



annabel

a
DELIRIUM
eBook exclusive
short story

LAUREN OLIVER

Author of *Before I Fall* and *Pandemonium*

Also by Lauren Oliver

Before I Fall
Delirium
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Requiem

Hana — A Delirium Short Story

For younger readers

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Annabel: A Delirium Short Story

Lauren Oliver



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Lena

Hana

now

When I was a girl, it snowed for a whole summer.

Every day, the sun rose smudgy behind a smoke-gray sky and hovered behind its haze; in the evenings, it sank, orange and defeated, like the glowing embers of a dying flame.

And the flakes came down and down—not cold to touch, but with their own peculiar burn—as the wind brought smells of burning.

Every night, my mother and father sat us down to watch the news. All the pictures were the same: towns neatly evacuated, cities enclosed, grateful citizens waving from the windows of big, shiny buses as they were carted off to a new future, a life of perfect happiness. A life of painlessness.

“See?” my mother would say, smiling at me and my sister, Carol, in turn. “We live in the greatest country on earth. See how lucky we are?”

And yet the ash continued swirling down, and the smells of death came through the windows, crept under the door, hung in our carpets and curtains, and screamed of her lie.

Is it possible to tell the truth in a society of lies? Or must you always, of necessity, become a liar?

And if you lie to a liar, is the sin somehow negated or reversed?

These are the kinds of questions I ask myself now: in these dark, watery hours, when night and day are interchangeable. No. Not true. During the day the guards come, to deliver food and take the bucket; and at night the others moan and scream. They are the lucky ones. They are the ones who still believe that sound, that voice, will do any good. The rest of us know better, and have learned to live in silence.

I wonder what Lena is doing now. I always wonder what Lena is doing. Rachel, too: both my girls, my beautiful, big-eyed girls. But I worry about Rachel less. Rachel was always harder than Lena, somehow. More defiant, more stubborn, less *feeling*. Even as a girl, she frightened me—fierce and fiery-eyed, with a temper like my father’s once was.

But Lena . . . little darling Lena, with her tangle of dark hair and her flushed, chubby cheeks. She used to rescue spiders from the pavement to keep them from getting squashed; quiet, thoughtful Lena, with the sweetest

lisp to break your heart. To break my heart: my wild, uncured, erratic, incomprehensible heart. I wonder whether her front teeth still overlap; whether she still confuses the words *pretzel* and *pencil* occasionally; whether the wispy brown hair grew straight and long, or began to curl.

I wonder whether she believes the lies they told her.

I, too, am a liar now. I've become one, of necessity. I lie when I smile and return an empty tray. I lie when I ask for *The Book of Shhh*, pretending to have repented.

I lie just by being here, on my cot, in the dark.

Soon, it will be over. Soon, I will escape.

And then the lies will end.

then

The first time I saw Rachel and Lena's father I knew: knew I would marry him, knew I would fall in love with him. Knew he would never love me back, and I wouldn't care.

Picture me: seventeen, skinny, scared. Wearing a too-big, beat-up denim jacket I'd bought from a thrift store and a hand-knitted scarf, not even close to warm enough to immunize me from the frigid December wind, which came howling across the Charles River, blew the snow sideways, stripped people in the streets of all their color so they walked, white as ghosts, heads bowed against the fury.

That was the night Misha took me to see the cousin of a friend of a friend, Rawls, who ran a Brain Shop down on Ninth.

That's what we called the dingy centers that sprang up in the decade after the cure became law: Brain Shops. Some of them pretended to be at least half-legit, with waiting rooms like at a regular doctor's office and tables for lying down. In others, it was just some guy with a knife, ready to take your money and give you a scar, hopefully one that looked realistic enough.

Rawls's shop was the second kind. A low basement room, painted black for God knows what reason; a sagging leather couch, a small TV, a stiff-backed wooden chair, and a space heater—and that was pretty much it, except for the smell of blood, a few buckets, and a little curtained-off area, too, where he actually did his work.

I remember I nearly threw up coming in, I was so nervous. A couple of kids were ahead of me. There was no space on the couch, and I had to stand. I kept thinking the walls were contracting; I was terrified they would collapse entirely, burying us there.

I'd run away from home almost a month earlier and in that time had been scraping and saving money for a fake.

In those days it was easier to travel; a decade after the cure was perfected, the walls were still going up, and regulations weren't as stringent. Still, I'd never been more than twenty miles from home, and I spent practically the whole bus ride down to Boston either with my nose pressed up against the window, watching the bleak blur of starved winter trees and shivering landscapes and guard towers, new and in construction—or in the

bathroom, sick with nerves, trying to hold my breath against the sharp stink of pee.

The last commercial flight: that's what I watched on TV, at Rawls's shop, while I waited my turn. The news crews packing the runway, the roar of the plane down the strip, and then the lift: an impossible lift, like a bird's, so beautiful and easy it made you want to cry. I'd never been on an airplane, and now I never would. The airstrips would be dismantled and airports abandoned. Too little gas, too much risk of contagion.

I remember my heart was in my throat, and I couldn't look away from the TV, from the image of the plane as it morphed, grew smaller, turned into a small black bird against the clouds.

That's when they came: soldiers, young recruits, fresh out of boot camp. Uniforms crisp and new, boots shining like oil. People were trying to run out the exit in the back, and everyone was shouting. The curtains got torn down; I saw a flimsy folding table covered by a sheet, and a girl stretched out on it, bleeding from her neck. Rawls must have been halfway through her procedure.

I wanted to help her, but there wasn't any time.

The back door was thrown open, and I made it out and into an alley slick with ice, heaped with dirty snow and trash. I fell, cut my hand on the ice, kept going. I knew if I was caught, that was the end—I'd be hauled back to my parents, chucked into the labs, probably ranked a zero.

That was the first year that a national system of ranking was established, made consistent across the country. Pairing was taking off. Regulatory councils were springing up everywhere, and little kids talked about becoming evaluators when they grew up.

And no one would choose the girl with the record.

It was at the corner of Linden and Adams that I saw him. Ran into him, actually—saw him step out in front of me, hands up, shouting, "Wait!" Tried to dodge, lost my footing, stumbled directly into his arms. I was so close, I could see the snow caught in his lashes, smell the damp wool of his coat and the sharpness of aftershave, see where he'd missed the stubble on his jaw. So close that the procedural scar on his neck looked like a tiny white starburst.

I'd never been that close to a boy before.

The soldiers behind me were still shouting—“Stop!” and “Hold her!” and “Don’t let her get away!” I’ll never forget the way he looked at me—curiously, almost amused, as though I were a strange species of animal in a zoo.

Then: He let me go.

now

The dagger pin is all I have left. It is comfort and pain, both, because it reminds me of all I've had, held, and had taken from me.

It is my pen, too. With it, I write my story, again and again, in the walls. So I don't forget. So it becomes real.

I think of: Conrad's hands, Rachel's dark hair, Lena's rosebud mouth, how when she was an infant, I used to sneak into her bedroom and hold her while she slept. Rachel never let me—from birth, she screamed, kicked, would have woken the household and the street.

But Lena lay still and warm in my arms, submerged in some secret dreamland.

And she was my secret: those nighttime hours, that twin heartbeat space, the darkness, the joy.

All of this, I write.

And so truth shall set me free.

My room is full of holes. Holes where the stone grows porous, eaten away by mold and moisture. Holes where the mice make .(their homes. Holes of memory, where people and things get lost.

There is a hole in the bottom of my mattress.

And in the wall behind my bed, another hole, growing bigger by the day.

On the fourth Friday of every month, Thomas brings me a change of linens for the cot. Laundry day is my favorite. It helps me keep track of the days. And for the first few nights, before the new sheet is soiled with sweat and the sediment of dust that sifts down on me continuously, like snow, I feel almost human again. I can close my eyes, imagine I am back in the warmth of the old house, with the wood and the sun, the smell of detergent, an illegal song piping softly from the ancient record player.

And, of course, laundry day is when I get my messages.

Today I'm up just before the sun. My cell is windowless, and for years I couldn't tell night from day, morning from evening: a colorless existence, a time without aging or end. In the first year of my imprisonment, I did nothing but dream of the outdoors—the sun on Lena's hair, warm wood steps, the smell of the beach at low tide, swollen-belly rain clouds.

Over time even my dreams became gray and textureless.

Those were the years I wanted to die.

When I first broke through the wall, after three years of digging, twisting, carving the soft stone away with a bit of metal no larger than a child's finger—when that last bit of rock crumbled away and went spinning, tumbling into the river below—my first thought wasn't even of escape but of air, sun, breath. I slept for two nights on the floor just so I could feel the wind, so I could inhale the smell of snow.

Today I have stripped my bed of its single sheet and the coarse blanket—wool in winter, cotton in summer—that is standard issue in Ward Six. No pillows. I once heard the warden say that a prisoner had tried to suffocate himself here, and ever since, pillows have been forbidden. It seems unlikely but then again: Two years ago a prisoner managed to get hold of a guard's broken shoelaces and choked himself to death on the metal frame of his cot.

I am at the end of the row, so as always, I get to listen to the rest of the ritual: the doors creaking open, the occasional cry or moan, the squeak of Thomas's sneakers and then the heavy thud, the click, of the cell doors closing again. This is my only excitement, my only pleasure: waiting for the clean linens, holding the filthy sheet balled in my lap, heart fluttering like a moth in my throat, thinking, *Maybe, maybe this time . . .*

Amazing, how hope lives. Without air or water, with hardly anything at all to nurture it.

The bolts slide back. A second later, the door grinds open and Thomas appears, carrying a folded sheet. I haven't seen my reflection in eleven years—since I arrived and sat in the medical wing while a female warden cut off my hair and shaved my head with a razor, telling me it was for my own good—so the lice would stay out.

My monthly shower takes place in a windowless, mirrorless room, a stone box with several rusted showerheads and no hot water, and now when my head needs shaving, the warden comes to me, and I am bound and locked to a heavy metal ring on the door while she works. It is by watching Thomas, by seeing the way the years have made his skin puff and sag, carved wrinkles into the corners of his eyes, thinned his hair, that I can estimate what they have done to me.

He passes me the new sheet and removes my soiled one. He says nothing. He never does, not out loud. It's too risky. But for a second, his eyes meet mine, and some communication passes between us.

Then it's over. He turns and leaves. The door grinds shut and the bolts click into place.

I stand and move to the cot. My hands are shaking as I unfold the sheet. Inside it is a pillowcase, carefully concealed, no doubt smuggled up from one of the other wards.

Time is really just a test of patience. This is how it works, how it has worked for years: a pillowcase one month, occasionally an extra sheet. Linens that go missing and aren't looked for, linens that can be torn, twisted, braided together.

I reach into the pillowcase. At the very bottom is a small piece of paper, also carefully folded, containing Thomas's sole instructions: *Not yet*.

My disappointment is physical: a bitter rush of taste, a liquid feeling in my stomach. Another month to wait. I know I should be relieved—the rope I've been making is still too short, and will leave me with a ten-foot drop to the Presumpscot River. More chances to slip, twist or break something, cry out.

And I absolutely cannot cry out.

To keep from thinking too much about the wait ahead of me, another thirty days in this airless, dark place—another thirty days closer to death—I get down on my hands and knees and maneuver under the cot, feeling for the hole in the mattress, as big as a fist. Over the course of a year, I've been pulling out handfuls of foam and filler, all of it disposed in the metal chamber pot where I piss and shit and, when the flu makes the rounds, get sick. I wrap my hand around a coil of cotton and pull; inch by inch, all those stolen linens are revealed, torn and braided, made strong to hold my weight. By now, the rope is nearly forty feet long.

I spend the rest of the evening making careful tears, using the edge of the dagger pin, now blunted nearly useless, to poke and tear holes in the fabric. No point in moving quickly.

There is nowhere to go, nothing else to do.

By the time I receive my daily dinner ration, I've finished working. I replace the rope in its hiding place, pushing, working it through the opening: a reverse birth. When I'm finished, I eat the food without tasting it, which is probably a blessing. Then I lie on my cot until the lights go off abruptly. Then the whimpering begins, the muttering and the occasional scream of someone gripped in a nightmare or, perhaps, waking

from a pleasant dream. Strangely, I've learned to find the nighttime sounds almost comforting.

Eventually, my mind brings me memories of Lena, and then visions of the sea; at last, I sleep.

then

There was no resistance back then; there was no consciousness, yet, that we needed to resist. There were promises of peace and happiness, a relief from instability and confusion. A path and a place for all. A way to know, always, that your road was the right one. People were flocking to get cured the way they had once flocked to churches. The streets were papered with signs pointing the way to a better future. A central bank; jobs and marriages designed to fit like gloves.

And a life designed to slowly strangle.

But there was an underground: Brain Shops, someone who knew someone who could get you a fake ID for the right price; another person who could hook up an intercity bus ticket; someone else who rented basement space to anyone who wanted to disappear.

In Boston I stayed in the basement apartment of an older couple named Wallace. They weren't cured; they missed the age cutoff even when the procedure became mandatory, and were allowed to die in peace, in love. Or would have been allowed to—I heard several years later that they had been busted for harboring runaways, people who were dodging the cure, and spent the last few years of their lives in jail.

A path and a place for everyone, and for the people who disagree, a hole.

I should never have stolen his wallet. But that's the problem with love—it acts on you, works through you, resists your attempts to control. That's what made it so frightening to the lawmakers: Love obeys no laws other than its own.

That's what has always made it frightening.

The basement was accessible only through a narrow alleyway that ran between the Wallaces' house and their neighbor's; the door was concealed behind a pile of junk that had to be carefully navigated each time we entered or left. Down a steep flight of stairs was a large, unfinished room: mattresses on the floor, a wild jumble of clothing, and a small toilet and sink, made semiprivate behind a folding screen. The ceiling was crisscrossed with metal pipes and plastic tubes and wiring, so it looked like someone's intestines tacked above us. It was ugly, freezing, and smelled

like dirty feet, and I loved it. In my short time there, I made two good friends: Misha, who hooked me up with Rawls and was trying to get me fake papers, too; and Steff, who taught me how to pick pockets and showed me all the best places to do it.

That is how I knew the name of the man I would someday marry: I stole his wallet. The slight touch, my hands across his chest, the momentary contact—it was long enough to feel for it in his jacket, slip it into my pocket, and run.

I should have dumped the wallet and kept the cash, as Steff had taught me to do. But even then love was working on me, making me stupid and curious and careless. Instead I took the wallet back to the crash pad with me and spread out its contents carefully, greedily, on my mattress, like a jeweler bending over her diamonds. One government ID card, pristine, printed with the name Conrad Haloway. One credit card, gold, issued by the National Bank. One loyalty card at Boston Bean, stamped three times. A copy of his medical certification; he'd been cured exactly six months earlier. Forty-three dollars, which was a fortune to me.

And, tucked into one of the empty credit card flaps, distorting the leather slightly: one silver dagger pin, the size of a child's finger.

now

Three days after Thomas brings me the note telling me to wait, he comes again. This time he is carrying nothing. He merely slides open the door, enters my cell, cuffs me, and hauls me to my feet.

“Let’s go,” he says.

“Go where?” I ask.

“Don’t ask questions.” He speaks loudly, no doubt so that the other prisoners will hear. He shoves me roughly toward the door, out into the narrow corridor that runs between the cells. Above us, the cameras set in the stone ceiling blink like small red eyes.

Thomas grabs my wrists and propels me forward. My shoulders burn. I have a momentary flash of fear: I’m so weak. How will I make it on my own, in the Wilds?

“What did I do?” I ask him.

“Breathe,” he answers. He puts on a good show. “Didn’t I tell you not to ask questions?” At one end of the corridor is the exit to the other wards; at the opposite end is the Tank. The Tank is only a cell, unused, but much smaller than the others, and fitted with nothing but a rusted metal ring hanging from the ceiling. If the residents of Ward Six are too loud, if they give trouble, they are strapped to the ring and whipped or hosed, or simply thrown in here to sit for days in darkness, soiling themselves when they need to go. But the hose is the worst: icy water, emerging with such force it takes your breath away, leaves you blackened and bruised.

Thomas does everything exactly as he should. He cuffs me to the ceiling, and for a moment, as he reaches above my head, we’re so close that I can smell the coffee on his breath.

I feel a deep ache in my stomach, a sudden, wrenching pain; Thomas, for all the risks he is taking, still belongs to the other-world, of bus stops and convenience stores and dawn breaking over the horizon; of summer days and driving rains and wood fires in the winter.

For a moment, I hate him.

Once he locks the door, he turns to me.

“We don’t have much time, so listen carefully,” he says. And just like that, my hatred evaporates, is replaced by a rush of feeling. Skinny Thomas,

the boy I used to see sometimes hanging around the house, careful to pretend to be reading. How did he become this pudgy, hard-faced man, with hair gelled over a pink scalp, with lines etched deep into his face?

That's what time does: We stand stubbornly like rocks while it flows all around us, believing that we are immutable—and all the time we're being carved, and shaped, and whittled away.

"It will happen soon. As early as this week. Are you ready?"

My mouth is dry. The rope is still too short by seven feet. But I nod. I can make the drop, and with a little luck, I'll hit a deep spot in the water.

"You'll go north from the river, then head east when you hit the old highway. There will be scouts looking for you. They'll take care of you. Got it?"

"North from the river," I say. "Then east."

He nods. He looks almost sorry, and I can tell he thinks I won't make it. "Good luck, Annabel."

"Thank you," I say. "I can never repay you. . . ."

He shakes his head. "Don't thank me." For a second we stand there, staring at each other. I try to see him as he once was: the boy Rachel loved. But I can hardly remember Rachel, now, as she was when I last saw her. Strangely, I can more easily picture her as a girl, always a little bossy, always demanding to know *why* she couldn't stay up and *what was the point* of eating green beans and *what if* she didn't want to get paired, anyway? And when Lena came along, she bossed her around, too; Lena trotted behind her like a puppy, eyes wide, observing, her fat thumb stuck in her mouth.

My girls. I know that I will never see them again. For their own safety, I can't.

But there is a small, stubborn, stone part of me that still hopes.

Thomas picks up the hose coiled in the corner. "I told them you needed to be punished, so we could talk," he says. He looks almost sick as he aims the nozzle at me.

My stomach rolls. The last time I was hosed was years ago. I cracked a rib, and for weeks I ran a fever of more than a hundred, floating in and out of vivid dreams of fire, and faces screaming at me through the smoke. But I nod.

"I'll make it quick," he says. His eyes say: *I'm sorry*.

Then he turns on the water.

then

The girl behind the register was giving me the fish eye.

“You don’t got no ID?” she said.

“I told you, I left it at home.” I was starting to get antsy. I was hungry—I was always hungry back then—and I didn’t like the way the girl was looking at me, with her big bug eyes and the patchwork gauze on her neck, almost showing off the procedure, like she was some war hero and this was her injury to prove it.

“Haloway your pair or something?” She turned his credit card over in her hands, like she’d never seen one.

“Husband,” I snapped. She shifted her eyes to the place where my procedural scar should have been, but I had carefully combed my hair forward and jammed a wool hat down over my ears, so my entire neck was concealed. I shifted my weight, then realized I was fidgeting too much.

Scene: IGA Market on Dorchester, three days after the bust at Rawls’s. Piled on the conveyor belt between us, the source of all the tension: a tin of instant hot cocoa, two packets of dried noodles, ChapStick, deodorant, a bag of chips. The air smelled stale and yeasty, and after the brutal winds of the streets, the store felt as hot as a desert, and as dry.

Why did I use his card? To this day, I don’t know. I don’t know whether I was getting overconfident, or whether, just for a moment, I wanted to pretend: pretend that I wasn’t a runaway, pretend that I wasn’t squatting in an unfinished basement with six other girls, pretend that I had a home and a place and a pair, just like she did, just like everyone was supposed to.

Maybe I was already a little tired of freedom.

“We’re not supposed to take cards without an ID,” she said after a long minute. I’ll never forget her: those black bangs, the eyes as incurious, as flat, as marbles. “If you want, I can call the manager.” She said it like she’d be doing me a favor.

Alarm bells went off in my head. Manager meant authority meant trouble. “You know what? Forget it.”

But she had already swiveled around. “Tony! Hey, Tony! Anybody know where Tony went?” Then she turned back to me, exasperated. “Give me a second, okay?”

It was then: a split-second decision, the moment she left the register and went looking for Tony—a thirty, maybe forty-second reprieve. Without thinking, I stuffed the ChapStick in my pocket, pushed the chips and the noodles inside my jacket, and took off. I was a few feet from the door when I heard her yelling. So close to the street, to the blast of cold air and people bundled and indistinguishable. Three feet, then two . . .

A security guard materialized in front of me. He gripped me by the shoulders. He smelled like beer. Ffacfont>

He said, “Where do you think you’re going, little lady?”

Within two days, I was on a bus back to Portland. This time my sister, Carol, was with me—and, for extra insurance, a member of the Juvenile Regulatory Commission, a skinny nineteen-year-old with a face full of pimples, hair like a tuft of sea grass, and a wedding ring.

I knew Carol wouldn’t be able to keep her mouth shut for long—she never had been able to—and as soon as we had pulled away from the bus terminal, she rounded on me.

“What you did was selfish,” she said. Carol was only sixteen at the time—we were born almost exactly a year apart—but even then she could have passed for forty. She carried a purse, an actual purse, and red leather gloves, square-toed black boots, and jeans she actually ironed. Her face was narrower than mine, and her nose was upturned, as though it disapproved of the rest of her features and was trying to distinguish itself from them. “Do you know how worried Mom and Dad are? And how embarrassed?”

My mother had been one of the first volunteers to be cured. She’d had the procedure even before it was federally mandated. After three decades in a marriage with my father—who was charming and loud when he was sober, mean and loud when he was drunk, and a philanderer whenever he could get his hands on a woman who would sleep with him—she had welcomed the cure like a beggar welcomes food, water, and the promise of warmth. She’d bullied Dad into it too, and I had to admit, he was better for it. Calmer. Less angry. And he hardly drank anymore either. He hardly did anything anymore, since he’d been air-traffic control most his life—except sit in front of the TV or fiddle downstairs at his workbench, playing with old machine parts and radio equipment.

“Which is it?” I blew my breath onto the window, drew a star inside the condensation with my finger, then wiped it off.

Carol frowned. "What?"

"Are they worried? Or are they embarrassed?" I blew again, and drew a heart this time.

"Both." Carol reached out quickly and smudged the heart away. "Stop that." A look of fear flashed across her face.

"No one's looking," I said. I leaned my head against the window, feeling suddenly exhausted. I was going home. No more bumping up against commuters, fumbling for easy picks, feeling the mix of shame and elation when a target worked out. No more peeing behind a folding screen in the middle of the night, trying not to wake anyone else up. I'd be cured right away, probably by the end of the week.

A small part of me was glad. There's always relief in giving up.

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" Carol said.

I turned to look at her. My kid sister. We'd never been close. I'd wanted to love her, really. But she Kallime had always been too different, too cautious, likely to tell, impossible to play with.

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't give you any trouble again."

I slept for most of the trip back to Portland, my hands tucked in my jacket and my forehead resting against the window, and the ID of Conrad Haloway cupped in my right palm.

now

I've been on Ward Six for eleven years, with nothing but old stories, old words, for comfort. Scratching my way through minutes that feel like years, and years that have run by me like sand, like waste.

But now, waiting for Thomas to give me the signal, I find I have no patience left.

I remember that's how it was when I was pregnant with Lena. The last two weeks seemed longer than the rest of the months combined. I was so fat and my ankles were so swollen, it took energy just to stand. But I couldn't sleep, couldn't wait, and in the dark hours, after Rachel and my husband were asleep, I walked. I paced the room that would soon be hers back and forth: twelve steps across, twenty on the diagonal. I kneaded my feet on the carpet. I held my stomach, tight as a bowl, with both hands, and felt her gentle stirrings, her faint heartbeat pulsing under my fingertips like a distant drum.

And I spoke to her. I told her stories of who I'd been and who I'd wanted to be and the world she was about to enter and the world that had come before.

I said I was sorry.

I remember one time I turned and saw Conrad standing in the doorway. He stared at me, and in that moment the wordless thing passed between us, the thing that wasn't quite love but was so close I could believe in it sometimes—maybe a kind of understanding.

"Come to bed, Bells," was all he said.

Now I find I must walk as well. I can't lie down anyway: The hose left bruises on my legs and spine, and even the touch of the sheet is painful. I can hardly bring myself to eat, but I know I must. Who knows how long I'll be out in the Wilds before the scouts find me, or if they even will? I have nothing but a pair of cotton slippers and a cotton jumpsuit. And the snow lies in heavy drifts along the frozen river; the trees will be bare, the animals in hiding.

If I can't find help, I'll die within two, three days. Better to die out there, though, in the world I have always loved—even now, after all it has done to me.

Three days pass with no word. Then a fourth and a fifth. The disappointment is constant, suffocating. When the sixth day passes with no sign from Thomas, I begin to lose hope. Maybe he has been found out. Another day goes by. I get angry. He must have forgotten about me.

My bruises have turned to starbursts, big explosions of improbable colors, yellows and greens and purples. I'm no longer worried or NallimMy bruisesangry. All my hope, the energy that I've been eking from thoughts of escape, abandons me at once. I lose even the desire to walk.

I'm filled with black thoughts: Thomas never intended to help me. The planned escape, the braiding of the rope, the scouts—all of it has been a dream, a fantasy that has kept me going all these years.

I stay in bed, don't bother to get up except when I have to relieve myself, and when at last the dinner tray is shoved in through a narrow slot in the door.

And then I freeze: Underneath the small plastic bowl filled with pasta cooked into a lump is a small square of paper. Another note.

Thomas has written in all caps: tonight. be ready.

My stomach goes into my throat, and I'm worried I might be sick. Suddenly the thought of leaving these walls, this room, seems impossible. What do I know about the world outside? What do I know about the Wilds, and the resistance that survives there? When I was taken, I had only just begun my involvement with the movement. A meeting here, a document passed from hand to hand there. . . .

I've been dreaming of escape for eleven years, and now, when the time has finally come, I know I'm not ready.

then

I didn't know, at first, that the cure hadn't worked.

Installed in my old bedroom at my parents' house, forbidden from seeing my friends, from leaving the house without permission and without Carol as an escort, I was as good as dead. Shuffling from the bed to the shower, watching the same news on TV, listening to the same music piping from the radio. This was what being cured was like: like being in a fishbowl, circling always inside the same glass.

I did what I was told, helped my parents with the chores, reapplied to college, since my admission had been rescinded once the facts of my time in Boston became public. I wrote letters of apology: to countless committees, to public officials, to my neighbors, to faceless bureaucrats with long, meaningless titles.

Slowly I earned back certain freedoms. I could go to the store by myself. I could go to the beach, too. I was able to see old friends, although most of them were forbidden from seeing me. And all that time, my heart was like a dull hammer in my chest.

It was a full six months before the Portland Evaluation Committee, as it was called then, decided I was ready to be paired. The Marriage Stability Act had just been passed, and the system was still in its infancy. I remember that my mother and I had to go down to CORE, the Center for Organization, Research, and Education, to receive my results, and for the first time since I'd returned to Portland, I was filled with something like excitement. Except it was the bad kind, the kind that turns your stomach and makes your own spit taste a little like throw-up.

Dread.

I don't remember receiving the slender folder containing my results, but I know we were outside, in the car, before I could bring myself to open it. Carol was with us, in the backseat. "Who'd you get?" she kept saying. But I couldn't read the names, couldn't make the words stand still on the page. The letters kept floating, drifting off the margins, and every picture looked like a collection of abstract shapes. For a minute, I thought I was losing my mind.

Until I reached my eighth recommended pair: Conrad Haloway. Then I *knew* I was losing my mind.

The picture was the same one he had used for his government ID—which I still kept, tucked at the bottom of my underwear drawer, concealed within a sock. Next to the picture were the basic facts of his life: where he was born, what school he'd attended, his various scores, his work history, details about his family, and a psychological and social stability rank.

I felt a sudden surge, like my insides had been powered off, dusty and useless, for the past six months. Now they came online all at once: my heart beating up into my mouth, chest tight, lungs squeezing, squeezing.

“This one,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I pointed, placed a finger directly on his forehead between his eyes. The picture was black-and-white, but I remembered them perfectly: light brown, like hazelnut skins.

My mother leaned over me to look. “He’s a bit old, isn’t he?”

“He’s only just moved to Portland,” I said. “He’s been in service to the engineering corps. Working on the walls. See? It says so.”

My mother smiled tightly. “Well, it’s your choice, of course.” She reached over and patted me awkwardly on the knee. Even before her cure, she had never been affectionate; no one had ever touched in my family, unless it was my father taking a swing at my mom when he was drunk. “I’m proud of you.”

Carol leaned forward into the front seat. “He doesn’t *look* like an engineer,” was all she said.

I turned my face to the window. On the drive home, I repeated his name to myself like a private rhythm: Conrad, Conrad, Conrad. My secret music. My husband. I felt something loosen inside my chest. His name warmed me. It spread through my mind, through my whole body, until I could feel the syllables in my fingertips, and all the way down to my toes. Conrad.

That’s when I knew, without a doubt, that the cure hadn’t worked at all.

now

The light goes out, and the nighttime noises begin on the ward: the murmurs and moans and screams.

I remember other noises—the sounds of outside: frogs singing, throaty and mournful; crickets humming an accompaniment. Lena as a young girl, her palms cupped carefully to contain a firefly, shrieking with laughter.

Will I recognize the world outside? Would I recognize Lena, if I saw her?

Thomas said he would give me the signal. But at least an hour passes with nothing—no sign, no further word. My mouth is dry as dust.

I am not ready. Not yet. Not tonight. My heartbeat is wild and erratic. I'm sweating already and shaking, too.

I can barely stand.

How will I run?

A jolt goes through me as the alarm system kicks on without warning: a shrill, continuous howl from downstairs, muffled through layers of stone and cement. Doors slam; voices cry out. Thomas must have tripped one of the alarms in a lower ward. The guards will go rushing for it, suspecting an attempted breakout or maybe a homicide.

That's my cue.

I stand up and shove the cot aside, so the hole in the wall is revealed: a tight squeeze, but big enough to fit me. My makeshift rope is coiled on the floor, ready to go, and I thread one end through the metal ring on the door, knot it as tightly as I can.

I'm not thinking anymore. I'm not afraid, either.

I toss the free end of the rope out through the hole, hear it snap once in the wind. For the first time since I was imprisoned, I thank God that the Crypts is windowless, at least on this side.

I go headfirst through the hole, wriggling when my shoulders meet resistance. Soft, wet stone rains down on my neck. My nose is full of the smell of spoiled things.

Good-bye, good-bye.

The alarm still wails, as though in response.

Then my shoulders are through and I'm upside-down over a dizzying drop: forty-five feet at least, to the black and frozen with ice, motionless, reflecting the moon. And the rope, like a spun thread of white water, running vertically toward freedom.

I make a grab for the rope. I pull, hand over hand, sliding my body, my legs, through the jagged hole in the rock.

And then I fall.

My legs leave the lip of rock, and I swing a wild half circle, kicking into air, crying out. I stop with a jerk, right side up, the rope coiled around my wrists. Stomach in my throat. The alarm is still going: high-pitched, hysterical.

Air, air, nothing but air. I'm frozen, unable to move up or down. I have a sudden memory of a spring cleaning the year before I was born, New Ross taken, and a giant spiderweb uncovered behind the standing mirror in the bedroom. Dozens of insects were bound, immobile, in white thread, and one had only just been caught—it was still struggling feebly to get out.

The alarm stops, and the ensuing silence is as loud as a slap. I have to move. I can hear the roar of the river now, and the shush of the wind through the leaves. Slowly I inch downward, wrapping my legs around the rope, swinging, nauseous. There's a pressure on my bladder, and my palms are burning. I'm too afraid to be cold.

Please let the rope hold.

Thirty feet from the river I lose my grip and free-fall several feet before catching myself. The force of my stop makes me cry out, and I bite down on my tongue. The rope lashes in the wind.

But I'm still safe. And the rope holds.

Inch by inch. It seems to take forever. Hand over hand. I don't even notice that my palms are bleeding until I see smears of red on the linens. But I feel no pain. I'm beyond pain now, numb from fear and exhaustion. I'm weaker, even, than I'd feared.

Inch by inch.

And then, all at once, I'm at the end of the rope, and seven feet below me is the frozen Presumpscot, a blackened surface of rotted logs and black rocks and ice. I have no choice but to drop and pray for a good landing, try to avoid the water and make it into the drifts, white as a pillow, piled up on the banks.

I let go.

then

I kept up my end of the bargain. I gave my family no trouble. In the months leading up to the marriage ceremony, I said yes when I was supposed to and did what I was told.

But all the time, love grew inside me like a delicious secret.

It was exactly that way later, when I was pregnant first with Rachel, and then Lena. Even before the doctors confirmed it, I could always tell. There were the normal changes: the swollen, tender breasts; a sharpening sense of smell; a heaviness in my joints. But it was more than that. I could always *feel* it—an alien growth, the expansion of something beautiful and other and also entirely mine. A private constellation: a star growing inside my belly.

If Conrad remembered the skinny, frightened girl he'd held for one brief moment on a frigid Boston street corner, he showed no signs of it when we met. From the beginning, he was polite, kind, respectful. He listened to me, and asked questions about what I thought, what I liked, and what I didn't. He told me once, early on, that he liked engineering because he enjoyed the mechanics of making things work—structures, machines, anything. I know he often wished that people were more easily decoded.

That's, of course, what the fffone cure was for: for flattening people into paper, into biomechanics and scores.

A year before Conrad died, he got the diagnosis: a tumor the size of a child's thumb was growing in his brain. It was sudden and totally unexpected. The doctors had bad luck.

I was sitting next to his hospital bed when he suddenly sat up, confused from a dream. Even as I tried to urge him back against the pillows, he looked at me with wild eyes.

"What happened to your leather jacket?" he asked.

"Shh," I said, trying to soothe him. "There's no leather jacket."

"You were wearing it the first time I saw you," he said, frowning slightly. Then he sagged suddenly back against the pillows, as though the effort of speaking had exhausted him. And I sat next to him while he slept, gripping his hand, watching the sun revolve in the sky outside the window and the patterns of light shifting on his sheet.

And I felt joy.

Conrad always held my head—lightly, with both hands—when we kissed. He wore glasses for reading, and when he was thinking hard about something, he would polish them. His hair was straight except for a bit that curled behind his left ear, just above his procedural scar. Some of this I observed right away; some of it I learned much later.

But from the beginning, I knew that in a world where destiny was dead, I was destined, forever, to love him. Even though he didn't—though he couldn't—ever love me back.

That's the easy thing about falling: There is only one choice after that.

now

I count three seconds of air. Then a blast of cold and a force like a fist, driving the breath from me, pummeling me forward. I hit bottom, and pain shoots up my ankle, and then the cold is everywhere, all at once, obliterating all other thought. For a minute, I can't breathe, can't get air, don't know which way is up or down. Just cold, everywhere and in all directions.

Then the river shoves me upward, spits me out, and I come up gasping, flailing, as ice breaks around me with a noise like a dozen rifles firing at once. Stars spin above me. I manage to make it to the edge of the river, and I slosh into the shallows, shivering so hard my brain feels like it's bouncing in my skull, coughing up water. I sit forward, cup my hand to the water, and drink through frozen fingers. The water is sweet, slightly gritty with dirt, delicious.

I haven't felt the wind, truly felt it, in eleven years.

It's colder than I remember.

I know I have to move. North from the river. East from the old highway.

I take one last look at the looming silhouette

Beyond the Crypts, I know, is the old, dusty road that leads to the bus stop—and beyond that, the gray sludge of the service road, which extends all the way on-peninsula and eventually merges with Congress Street. And then: Portland, my Portland, gripped on three sides by water, nestled like a jewel on a small spit of land.

Somewhere, Lena is sleeping. Rachel, too. My own jewels, the stars I carry with me. I know that Rachel was cured, and out of reach to me now. Thomas told me so.

But Lena . . .

My littlest . . .

I love you. Remember.

And someday, I will find you again.

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Lena

I've started dreaming of Portland again.

Since Alex reappeared, resurrected but also changed, twisted, like a monster from one of the ghost stories we used to tell as kids, the past has been finding its way in. It bubbles up through the cracks when I'm not paying attention, and pulls at me with greedy fingers.

This is what they warned me about for all those years: the heavy weight in my chest, the nightmare-fragments that follow me even in waking life.

I warned you, Aunt Carol says in my head.

We told you, Rachel says.

You should have stayed. That's Hana, reaching out across an expanse of time, through the murky-thick layers of memory, stretching a weightless hand to me as I am sinking. vnface

About two dozen of us came north from New York City: Raven, Tack, Julian, and me, and also Dani, Gordo, and Pike, plus fifteen or so others who are largely content to stay quiet and follow directions.

And Alex. But not my Alex: a stranger who never smiles, doesn't laugh, and barely speaks.

The others, those who were using the warehouse outside White Plains as a homestead, scattered south or west. By now, the warehouse has no doubt been stripped and abandoned. It isn't safe, not after Julian's rescue. Julian Fineman is a symbol, and an important one. The zombies will hunt for him. They will want to string the symbol up, and make it bleed meaning, so that others will learn their lesson.

We have to be extra careful.

Hunter, Bram, Lu, and some of the other members of the old Rochester homestead are waiting for us just south of Poughkeepsie. It takes us nearly three days to cover the distance; we are forced to circumnavigate a half-dozen Valid cities.

Then, abruptly, we arrive: The woods simply run out at the edge of an enormous expanse of concrete, webbed with thick fissures, and still marked very faintly with the ghostly white outlines of parking spaces. Cars, rusted,

picked clean of various parts—rubber tires, bits of metal—still sit in the lot. They look small and faintly ridiculous, like ancient toys left out by a child.

The parking lot flows like gray water in all directions, running up at last against a vast structure of steel and glass: an old shopping mall. A sign in looping cursive script, streaked white with bird shit, reads empire state plaza mall.

The reunion is joyful. Tack, Raven, and I break into a run. Bram and Hunter are running too, and we intercept them in the middle of the parking lot. I jump on Hunter, laughing, and he throws his arms around me and lifts me off my feet. Everyone is shouting and talking at once.

Hunter sets me down, finally, but I keep one arm locked around him, as though he might disappear. I reach out and wrap my other arm around Bram, who is shaking hands with Tack, and somehow we all end up piled together, jumping and shouting, our bodies interlaced, in the middle of the brilliant sunshine.

“Well, well, well.” We break apart, turn around, and see Lu sauntering toward us. Her eyebrows are raised. She has let her hair grow long, and brushed it forward, so it pools over her shoulders. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

It’s the first time I’ve felt truly happy in days.

The short months we have spent apart have changed both Hunter and Bram. Bram is, against all odds, heavier. Hunter has new wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, although his smile is as boyish as ever.

“How’s Sarah?” al I say. “Is she here?”

“Sarah stayed in Maryland,” Hunter says. “The homestead is thirty strong, and she won’t have to migrate. The resistance is trying to get word to her sister.”

“What about Grandpa and the others?” I am breathless, and there is a tight feeling in my chest, as though I am still being squeezed.

Bram and Hunter exchange a small glance.

“Grandpa didn’t make it,” Hunter says shortly. “We buried him outside Baltimore.”

Raven looks away, spits on the pavement.

Bram adds quickly, “The others are fine.” He reaches out and places a finger on my procedural scar, the one he helped me fake to initiate me into the resistance. “Looking good,” he says, and winks.

We decide to camp for the night. There's clean water a short distance from the old mall, and a wreckage of houses and business offices that have yielded some usable supplies: a few cans of food still buried in the rubble; rusted tools; even a rifle, which Hunter found cradled in a pair of upturned deer hooves, under a mound of collapsed plaster. And one member of our group, Henley, a short, quiet woman with a long coil of gray hair, is running a fever. This will give her time to rest.

By the end of the day, an argument breaks out about where to go next.

"We could split up," Raven says. She is squatting by the pit she has cleared for the fire, stoking the first, glowing splinters of flame with the charred end of a stick.

"The larger our group, the safer we are," Tack argues. He has pulled off his fleece and is wearing only a T-shirt, so the rosy muscles of his arms are visible. The days have been warming slowly, and the woods coming to life. We can feel the spring coming, like an animal stirring lightly in its sleep, exhaling hot breath.

But it's cold now, when the sun is low and the Wilds are swallowed by long purple shadows, when we are no longer moving.

"Lena," Raven barks out. I've been staring at the beginnings of the fire, watching flame curl around the mass of pine needles, twigs, and brittle leaves. "Go check on the tents, okay? It'll be dark soon."

Raven has built the fire in a shallow gully that must once have been a stream, where it will be somewhat sheltered from the wind. She has avoided setting up camp too close to the mall and its haunted spaces; it looms above the tree line, all twisted black metal and empty eyes, like an alien spaceship run aground.

Up the embankment a dozen yards, Julian is helping set up the tents. He has his back to me. He, too, is wearing only a T-shirt. Just three days in the Wilds have already changed him. His hair is tangled, and a leaf is caught just behind his left ear. He looks skinnier, although he has not had time to lose weight. This is just the effect of being here, in the other a leaper, with salvaged, too-big clothing, surrounded by savage wilderness, a perpetual reminder of the fragility of our survival.

He is securing a rope to a tree, yanking it taut. Our tents are old and have been torn and patched repeatedly. They don't stand on their own. They must be propped up and strung between trees and coaxed to life, like sails in the wind.

Gordo is hovering next to Julian, watching approvingly.

“Do you need any help?” I pause a few feet away.

Julian and Gordo turn around.

“Lena!” Julian’s face lights up, then immediately falls again as he realizes I don’t intend to come closer. I brought him here, with me, to this strange new place, and now I have nothing to give him.

“We’re okay,” Gordo says. His hair is bright red, and even though he’s no older than Tack, he has a beard that grows to the middle of his chest. “Just finishing up.”

Julian straightens and wipes his palms on the back of his jeans. He hesitates, then comes down the embankment toward me, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “It’s cold,” he says when he’s a few feet away. “You should go down to the fire.”

“I’m all right,” I say, but I put my hands into the arms of my wind breaker. The cold is inside me. Sitting next to the fire won’t help. “The tents look good.”

“Thanks. I think I’m getting the hang of it.” His smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

Three days: three days of strained conversation and silence. I know he is wondering what has changed, and whether it can be changed back. I know I’m hurting him. There are questions he is forcing himself not to ask, and things he is struggling not to say.

He is giving me time. He is patient, and gentle.

“You look pretty in this light,” he says.

“You must be going blind.” I intend it as a joke, but my voice sounds harsh in the thin air.

Julian shakes his head, frowning, and looks away. The leaf, a vivid yellow, is still tangled in his hair, behind his ear. In that moment, I’m desperate to reach out, remove it, and run my fingers through his hair and laugh with him about it. *This is the Wilds*, I’ll say. *Did you ever imagine?* And he’ll lace his fingers through mine and squeeze. He’ll say, *What would I do without you?*

But I can’t bring myself to move. “You have a leaf in your hair.”

“A what?” Julian looks startled, as though I’ve recalled him from a dream.

“A leaf. In your hair.”

Julian runs a hand impatiently through his hair. “Lena, I—”

Bang.

The sound of a rifle shot makes us both jump. Birds start out of the trees behind Julian, temporarily darkening the sky all at once, before dispersing into individual shapes. Someone says, “Damn.”

Dani and Alex emerge from the trees beyond the tents. Both of them have rifles slung across their shoulders.

Gordo straightens up.

“Deer?” he asks. The light is nearly all gone. Alex’s hair looks almost black.

“Too big for a deer,” Dani says. She is a large woman, broad across the shoulders with a wide, flat forehead and almond-eyes. She reminds me of Miyako, who died before we went south last winter. We burned her on a frigid day, just before the first snow.

“Bear?” Gordo asks.

“Might have been,” Dani replies shortly. Dani is harder-edged than Miyako was: She has let the Wilds whittle her down, carve her to steel.

“Did you hit it?” I ask, too eager, though I already know the answer. But I am willing Alex to look at me, to speak to me.

“Might have just clipped it,” Dani says. “Hard to tell. Not enough to stop it, though.”

Alex says nothing, doesn’t register my presence, even. He keeps walking, threading his way through the tents, past Julian and me, close enough that I imagine I can smell him—the old smell of grass and sun-dried wood, a Portland smell that makes me want to cry out, and bury my face in his chest, and inhale.

Then he is heading down the embankment as Raven’s voice floats up to us: “Dinner’s on. Eat up or miss out.”

“Come on.” Julian grazes my elbow with his fingertips. Gentle, patient.

My feet turn me, and move me down the embankment, toward the fire, which is now burning hot and strong; toward the boy who becomes shadow standing next to it, blotted out by the smoke. That is what Alex is now: a shadow-boy, an illusion.

For three days he has not spoken to me or looked at me at all.

Hana

Want to know my deep, dark secret? In Sunday school, I used to cheat on the quizzes.

I could never get into *The Book of Shhh*, not even as a kid. The only section of the book that interested me at all was “Legends and Grievances,” which is full of folktales about the world before the cure. My favorite, the story of Solomon, goes like this:

Once upon a time, during the days of sickness, two women and an infant went before the king. Each woman claimed that the infant was hers. Both refused to give the child to the other woman and pleaded their cases passionately, each claiming that she would die of grief if the baby were not returned solely to her possession.

The king, whose name was Solomon, listened to both their speeches, and at last announced that he had a fair solution.

“We will cut the baby in two,” he said, “and that way each of you will have a portion.”

The women agreed that this was just, and so the executioner was brought forward, and with his ax, he sliced the baby cleanly in two.

And the baby never cried, or so much as made a sound, and the mothers looked on, and afterward, for a thousand years, there was a spot of blood on the palace floor that could never be cleaned or diluted by any substance on earth. . . .

I must have been only eight or nine when I read that passage for the first time, but it really struck me. For days I couldn’t get the image of that poor baby out of my head. I kept picturing it split open on the tile floor, like a butterfly pinned behind glass.

That’s what’s so great about the story. It’s real. What I mean is, even if it didn’t *actually* happen—and there’s debate about the Legends and Grievances section, and whether it’s historically accurate—it shows the world truthfully. I remember feeling just like that baby: torn apart by feeling, split in two, caught between loyalties and desires.

That’s how the diseased world is.

That's how it was for me, before I was cured.

In exactly twenty-one days, I'll be married.

My mother looks as though she might cry, and I almost hope that she will. I've seen her cry twice in my life: once when she broke her ankle and once last year, when she came outside and found that protesters had climbed the gate, and torn at she willup our lawn, and pried her beautiful car into pieces.

In the end she says only, "You look lovely, Hana." And then: "It's a little too big in the waist, though."

Mrs. Killegan—*Call me Anne*, she simpered, the first time we came for a fitting—circles me quietly, pinning and adjusting. She is tall, with faded blond hair and a pinched look, as though over the years she has accidentally ingested various pins and sewing needles. "You're sure you want to go with the cap sleeves?"

"I'm sure," I say, just as my mom says, "You think they look too young?"

Mrs. Killegan—Anne—gestures expressively with one long, bony hand. "The whole city will be watching," she says.

"The whole country," my mother corrects her.

"I like the sleeves," I say, and I almost add, *It's my wedding*. But that isn't true anymore—not since the Incidents in January, and Mayor Hargrove's death. My wedding belongs to the people now. That's what everybody has been telling me for weeks. Yesterday we got a phone call from the National News Service, asking whether they could syndicate footage, or send in their own television crew to film the ceremony.

Now, more than ever, the country needs its symbols.

We are standing in front of a three-sided mirror. My mother's frown is reflected from three different angles. "Mrs. Killegan's right," she says, touching my elbow. "Let's see how it looks at three-quarters, okay?"

I know better than to argue. Three reflections nod simultaneously; three identical girls with identical ropes of braided blond in three identical white, floor-skimming dresses. Already, I hardly recognize myself. I've been transfigured by the dress, by the bright lights in the dressing room. For all my life I have been Hana Tate.

But the girl in the mirror is not Hana Tate. She is Hana Hargrove, soon-to-be wife of the soon-to-be mayor, and a symbol of all that is right about

the cured world.

A path and a road for everyone.

“Let me see what I have in the back,” Mrs. Killegan says. “We’ll slip you into a different style, just so you’ll have a comparison.” She slides across the worn gray carpet and disappears into the storeroom. Through the open door, I see dozens of dresses sheathed in plastic, dangling limply from garment racks.

My mother sighs. We’ve been here for two hours already, and I’m starting to feel like a scarecrow: stuffed and poked and stitched. My mother sits on a faded footstool next to the mirrors, holding her purse primly in her lap so it won’t touch the carpet.

Mrs. Killegan’s has always been the nicest wedding shop in Portland, but it, too, has clearly felt the lingering effects of the Incidents, and the security crackdowns the government implemented in their aftermath. Money is tighter for practically everybody, and it shows. One of the overhead bulbs is out, and the shop has a musty smell, as though it has not been cleaned recently. On one wall, a pattern of moisture has begun bubbling the wallpaper, and earlier I noticed a large brown stain on one of the striped settees. Mrs. Killegan caught me looking and casually tossed a shawl down to conceal it.

“You really do look lovely, Hana,” my mother says.

“Thank you,” I say. I know I look lovely. It might sound egotistical, but it’s the truth.

This, too, has changed since my cure. When I was uncured, even though people always told me I was pretty, I never *felt* it. But after the cure, a wall came down inside me. Now I see that yes, I am quite simply and inarguably beautiful.

I also no longer care.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Killegan reemerges from the back, holding several plastic-swathed gowns over her arm. I swallow a sigh, but not quickly enough. Mrs. Killegan places a hand on my arm. “Don’t worry, dear,” she says. “We’ll find the perfect dress. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

I arrange my face into a smile, and the pretty girl in the mirror arranges her face with me. “Of course,” I say.

Perfect dress. Perfect match. A perfect lifetime of happiness.

Perfection is a promise, and a reassurance that we are not wrong.

Mrs. Killegan's shop is in the Old Port, and as we emerge onto the street I inhale the familiar scents of dried seaweed and old wood. The day is bright, but the wind is cold off the bay. Only a few boats are bobbing in the water, mostly fishing vessels or commercial rigs. From a distance, the scattersplattered wood moorings look like reeds growing out of the water.

The street is empty except for two regulators and Tony, our bodyguard. My parents decided to employ security services just after the Incidents, when Fred Hargrove's father, the mayor, was killed, and it was decided that I should leave college and get married as soon as possible.

Now Tony comes everywhere with us. On his days off, he sends his brother, Rick, as a substitute. It took me a month to be able to distinguish between them. They both have thick, short necks and shiny bald heads. Neither of them speaks much, and when they do, they never have anything interesting to say.

That was one of my biggest fears about the cure: that the procedure would switch me off somehow, and inhibit my ability to think. But it's the opposite. I think *more* clearly now. In some ways, I even feel things more clearly. I used to feel with a kind of feverishness; I was filled with panic and anxiety and competing desires. There were nights I could hardly sleep, days when I felt like my insides were trying to crawl out of my throat.

I was infected. Now the infection has gone.

Tony is leaning against the car. I wonder if he has been standing in that position for all three hours we've been in Mrs. Killegan's. He straightens up as we approach, and opens the door for my mother.

"Thank you, Tony," she says. "Was there any trouble?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good." She gets into the backseat, and I slide in after her. We've had this car for only two months—a replacement for the one that was vandalized—and just a few days after it arrived, my mom came out of the grocery store to find that someone had keyed the word *PIG* into the paint. Secretly, I think that my mom's real motivation for hiring Tony was to protect the new car.

After Tony shuts the door, the world outside the tinted windows gets tinged a dark blue. He turns the radio to the NNS, the National News Service. The commentators' voices are familiar and reassuring.

I lean my head back and watch the world begin to move. I have lived in Portland all my life and have memories of almost every street and every

corner. But these, too, seem distant now, safely submerged in the past. A lifetime ago I used to sit on those picnic benches with Lena, luring seagulls with bread crumbs. We talked about flying. We talked about escape. It was kid stuff, like believing in unicorns and magic.

I never thought she would actually do it.

My stomach cramps. I realize I haven't eaten since breakfast. I must be hungry.

"Busy week," my mother says.

"Yeah."

"And don't forget, the *Post* wants to interview you this afternoon."

"I haven't forgotten."

"Now we just need to find you a dress for Fred's inauguration, and we'll be all set. Or did you decide to go with the yellow one we saw in Lava last week?"

"I'm not sure yet," I say.

"What do you mean, you're not sure? The inauguration's in *five days*, Hana. Everyone will be looking at you."/p>

"The yellow one, then."

"Of course, I have no idea what *I'll* wear. . . ."

We've passed into the West End, our old neighborhood. Historically, the West End has been home to many of the higher-ups in the church and the medical field: priests of the Church of the New Order, government officials, doctors and researchers at the labs. That's no doubt why it was targeted so heavily during the riots following the Incidents.

The riots were quelled quickly; there's still much debate about whether the riots represented an actual movement or whether they were a result of misdirected anger and the passions we're trying so hard to eradicate. Still, many people felt that the West End was too close to downtown, too close to some of the more troubled neighborhoods, where sympathizers and resisters are concealed. Many families, like ours, have moved off-peninsula now.

"Don't forget, Hana, we're supposed to speak with the caterers on Monday."

"I know, I know."

We take Danforth to Vaughan, our old street. I lean forward slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of our old house, but the Andersons' evergreen conceals it almost entirely from view, and all I get is a flash of the green-gabled roof.

Our house, like the Andersons' beside it and the Richards' opposite, is empty and will probably remain so. Still, we see not a single for sale sign. No one can afford to buy. Fred says that the economic freeze will remain in place for at least a few years, until things begin to stabilize. For now, the government needs to reassert control. People need to be reminded of their place.

I wonder if the mice are already finding their way into my old room, leaving droppings on the polished wood floors, and whether spiders have started webbing up the corners. Soon the house will look like 37 Brooks, barren, almost *chewed*-looking, collapsing slowly from termite rot.

Another change: I can think about 37 Brooks now, and Lena, and Alex, without the old strangled feeling.

"And I'll bet you never reviewed the guest list I left in your room?"

"I haven't had time," I say absently, keeping my eyes on the landscape skating by our window.

We maneuver onto Congress, and the neighborhood changes quickly. Soon we pass one of Portland's two gas stations, around which a group of regulators stands guard, guns pointing toward the sky; then dollar stores and a Laundromat with a faded orange awning; a dingy-looking deli.

Suddenly my mom ddes aleans forward, putting one hand on the back of Tony's seat. "Turn this up," she says sharply.

He adjusts a dial on the dashboard. The radio voice gets louder.

"Following the recent outbreak in Waterbury, Connecticut—"

"God," my mother says. "Not *another* one."

"—all citizens, particularly those in the southeast quadrants, have been strongly encouraged to evacuate to temporary housing in neighboring Bethlehem. Bill Ardury, chief of Special Forces, offered reassurances to worried citizens. 'The situation is under control,' he said during his seven-minute address. 'State and municipal military personnel are working together to contain the disease and to ensure that the area is cordoned off, cleansed, and sanitized as soon as possible. There is absolutely no reason to fear further contamination—"

"That's enough," my mother says abruptly, sitting back. "I can't listen anymore."

Tony begins fiddling with the radio. Most stations are just static. Last month, the big story was the government's discovery of wavelengths that had been co-opted by Invalids for their use. We were able to intercept and

decode several critical messages, which led to a triumphant raid in Chicago, and the arrest of a half dozen key Invalids. One of them was responsible for planning the explosion in Washington, DC, last fall, a blast that killed twenty-seven people, including a mother and a child.

I was glad when the Invalids were executed. Some people complained that lethal injection was too humane for convicted terrorists, but I thought it sent a powerful message: We are not the evil ones. We are reasonable and compassionate. We stand for fairness, structure, and organization.

It's the other side, the uncureds, who bring the chaos.

"It's really disgusting," my mother says. "If we'd started bombing when the trouble first—Tony, look out!"

Tony slams on the brakes. The tires screech. I go shooting forward, narrowly avoiding cracking my forehead on the headrest in front of me before my seat belt jerks me backward. There is a heavy thump. The air smells like burned rubber.

"Shit," my mother is saying. "Shit. What in *God's* name—?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't see her. She came out from between the Dumpsters. . . ."

A young girl is standing in front of the car, her hands resting flat on the hood. Her hair is tented around her thin, narrow face, and her eyes are huge and terrified. She looks vaguely familiar.

Tony rolls down his window. The smell of the Dumpsters—there are several of them, lined up next to one another—floats into the car, sweet and rotten. My mother coughs, and cups a palm over her nose.

"You okay?" Tony calls out, craning his head out the window.

The girl doesn't respond. She is panting, practically hyperventilating. Her eyes skate from Tony to my mother in the backseat, and then to me. A shock runs through me.

Jenny. Lena's cousin. I haven't seen her since last summer, and she's much thinner. She looks older, too. But it's unmistakably her. I recognize the flare of her nostrils, her proud, pointed chin, and the eyes.

She recognizes me, too. I can tell. Before I can say anything, she wrenches her hands off the car hood and darts across the street. She's wearing an old, ink-stained backpack that I recognize as one of Lena's hand-me-downs. Across one of its pockets two names are colored in black bubble letters: Lena's, and mine. We penned them onto her bag in seventh grade, when we were bored in class. That's the day we first came up with

our little code word, our pump-you-up cheer, which later we called out to each other at cross-country meets. *Halena*. A combination of both our names.

“For heaven’s sake. You’d think the girl was old enough to know not to dart in front of traffic. She nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I know her,” I say automatically. I can’t shake the image of Jenny’s huge, dark eyes, her pale skeleton-face.

“What do you mean, you *know* her?” My mother turns to me.

I close my eyes and try to think of peaceful things. The bay. Seagulls wheeling against a blue sky. Rivers of spotless white fabric. But instead I see Jenny’s eyes, the sharp angles of her cheek and chin. “Her name is Jenny,” I say. “She’s Lena’s cousin—”

“Watch your mouth,” my mom cuts me off sharply. I realize, too late, that I shouldn’t have said anything. Lena’s name is worse than a curse word in our family.

For years, Mom was proud of my friendship with Lena. She saw it as a testament to her liberalism. *We don’t judge the girl because of her family*, she would tell guests when they brought it up. *The disease isn’t genetic; that’s an old idea*.

She took it as almost a personal insult when Lena contracted the disease and managed to escape before she could be treated, as though Lena had deliberately done it to make her look stupid.

All those years we let her into our house, she would say out of nowhere, in the days following Lena’s escape. *Ev=“T*

“She looked thin,” I say.

“Home, Tony.” My mom leans her head against the headrest and closes her eyes, and I know the conversation is over.