room 103 cracked open, and the face of Mr.

Fields appeared, tired and suspicious. Chubs lifted the wrinkled

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A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

letter and extended it out to him. I wished Chubs had turned

at an angle so we could have made out what he was saying.

The man's face flushed crimson, so dark that it matched his

work shirt. He yelled something, loud enough that his next door

neighbors opened their curtains to see what was happening.

"This is bad," Liam said, unlocking his door. "I knew I should

have had him practice with me first."

The door shut in Chubs's face, only to open again all the

way. I saw a flash of silver, saw Chubs raise his hands and take a step back.

The gunshot tore through the sunset, and by the time I screamed, Chubs was already on the ground.

We ran toward the room, screaming for him. All the complex's residents were standing outside now, mostly men, some women.

Their faces were monstrous blurs.

Jack's father raised his shaking gun toward us, but Liam

threw him back into his room and pulled the door shut with a

sweep of his hand. My knees slid across the loose asphalt as I

dropped down beside Chubs.

His eyes were open, staring at me, blinking. *Alive.*

He tried to tell me something, but I couldn't hear over the

screaming from inside 103. "*Fucking freaks! Get out of here you*

goddamn freaks!”

Bright red blood bubbled up from just below Chubs’s right

shoulder, spreading out over his shirt with hundreds of glid-

ing fingers. I couldn’t do anything at first. It didn’t look real.

Liam diving for the man’s gun, pointing it at 104 and 105, not

real.

465

The Darkest Minds

“It’s okay,” someone said behind us. Liam whirled around,

his finger on the trigger, his face set in stone. The man raised his

hands; he was holding a small phone. “I’m just calling 9-1-1, it’s

okay; we’ll get him help.”

“Don’t let them call,” Chubs gasped. “Don’t let them take

me.” He choked on the words. “I need to go home.”

Liam looked back over his shoulder. “Grab his legs, Ruby.”

“Don’t move him,” the man from 104 said. “You’re not supposed to move him!”

Jack’s father appeared behind us again, but the man with the

cell phone tackled him back into the room and kicked the door

shut behind him.

“Grab him,” Liam said, tucking the gun into the waistband

of his jeans.

I slipped my arms under Chubs’s,

carrying him the same way

he had carried me. One of the other men stepped forward—

maybe to stop us, maybe to help.

“Don’t touch him!” I screamed. They backed off, but only

just.

Chubs pressed his own hands against the wound, his eyes

wide and unblinking. Liam took his legs and, together we carried

him. The men called after us, telling us

the ambulance would be

there any minute. The ambulance, along with every PSF. The

soldiers wouldn't save him, they wouldn't. They'd rather see a

freak kid die.

“Don't let them take me,” Chubs squeezed out. “Keep my

legs below my chest, Lee, don't lift them so high, not for chest

wounds, breathing difficult—”

It wasn't the babbling that sent the spikes

of fear straight

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into my heart, but the unending pulse of
blood leaking out from

behind his hands. He was shaking, but
not crying. “Don’t let

them take me. . . .”

I climbed into the backseat first, pulling
Chubs in behind me.

His blood soaked through the front of my
shirt, burning against

my skin.

“Keep . . . pressure on it,” Chubs told me. “Harder . . . Ruby,

harder. I’m going to try to . . . hold it in with . . .”

His abilities, I think. The blood did seem to slow somewhat

when his hand covered it again. But how long could that actually

last? My hands covered his, shaking so hard they probably did

more harm than good.

“God,” I was saying, “oh my God, don’t close your eyes—

talk to me, keep talking to me, tell me what to do!”

The car squealed as we turned out of the parking lot. Liam

hit the gas as hard as he could, slamming his palms down against

the steering wheel. “*Shit, shit, shit!*”

“Take me home,” Chubs begged. “Ruby, make him take me

home.”

“You’re going—you’ll be fine,” I told him, leaning over so he could see my eyes.

“My dad . . .”

“No—Lee, *hospital!*” I wasn’t speaking in sentences, and

Chubs wasn’t either, not anymore. He made a sound like he was choking on his own tongue.

When the glimpses came, they were washed in the same bright red as his blood. A man sitting in

a large armchair, reading.

A beautiful woman leaning across a kitchen table. A cross-stitch

pattern, an emergency room sign. The black at the edge of my

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vision was curling up. Someone had taken a knife and driven it

straight down into my brain.

“Alexandria is a half hour away,” Liam shouted, turning back

over his shoulder. “I’m not taking you there!”

“Fairfax Hospital,” Chubs wheezed out.

“My dad . . . tell

them to page Dad . . .”

“Where is it?” Liam demanded. He looked at me, but I had

no idea, either. It occurred to me then that there was a chance we

would be driving around so long that Chubs would die. He would

bleed out right here, right now, in my lap. After everything.

Liam whipped the car around so hard I had to brace me and

Chubs from flying off the seat. I bit my tongue in an effort to

keep from screaming again.

“Keep talking to him!” Liam said.
“Chubs— *Charles!*”

I don’t know when and where he had lost his glasses. His

eyes were red at the edges, staring up at my face. I tried to hold

his gaze for as long as I could, but he was trying to hand me

something. Chubs lifted his hand from where it had fallen across

his stomach.

Jack's letter. Its edges soaked in wet, sticky blood, but open.

Waiting to be read.

The handwriting was small cramped. Each letter had a

ghostly halo around it from the time it had spent submerged

with the two of us in the lake, and some were gone completely.

Dear Dad,

When you sent me to school that morning, I thought

you loved me. But now I see you for what you are. You

called me a monster and a freak. But you're the one

that raised me.

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“Tell him to read . . .” Chubs licked his lips. I had to lean

down to hear his voice over the wind outside. “Tell Lee to read

my letter. I wrote it . . . it was for him.”

“Charles,” I said.

“*Promise—*” Whatever lodged itself in my throat made it

impossible to speak. I nodded. A rush of blood bubbled up under

our hands, coming faster than before.

“Where is it?” Liam was shouting.

“Chubs, where is the hos-

pital? You have to—you have to tell me

where it is!”

The car began to quiver, then howl, sounding more beast

than machine. Liam hit a pothole in the road that sent the front

hood flying up, along with a cloud of gray-blue smoke. We got

another ten, maybe twenty feet, before the car jerked to a dead

stop.

I looked up, meeting his gaze.

“I can fix it,” Liam swore, his voice

breaking, “I can fix it—

just—just—keep him talking, okay? I can fix this. I can.”

I waited until I heard the door slam behind him before I

closed my eyes. Chubs had gone so still, so pale, and no amount

of shaking or yelling would bring him back out of it. I felt his

blood leak past my hands, scarlet under the overcast sky, and I

thought about what he had said the night Zu left us. *It's over.*

It's all over.

And it was. The unnatural calm that settled over me told

me as much. All along, I'd been fighting. I'd been fighting the

moment I left Thurmond, struggling against the restraints every-

one wanted to wrap around me, kicking and clawing against the

inevitable. But I was tired now. So tired. I couldn't deny what a

part of me had known from the moment the PSFs had burned

my world down. What a part of me had known all along.

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What had Miss Finch said, all those years ago? That there

were no do-overs, no comebacks? That once someone was gone,

they were gone forever. Dead flowers didn't bloom, and they

didn't grow. A dead Chubs wouldn't smile, spout off rambling

sentences, wouldn't pout, wouldn't laugh
—a dead Chubs was
unimaginable.

I reached into the pocket of Liam's
jacket and pushed the

panic button. Twenty seconds clicked
by, each one feeling longer

than the last. It gave a little vibration, a
little acknowledgment,

and I released it.

Outside, Liam was banging metal against
metal—growing

more helpless and angry by the second. I wanted to call him

back to us, to have him next to Chubs, because I was sure this

was it. I was sure he was going to die right there in my arms, less

than twenty-four hours after he had saved me. And I couldn't do

anything for him, other than hold him.

“Do not die,” I whispered. “You cannot die. You have to take

calculus and go to football games and go to prom and apply to

colleges and you absolutely cannot die.
You can't—you *can* 't—”

I detached completely. A familiar numbness took hold of my entire body. I was vaguely aware of Liam shouting something outside. My arms tightened around Chubs's chest. I heard feet shuffling against the loose asphalt outside; all I could smell was smoke and blood. All I could hear was my own heartbeat.

That's when the door across from me

opened, and Cate's

face appeared.

And that's when I began to cry, really cry.

“O h , *Ruby*,” she said, anguished.
“*Ruby*. ”

“Please help him,” I sobbed. “Please!”

Two pairs of hands reached in to lift me out. My arms were

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still wrapped around Chubs. I couldn't move my hands. There

was so much blood. I kicked and butted against whoever was

trying to pull us apart.

“Ruby, sweetheart,” Cate said, suddenly next to me. “Ruby,

you have to let go now.”

I had made a mistake. This was a mistake. I never should

have called them. A terrible noise filled the air, and it wasn't

until Liam was there, holding me back,
his arms around my

shoulders, that I realized I had been
screaming the entire time.

There were three cars surrounding our
smoking, useless

hunk of metal. All SUVs.

“If you get him help, we’ll go with you,”
I heard Liam tell

Cate. “We’ll go with you. We’ll do
whatever you want.”

“No,” I cried, “*no!*”

Liam was holding me steady, but I felt the way his arms

shook. We watched them load Chubs's still form into the back

of one of the SUVs, and the door had barely shut before it tore

off down the highway. Chubs's blood was still warm on my skin,

cooling every second, and it made me want to crawl out of it.

"Please," Liam said, his voice breaking. "Calm down. You

have to calm down. I've got you. I'm

right here.”

There was a pinch on the back of my neck; there and gone,

faster than taking a breath. All at once, I felt my muscles relax. I

was being dragged forward on limp legs, the image of the nearest

white SUV swimming in and out of focus. *Lee?* I wanted to say,

but my tongue was too heavy. Someone slid a dark hood over my

face, and I was being lifted—up, up into the air, like my father

used to do when I was just a kid. When I
thought I could grow

up and fly.

And then the real darkness came.

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THIRTY-ONE

It was the cold water that woke me, more than

the woman's soft voice. "You're all right," she was saying, "Ruby.

You're gonna be fine." I'm not sure who she thought she was

fooling with her sweet little B.S., but it wasn't me.

The smell of rosemary was back, filling my nose with a mem-

ory that felt both ancient and new. Which was it?

When I felt the press of her hand against mine, I forced my

eyes open, blinking against the sunlight. Cate's face swam in and

out of my vision. She stood and crossed the room, drawing the

gauzy curtains shut. It helped somewhat, but I was still having

trouble fixing my sight on any one thing. It was glancing off

bright, shiny surfaces. A white dresser, pale purple wallpaper,

a flashing alarm clock, a mirror on the

opposite wall, and our
reflections there.

“Is this real?” I whispered.

Cate sat at the edge of my bed, the exact
same way she had

at Thurmond, only now she wasn't
smiling. Behind her, Martin

leaned against the wall in camo pants
and boots. He looked like

a completely different person to me. I
hadn't fully recognized

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him at first glance. The roundness in his face had thinned out,

sinking his eyes further into his skull. Someone had been dumb

enough to give him a gun.

“We’re in a safe house outside of Maryland,” she said.

“Lee?”

“Safe here, too.”

Not safe, I thought; never safe with you.

I felt the urge to run rise up deep from my bones; it was

instinct now. Exhaustion and pain had stripped every other

sensation away from me. My eyes scanned the room—two win-

dows, the only other exit aside from the door. I could break the

glass. I force Cate back with a single brush of my mind against

her, get Liam, and we could be gone before anyone noticed. It

could work.

“Don’t even try,” Cate said, following my eyes. She slipped a

small silver object from the back pocket of her jeans and held it

out to me, the rough pattern of the speaker face up. “Even if you

could get past me, every single one of the agents downstairs is

carrying one of these on them. Judging by your last hit of Calm

Control, you’re not going to be of much use to Liam when they

take him out and shoot him for your

insubordination.”

I jerked away. “They wouldn’t—” But I saw the truth of it in

her eyes. They would. They risked everything to break me out

of Thurmond. They fought off skiptracers to get me back. I had

already seen in Rob’s mind that despite what they claimed their

mission was, they didn’t have any qualms about offing a few kids

if it meant getting the ones they wanted.

“How could you even think about it?”
Martin hissed. “Do

you know how much time she wasted
looking for you?”

Cate waved him off. When she leaned
toward me again, I

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saw there were splatters of blood across
the front of her shirt.

Dark. Dried.

The memory came into painfully sharp

focus. “Chubs—what happened to Chubs?”

Cate looked down at her hands and something in me

clenched.

“Honestly,” she said, “I’m not sure. We haven’t been able con-

tact the group of agents that took him, but I know they reached

the hospital.” Cate reached for my hands, but I wouldn’t let her

take them. The thought turned my

stomach. “He’s safe. They’ll
make sure he’s taken care of.”

“You don’t know that,” I said. “You said
it yourself.”

“But I believe it” Cate said.

I wanted to tell her that her beliefs
weren’t worth a damn

thing when she spoke again. “I’ve spent
the last month looking for

you. I stayed in this area, hoping you’d
eventually show up, but

Ruby, where were you? Where did you

go? You look like—like—”

“East River,” I said.

Cate sucked in a sharp breath. So the League had heard

about what happened.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Martin said, pushing himself up off the

wall. He slid the strap of his rifle over his shoulder and stalked

toward me. “Sitting around on your ass for weeks doing nothing?

Figures. I’ve been actually making a

difference. I've been part of something."

He made as if to touch my leg, but I grabbed his wrist tight

in my hand. I wanted to see what he had gone through for

myself—the training, the screaming instructors. I latched on to

the strongest of his memories and spread it open in my mind. I

wanted to glimpse our future.

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Martin's memory bubbled up like hot tar, forming and

shaping itself until I was standing where he had stood. The pack-

age that had been in his hands was now heavy in mine. I felt the

weight of it cramp my fingers, but my eyes were focused only

on the climbing numbers on the elevator's display: 11 , 12 , 13 . . .

The bell dinged as it passed each floor, heading to 17.

I cast a sly look to the girl standing next to me, dressed in

a skirt suit, her young face caked with enough makeup to age

her well beyond her years. She clutched her leather tote bag to

her side like a shield, and it was only when she released it that I

noticed her hands were shaking.

I was wearing a FedEx uniform; I could see myself through

Martin's eyes, reflected in the elevator's silver doors as they slid

open.

We were in an office building of some kind. It was dark out,

but there were still men and women working, tucked away in

their cubicles, their eyes glued to their computer screens. I didn't

stop, though, and neither did the girl at my side. Her face had

broken out in a sweat, heavy enough to smear her makeup, and

I felt a stab of irritation go through me at the sight of it.

The largest office was located at the far back corner of the

building, and that was where I was headed. The girl all but let

out a sigh as I left her by the drinking fountains. She was there

for backup. This was *my* mission.

The door to the office was closed, but I could see someone's

shape behind the frosted glass. *He's still here.* And so, thankfully,

was his executive assistant. She looked confused at the sight of

the package, but all it took was a single stroke at the back of her

hand. Her eyes went glassy, unfocused, and I knew I had her.

The elderly woman got up from her chair and turned toward the

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office door. I left the package right on her desk.

Free of that weight, I hustled back through the maze of

cubicles, catching the eye of the girl by the fountain. When I

jerked my head toward the elevators, she followed, looking back

and forth between the elevator bank and the office floor, her lip

caught between her teeth.

She didn't do anything stupid until we were outside, though.

I jogged down the steps, heading for the waiting FedEx van and

the dark-haired man sitting in the driver's seat. I was already

at the door when I realized she wasn't
behind me. The girl was

frozen at the top of the marble steps, her
eyes wide and her face

as pale as the stone beneath her feet.

She was going to run back into the
building to warn them

about the explosive, to warn them.
Weak. The words shot

through my mind, as crisp as if they had
been drilled there. *Ditch*

*and die. Double-cross the League and
die.*

I took the handgun from under my seat
and leaned out

the open window. But I never got a shot
off. Upstairs, high on

the seventeenth floor of the building, an
explosion blew out a

shower of glass and concrete, and she
had disappeared under

their weight.

Martin's hand stayed at my side, and he
stopped moving.

This is what it means to be one of them, I
thought. This is what

they will turn us into. I had slipped into his mind to confirm

my suspicions, but even I was surprised at how easy it had been.

Weeks ago, when we first got out, I hadn't been able to fend him

off. Now, all he had to do was brush by me and I overpowered

him. With a single touch.

Clancy had taught me well.

I looked at Martin again, feeling a strange sort of pity for

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him. Not because of what I was about to do, or the way I would

be using him, but because he thought he knew what it meant

to be powerful and in control. He honestly still thought he was

stronger than me.

I put a finger on the back of his hand, just one.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

The reaction from him was priceless.
There wasn't an ounce

of color left in his cheeks, and his lips
began to smack against

one another, trying to form the word,
trying to call up a memory

that was no longer there.

“Where are you from?”

I could see the panic now; it caused his
eyes to bulge. But I

still wasn't finished.

“Do you know where you are now?”

I almost felt guilty— *almost*—when I saw the moisture

began to gather at the corner of his eyes. But I also remembered

how helpless and afraid he had made *me* feel, and I regretted

not having done more. A plan was forming at the back of my

mind, and it was almost too terrible to acknowledge as my

own.

“I don’t—” He gasped the words out. “I don’t—”

“Then maybe you should leave,” I said in a cold voice.

I barely had to push the image of him doing it. He bolted

from the room, slamming the door behind him. Running from

the scary monster.

Cate stared after him, an unreadable expression on her face.

“Impressive.”

“I thought he could do with an attitude adjustment,” I said.

I kept my voice cold and flat, just the way I thought she'd want

it. I had seen enough to know the viciousness these people

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demanded, and I needed them to want me. "Since it seems we'll

be spending a lot of time together now."

Her pale blond hair fell over her shoulders as she bowed her

head, but Cate didn't deny it. We were

trapped here. She had

accepted Liam's deal.

"I guess it was never really a choice to begin with," I contin-

ued. "Eventually, you were going to have to bring me in."

"You are a valuable asset to the resistance." Cate lifted her

hand toward me, only to drop it before it could touch my face.

Smart lady. She knew what I could do.

"I hoped you would come

to see that on your own terms.”

“What about Lee?”

“He’s a security risk now that he’s seen this safe house and

the agents here. He’s safer with us, Ruby. The President wants

him dead. I’m sure he’d come to see that . . . eventually.”

My hands twisted against the pale bed sheets. A weapon.

Liam as a weapon. Liam, who could barely lose his temper with-

out feeling guilty. He had fought so hard
to escape this violence,

and me—I'd turned him right back
toward it. They'd put their

hands on him and press him into their
mold, and he'd come out

the other end of it as the same dark
creature he had struggled to

avoid becoming.

I was breathing hard now, though
inwardly I was as calm

as the waters on East River's lake. All
at once, the final piece

clicked into place, and I knew what I was going to do.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll stay and I won’t fight you or manipulate

you. But if you want me to do as you say . . . if you want to use

my abilities, or do testing on me, I have one condition. You have

to let Lee go.”

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“Ruby,” she began, shaking her head.
“It’s too dangerous, for
everyone involved.”

“He’s a Blue. You don’t need him. He
won’t ever be a fighter,
not like you want.”

And if he stays here, you will kill him.

You will kill every good part of him.

“I can do so much now,” I told her, “but
you won’t see
another hint of it until you let him go.
Until you swear you will

never chase him down.”

Cate watched me for a moment, a hand pressed to her

mouth. I could see the indecision in her face. I had used Martin

to show her exactly what I could offer them and he, apparently,

had already proven to them how valuable an Orange could be.

These were not, however, the terms she would have chosen.

“All right,” she said, finally. “All right. He can go.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your promise?” I asked.

Cate stood and reached again into her pocket. The silver

Calm Control device, the only thing keeping me out of her head,

was still warm when she pressed it into my palm. My fingers

closed around hers.

“So help me God,” I said slowly, clearly, when Cate looked

up at me. “If you go back on your word, I will tear you apart.

And I won't stop, not ever, until I've destroyed your life, and the

lives of every single person in this organization. Believe me, you

may not always keep your promises, but *I* do."

She nodded at me once, and there was something almost like

pride in her eyes.

"Understood," Cate said, and we were.

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They kept Liam in the bedroom at the other end of the hall, in

a room painted a soft blue. The kind you'd only find in the sky

just before sunrise, maybe. It might have been a nursery once.

There were clouds painted on the ceiling, and the few pieces of

furniture left seemed too small for an average adult.

Liam sat on the tiny bed with his back to me. At first, as

I shut the door behind me, I thought he

was staring out the

window. As I came closer, I saw he was actually fixated on the

wrinkled sheet of paper in his hand.

The bed dipped as I crawled across it, wrapping my arms

around his chest from behind. I pressed my cheek against his,

letting my hands wander until they found his steady heartbeat.

He shut his eyes and leaned back.

“What are you looking at?” I whispered.

He handed me the paper wordlessly as I moved to sit beside

him. Jack Fields's letter.

"You were right," Liam said after a moment. "You were so

right. We should have read it. We would have known not to

bother."

It was the dead way he spoke, so flat, so coated with grief,

that made me crumple the letter and throw it across the room.

He only shook his head, pressing a hand over his eyes.

I fumbled with the inside pocket of his jacket, where I had

stashed Chubs's letter all those days ago. Liam watched me pull

it out and sagged beside me.

“He told me he didn't write it for them,” I said. “He wrote it

for you. He wanted you to read it.”

“I don't want to.”

“Yes, you do. Because when you get out

of here, you'll want

something to say when you see him again."

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"Ruby." Now he sounded angry. His arm dropped from

around my shoulders, and he stood up.

"Do you really think that

if he lives, they're going to let us see him? Do you think they're

even going to let *us* stay together? That's

not how these people

work. They're going to control our every move, right down to

who we see and what we eat. Trust me, it'll be some precious

piece of luck if we even find out if he's alive, never mind if

they've brought him in for training.”

Liam paced the room once, twice, three times, and it felt

like an hour had passed before I worked up the nerve to open

Chubs's letter myself.

The room was silent for a long time.

“What?” Liam asked, finally. His voice was laced with fear.

“What does it say?”

It was blank. There was nothing written on the sheet of

paper aside from Chubs's parents' name and their address, and

there had never been. Not a single drop of ink.

“I don't understand . . .” I said, passing

it to him. That

couldn't have been right. Maybe he had lost the original let-

ter, or was carrying the real one on himself? When I looked

up again, Liam was crying. One hand destroying the letter in

his fist, the other pressed against his eyes. And then I realized I

already knew the answer.

Chubs hadn't written anything because he didn't think he

had to. He thought he was going to be able to tell his parents

everything he wanted to say in person. He believed he was going

to get home.

Liam's knees seemed to buckle out from under him as he sat

back down on the bed. His forehead came down to rest against

my shoulder, and I wrapped both arms around him. *He did*

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believe you, I wanted to say. All along, he believed you.

I felt so much older, then. Not sixteen, not sixty, not even a

hundred, but a thousand years old. Older, but not brittle. I felt

like one of the oak trees that grew along the highway overlook-

ing the Shenandoah Valley, with deep roots and a strong core.

He gets to go, I thought, he gets to go home.

For a long time I did nothing but hold on to him. I wanted

to memorize the way his hair curled at the ends, the scar at the

edge of his lips. I had never felt time's sting as sharply as I did

then. Why did it only ever seem to freeze or move forward at a

barreling speed?

“The crazy thing is, I had all of these plans,” he whispered.

“What we were going to do. All the places I was going to take

you. I really wanted you to meet Harry.”
The window breathed in

afternoon light. I felt his hand trail down
the length of my arm.

“We’ll be okay,” Liam said. “We just
can’t let them separate us.”

“They won’t,” I whispered. “I was
thinking . . . I know this

is going to sound so corny, but . . . if
there’s one good thing that

came out of all this, it was that I got to
meet you. I would go

through it all again—” Tears pricked my

eyes. “I would, as long
as it meant I’d met you.”

“You really think that?” Liam sat up and
pressed his lips

against my hair. “Cause, frankly, the
way I see it, you and me?

Inevitable. Let’s say we didn’t get stuck
in those god-awful

camps—no, just listen. I’m going to tell
you the amazing story

of us.”

Liam cleared his throat again and turned

to fully face me.

“So, it’s the summer and you’re in Salem, suffering through

another boring, hot July, and working part-time at an ice cream

parlor. Naturally, you’re completely oblivious to the fact that

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all of the boys from your high school who visit daily are more

interested in you than the thirty-one

flavors. You're focused on

school and all your dozens of clubs, because you want to go to a

good college and save the world. And just when you think you're

going to die if you have to take another practice SAT, your dad

asks if you want to go visit your grandmother in Virginia Beach."

"Yeah?" I leaned my forehead against his chest. "What about

you?"

“Me?” Liam said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I’m in Wilmington, suffering through another boring, hot sum-

mer, working one last time in Harry’s repair shop before going

off to some fancy university—where, I might add, my room-

mate will be a stuck-up-know-it-all-with-a-heart-of-gold named

Charles Carrington Meriwether IV—but he’s not part of this

story, not yet.” His fingers curled around

my hip, and I could

feel him trembling, even as his voice
was steady. “To celebrate,

Mom decides to take us up to Virginia
Beach for a week. We’re

only there for a day when I start catching
glimpses of this girl

with dark hair walking around town, her
nose stuck in a book,

earbuds in and blasting music. But no
matter how hard I try, I

never get to talk to her.

“Then, as our friend Fate would have it,
on our very last

day at the beach I spot her. You. I’m in
the middle of playing

a volleyball game with Harry, but it
feels like everyone else dis-

appears. You’re walking toward me, big
sunglasses on, wearing

this light green dress, and I somehow
know that it matches your

eyes. And then, because, let’s face it,
I’m basically an Olympic

god when it comes to sports, I manage to

volley the ball right

into your face.”

“Ouch,” I said with a light laugh.

“Sounds painful.”

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The Darkest Minds

“Well, you can probably guess how I’d react to that situation.

I offer to carry you to the lifeguard station, but you look like you

want to murder me at just the suggestion. Eventually, thanks to

my sparkling charm and wit—and
because I'm so pathetic you

take pity on me—you let me buy you ice
cream. And then you

start telling me how you work in an ice
cream shop in Salem, and

how frustrated you feel that you still
have two years before col-

lege. And somehow, *somehow*, I get
your e-mail or screen name

or maybe, if I'm really lucky, your phone
number. Then we talk.

I go to college and you go back to

Salem, but we talk all the

time, about everything, and sometimes we do that stupid thing

where we run out of things to say and just stop talking and listen

to one another breathing until one of us falls asleep—”

“—and Chubs makes fun of you for it,” I added.

“Oh, ruthlessly,” he agreed. “And your dad hates me because

he thinks I’m corrupting his beautiful, sweet daughter, but still

lets me visit from time to time. That's when you tell me about

tutoring a girl named Suzume, who lives a few cities away—”

“—but who's the coolest little girl on the planet,” I manage

to squeeze out.

“Yup,” Liam said. “Wanna try for the ending?”

By then, I couldn't help myself. I brought both hands up to

my face, pressing my fingers against my eyes.

I had to do it now, or I never would. We couldn't hide up

here forever. They could change their mind about his leaving as

quickly as they had the first time.

I sat up and wiped the tears off my face, gritting my teeth.

Liam pushed himself up so that he was sitting beside me on the

edge of the bed, a concerned look on his face. For a moment I

was terrified that he knew what I was about to do.

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

He tilted his head to the side, a small smile turning up the

corner of his lips. I tried to smile back, but inside I was breaking

apart. “What?”

When they brought us to the camps, they took everything.

They stripped away our friends and family, took our clothes,

took our future. They only thing we got

to keep were our memo-

ries, and now I was about to take those from him, too.

“Close your eyes,” I whispered. “I’m going to finish the story.”

I felt the trickle at the back of my mind and let it turn into

a roar. And when I kissed him, when my lips pressed against his

one last time, slipping inside of his mind was as easy as taking

his hand had been.

I felt him jerk back, heard him say my name in alarm, but I

didn't let him get away. I pulled myself from his mind, day by

day, piece by piece, memory by memory, until there was nothing

of Ruby left to weigh him down or keep him bound to my side.

It was a strange unwinding sensation, one I had never felt before,

or maybe one I never recognized until that moment.

The problem of Chubs rose in the back

of my mind, and I

had a split-second to make a decision. If he was alive—and he

had to be, there was no alternative for me—the League would

bring him in. But if Liam knew that, he'd come back to find a

way to get him out, and the deal would be for nothing.

I would take care of Chubs. *I* would be the one to help him

give the League the slip. There was no reason why Liam couldn't

think that his friend had made it home to his parents; no reason

he needed another distraction from getting home himself. It was

a simple adjustment, a quick patch over an ugly memory . . .

And then I was out of air and out of time.
The door behind

me opened and I pulled away from Liam.
He stayed board stiff,

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T h e D a r k e s t M i n d s

his hands resting on his knees, his eyes shut tight. Cate looked

back and forth between us, her brows drawing together. I stood

and moved to her side.

A moment later, Liam's bright blue eyes opened, and he was

seeing me. He just wasn't seeing Ruby.

“What happened?” he asked, looking between Cate and me.

He reached up to touch his face, which was still swollen and

battered.

“You had a car accident,” I said. “The League picked you up.”

Cate stiffened beside me; I caught the sudden comprehen-

sion fall over her features out of the corner of my eye.

“The League . . .” he repeated, his eyes narrowing.

“Yes, but if you feel well enough, you can go,” Cate said,

when she recovered. “Your brother asked us to give you some

money for a bus ticket.”

“I bet he did,” Liam grumbled as he searched the ground for

his shoes. “Why can’t I remember the accident?”

I’m not sure Cate realized how plainly she was wearing the

shock on her face. Her hand floated up toward my shoulder—to

steady me, or herself, I wasn’t sure—but I stepped away.

“Does your head still hurt?” I managed to choke out. I was

still wearing his jacket. I couldn't bring myself to take it off. "You

hit it pretty hard."

"A little," he admitted. I didn't like the way he was looking at

me, his brows drawn together in concentration. "And the League

is just letting me go?"

Cate nodded, and threw him an envelope. Liam threw it

right back to her.

"I don't want your money."

A l e x a n d r a B r a c k e n

“The procedure to contact your parents is also in here,” she

said.

“Don’t want it,” he said. “Don’t need it.”

“What am I supposed to tell Cole?”

Liam drew himself up on unsteady legs. “Tell him to come

home, and then we can talk.” He turned to me. “What about

you? Are you really one of them? You look like you have a lot

more sense than that.”

Wordlessly, I took the envelope from Cate. When I pressed

it into his hand, he didn't toss it back at me. “You'd better get

going.”

“I'm not going to thank you,” he told us.

“I didn't ask for

your help.”

Cate led him out into the hall. “You

didn't have to, and you
never need to."

He started down the stairs.

"Hey—" I called. Liam stopped, turning
back up to look at

me. "Be careful."

His blue eyes flicked back and forth
between Cate and me.

"You too, darlin'."

I watched him go from the window
overlooking the street,

following his familiar shape as he stepped outside and closed the

door behind him. No car, no one to watch over, no one to help.

He was completely free.

And he looked happy. Sure of himself, at least. His feet

instinctively knew what direction home was. Now there was

nothing left to keep him from getting there.

Liam passed through the white fence surrounding the house

and stepped onto the sidewalk. He flipped the sweatshirt hood

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up over his head and glanced both ways before jogging across the

street. I watched him grow smaller and smaller with each step.

*All the world will be your enemy,
Prince with a Thousand*

*Enemies, I thought, and whenever they
catch you, they will kill you.*

*But first they must catch you, digger,
listener, runner, prince with
the swift warning.*

*Be cunning and full of tricks, and your
people shall never be
destroyed.*

Cate came up behind me, stroking a hand
through my hair.

“You’ll be happy with us,” she said.
“I’ll take care of you.”

I drew the gauzy curtains shut, my
fingers sliding over their

silky surface. I watched her for a moment, searching for the tell

that would reveal her lie. I wondered if she still thought I was

the girl she had carried out of Thurmond, who had cried the first

time she'd seen the stars.

Because she didn't know that there were two of me now;

split between everything I had wanted, and everything I would

now have to be. One of me, the hardest, angriest part, would stay

with these monsters and slowly find herself twisting into their

shape. But there was another, secret Ruby. This one was as thin

as a wisp of air, and had struggled for so long just to be. This was

the one that Liam carried with him, without knowing. The one

that would ride in his back pocket, whisper words of encourage-

ment, tell him that he was born to chase the light.

For the first time in months, I heard

Sam's voice whisper in

my ear: *Don't be scared. Don't let them see.*

I turned from the window, and I didn't look back.

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