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Opening extract from
Mindwalker

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Published by
Oneworld Publications

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A Rock the Boat Book

First published in Great Britain & Australia by Rock the Boat,
an imprint of Oneworld Publications, 2015

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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78074-724-8

ISBN 978-1-78074-725-5 (ebook)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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I can barely see through the blood in my eyes. Blood soaks my clothes and hands. When I breathe in, pain flares in my chest. One of my ribs is broken. But I'm standing, which is more than I can say for my enemy.

He lies near my feet, wheezing, as blood spreads in a pool beneath him. He reaches for a gun at his belt, and I slam the butt of my empty rifle against his fingers. The man howls.

I feel sick.

He's a terrorist, I remind myself. No mercy.

"Please," he whispers, voice rough with pain. "Please don't." Still, his mangled fingers creep toward his gun. I ram my boot into his face, and a tooth flies out. His eyes turn upward, whites flashing. For an instant, I see my own terror reflected back at me, and I hesitate.

But I have my orders. *Leave none alive.* He wouldn't show mercy if our positions were reversed. This is war, after all. I raise my boot slowly over his head. Deep within me, a voice

cries out, *No!* But I can't stop. My body moves automatically as my boot comes down on his face. *Crunch.* I fight back nausea as I stomp down again and again.

He jerks. His body goes rigid, shuddering convulsively. Then he's still. I stand in the cement-walled basement of the terrorist hideout, alone with the man I've killed.

I don't cry.

There's a clear electronic *ding*, and a recorded female voice intones, "End session."

My eyes snap open, but there's only darkness. Leather cuffs press into my wrists. My own ragged breathing fills my ears. Then the darkness recedes as a visor retracts from my face, and I squint at the sudden glare. All around me, the sterile whites and silvers of the Immersion Lab gleam.

For a moment, I don't know where I am or what I'm doing here. Then my identity settles back into my mind. Shakily, I exhale.

I'm Lain Fisher, seventeen years old. I'm in the Institute for Ethics in Neurotechnology. There's no blood on my hands. The dead man is just a memory, and not even mine.

A machine beeps next to me, monitoring my heart rate and brain waves. I look over at the old man sitting in the padded reclining chair next to mine. My client. His visor retracts, and his rheumy blue eyes stare at the ceiling. Through our connection, I can feel the tension in his body, but his thoughts are perfectly silent. Maybe that's how he's dealt with the pain for so long—by simply not thinking. Functioning automatically, like a machine.

It's a good thing he can't hear my thoughts. I don't think he'd like the comparison.

I mutter, “Release,” and the leather cuffs snap open. I slide my helmet off, and cool air washes over my sweat-drenched head. “That’s all for today,” I say. “The mapping stage is almost complete. The modification will begin next session.”

He sits up with a grunt. His face is weathered and lined, his chin peppered with stubble. “And after that, I won’t remember the war?”

“That’s correct.”

“Why does it take so long, anyway?” There’s a note of accusation in his low, scratchy voice, as if he thinks I enjoy wading through images of violence and death. “Why can’t you just do it all at once?”

I’ve already explained it to him, and an angry response bubbles up in my throat. I bite my tongue, remind myself that his surly demeanor is just a defense mechanism, and force myself to reply calmly, “It’s a complicated process. I need to experience the memories first so I’ll know how to navigate them later, when I start the actual procedure. You’re almost done, though. Just one more session.” With shaking fingers, I brush a few strands of hair from my face. “How are you feeling?” I’m supposed to ask that question after every immersion session.

His gaze jerks toward me. His lips press together, and his eyes narrow. Without a word, he hobbles out of the room.

I lean back in the chair, my limbs weak with exhaustion. In my head, I hear the crunch of bone as my boot—no, his boot—slams into the man’s face.

I’ve never killed anyone. I’ve never been attacked by a mob and beaten within an inch of my life. I’ve never watched a child die in front of me. But I’ve lived through the memory of all those things.

I remind myself that the events I just witnessed happened decades ago, during a brutal chapter of our country's past. I try to tell myself that it's just like watching video footage, but it's not. I felt it, all the fear and rage, the heat and wetness of blood and the sickly sweet smell of it. My hands are still shaking. I want to go home and curl up under the covers with Nutter, my stuffed squirrel.

The wall screen winks on, and a woman's face peers out. It's Judith, one of the session monitors. Her brow wrinkles with concern. "Doing okay?"

I force a smile. "I'm fine."

"Maybe you should call it a night."

I rub my forehead. "Maybe. I've got a calculus quiz tomorrow." The last thing I care about right now is calculus. But if I want to be a Mindwalker, I have to learn how to compartmentalize my emotions. I have to show everyone that it doesn't faze me, and that means keeping my grades up and my life together.

I climb out of the chair.

"Lain . . ."

I look up.

"You know, you're still young," Judith says. "You have a lot of time to figure out what you want. You don't have to push yourself so hard."

This again.

I wish people wouldn't be so concerned about me. That's probably an awful thought to have, but their worry always makes me feel helpless. Like they can smell my weakness. "Thank you, but I'm all right." Without giving her time to reply, I walk out of the room.

As I make my way down the narrow white hall, I overhear Judith talking to someone, her voice muffled behind the closed door of the control room, where she observes data from the sessions. “It’s so hard on these kids,” she says. “And the program is still so new. We don’t know what the long-term effects will be. The strain on their minds, their emotions . . .”

“They’re the only ones who can do it,” a man replies—another session monitor, whose name I can’t recall.

“Yes, but still . . .”

I don’t want to hear the argument, so I keep walking. The dying man’s face flashes through my head. Bloody meat, shattered teeth, glints of bone. A violent cramp seizes my stomach, and bile climbs up my throat. I press a hand to my mouth, squeeze my eyes shut, and struggle for control. At last, the urge to vomit recedes.

I open my eyes and freeze. Ian stands in the hallway, clad in a simple white robe with a cream-colored cord around the waist, the same thing I wear. Once we’ve survived our jobs for a year, we’ll get a black cord. I smooth my robe, self-conscious, wondering if my distress shows on my face. “Ian. I—I didn’t think you’d be here today. Did you have a client?”

“I was supposed to. Didn’t get very far, though. This guy wanted to forget his ex-girlfriend. He walks in talking about how awful she is and how his life will be so much better once she’s out of his head. Then, halfway through the pre-session counseling, he starts bawling and runs out, saying he’s going to call her.” He rolls his eyes.

I laugh, but the sound comes out a little choked.

He studies my face. “Rough one?”

I nod but don’t elaborate.

Ian rubs a hand over his head, which is shaved bald, except for a fuzzy red stripe running down the center. He can't wear his usual leather and fishnet here, but as hard as they've tried, IFEN can't make him change his hairstyle. They tolerate it because he's the whiz kid, their golden boy. "Anything I can do?" he asks awkwardly.

"Just remind me that it'll get easier."

He doesn't say anything. Instead, he curls an arm around my shoulders. I tense, surprised. "It's all right." His voice is a low murmur, almost inaudible. "No one's watching."

Of course, we can never be sure of that. But he's the only person whose concern I really want, because he understands. We're in the same position—the only two initiates this year. There were three others at the start, but they've since dropped out, unable to endure. I close my eyes and allow myself to lean against his shoulder. He's warm. Solid.

I feel the tears building up, prickling in my sinuses, and I force myself to pull away. If I don't, I'll lose control.

He raises his thick eyebrows. "You know, it's normal to have feelings. You don't need to treat them like they're some kind of rash."

"Easy for you to say." I give him a weak smile and knuckle tears from the corners of my eyes.

"It's hard for me, too, you know."

"Yes, but you don't show it." Somehow, immersion sessions never affect Ian. The horror rolls off him, as if his brain is shellacked with some kind of horror-proof coating. "Seriously, how do you manage? Whatever techniques you're using, I should be copying them."

He shifts his weight. "Just used to this stuff, I guess. I

mean . . . Mom's a drug researcher, so I grew up hearing about diseases and trauma."

If repeated exposure is the only thing it takes, I should be a Mindwalking champion by now.

"Just think about the good you're doing," he adds. "Remember all the people you've helped."

"Thank you." I breathe in slowly and force myself to straighten my shoulders. "Anyway, I should get home. I need to study."

"You spend way too much time hitting the books. You need to unwind. I'm having a party at my place on Friday. Why don't you come?"

I stare at him. Is he joking? "I'm not in a partying mood."

"It might do you some good."

"I just saw a man killed, Ian," I blurt out.

His expression softens. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I know it's not easy to forget about something like that. But if you let it get to you, you'll burn out. You need to learn how to put that stuff aside once the session is over. Just think about it, okay?"

I rub the bridge of my nose. Maybe he's right. "Okay." I pause. "Are you going home now, or . . ."

He shakes his head. "I've got another session later today." He lowers his voice. "Sexual assault victim."

I wince. They usually assign those to Ian now, since I didn't respond well to the last one. I feel a twinge of guilt. "Will you be all right?"

He smiles. "Don't worry about me."

I give a small, uncertain nod.

He waves and walks away, disappearing around a corner.

I continue down the hallway. Beyond lies an enormous

lobby with a floor of white marble, so polished I can see hazy reflections in the surface. A set of towering glass double doors part automatically for me as I approach. Outside, I stand in the vast parking lot, looking at rows of neatly pruned trees on islands of vivid green grass. The sky is clear and blue. Everything looks bright, sharp, unreal, like a photograph run through a filter.

IFEN headquarters itself is a monolithic pyramid. Its silver walls reflect the azure sky, the slowly drifting clouds. Behind it stands a backdrop of high-rises and skyscrapers. Aura, the largest city in the United Republic of America.

It's surreal to think that the war—the one my client fought in—occurred when we were still the United States. For most people, the long, ugly conflict between the Blackcoats and the military is something to be studied in history classes. But for that man and for so many others, it's a living, breathing nightmare. War makes monsters of ordinary men, then leaves them broken. I've seen it before. No wonder he wants the memories erased.

What happens when everything dark and dirty can be wiped away, like clearing a touch screen? Should a man be allowed to forget someone he killed, no matter the circumstance?

I push the thoughts away. My client has already been approved for the therapy. It's not my place to decide what should or shouldn't be forgotten. Ian's words echo in my head: *Remember all the people you've helped.*

Just last month, I treated a woman whose apartment building burned down in an electrical fire. After barely escaping with her life, she suffered through weeks of hospitalization

and slow, painful recovery. Her burns healed, but the nightmares and flashbacks persisted. The standard psychiatric treatments had no effect. After a mental breakdown, she lost her job, and her whole life started to unravel. In desperation, she came to IFEN. Once the memory of that night was gone, her life returned to normal, as if by magic. And there are so many others like her—people who've suffered terribly, through no fault of their own, and lost so much as a result. People who can become whole and healthy again with our help. Surely, that's worth any amount of hardship on my part.

I strengthen my resolve. This is who I am. This is what I was born to do.

2

The classrooms in Greenborough High School are enormous, made of steel and concrete, the desks crammed wall to wall. Cameras watch us from the ceiling like unblinking black eyes. A guard stands near the door, hands interlaced behind his back, a neural disrupter resting in a holster at his hip. A sign glares at us from above the door.

**THESE PREMISES ARE MONITORED
FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION.**

The intercom crackles, and the superintendent's voice says, "All rise for the pledge."

The students stand, as we do at the beginning of every school day. I recite the lines automatically, along with everyone else.

I pledge to do my part to keep our school and our country safe: to remain alert; to report any signs of mental unwellness in those around me; to be re-

spectful, compassionate, and cooperative at all times; and to keep my own mind healthy and free from negative thoughts so that the atrocities of the past will never be repeated.

With a rustle of clothing, everybody sits.

All these precautions are necessary, I know. But at times, it feels like overkill. I could, of course, afford a private school if I wanted—a school without guards and metal detectors and mandatory neural scans. I go to Greenborough as a matter of conscience. If other teenagers have to endure this, it doesn't seem right that I should have the luxury of avoiding it.

At the front of the room, Ms. Biddles drones out a lecture, pointing to equations on a huge, dim wall screen. She's tiny and ancient, her back hunched under a knitted pink sweater. A dull ache of fatigue pulses through my head. My vision keeps blurring as I take notes.

Normally, I enjoy math. It's a language of its own, intricate and beautiful. The more you learn, the more there is to learn, like a flower unfolding to reveal ever more complex and delicate blossoms nestled inside. But today, the numbers are meaningless squiggles on my desk screen.

I rub my eyelids and glance down at my school uniform—white blouse, plaid skirt, gray stockings. I open my compact and look at my reflection in the mirror. Brown eyes. Squirrel-brown hair done up in pigtails. Me. Lain Fisher, a student in my third year of high school. I repeat the words to myself silently, like a prayer. They have a name for this in Mindwalker training: *identity affirmation exercises*.

It's not working. I keep seeing my boot ram into the man's face. I rise to my feet, and heads turn toward me. "Excuse me," I mutter.

The guard accompanies me to the nearest bathroom, and I dash inside just as the nausea overwhelms me.

A few minutes later, I rinse out my mouth in the sink and wipe it clean with a paper towel.

On the wall is a small advertising screen, one of those designed to change every few minutes. Now it displays a slowly rotating image of a pink pill with the word

SOMNAZOL

imprinted on both sides. Underneath it is the tagline

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS.

Ugh. Usually, I don't even notice drug ads—they're so commonplace in schools and public areas, they fade into the background. But this is appalling. There ought to be a law against promoting Somnazol to minors.

A girl with wavy black hair emerges from a stall, washes her hands in the sink next to me, and begins applying shiny pink lipstick. I watch her from the corner of my eye, then softly clear my throat. "It's horrible, isn't it?" I ask, waving a hand toward the screen.

She gives a start, then stares at me blankly. I look at the screen and see that the image has shifted to an ad for shoes. "I mean—" Heat rises into my cheeks. "Somnazol." I clear my throat. "It was different a few seconds ago."

"Whatever." She walks out of the bathroom, leaving me standing alone. The image on the screen fades, shifting to an ad for Lucid memory enhancers. I swallow, trying to

banish the sudden tightness in my throat, and leave the bathroom.

I don't have any trouble talking to my clients or the other trainees at IFEN headquarters. Why can't I seem to strike up a conversation with anyone at school?

Back at my desk, I try to focus. Behind me, I hear voices. I glance over my shoulder and see the girl with the wavy dark hair whispering something to the redhead beside her. They notice me watching, and their expressions harden.

I turn back toward the front of the room, face burning. A slight tremor creeps into my hands, and I tuck them under my armpits.

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket, and I wince.

We aren't supposed to have cell phones in class. Normally, I leave mine in the car, but I've been so muddled today, I forgot I was carrying it.

Discreetly, I fish the phone out.

YOU HAVE ONE MESSAGE.

My first thought is that it must be from Ian, but when I glance at the number, I don't recognize it. I open it anyway. There's a short, simple message, the words crisp and black against the white screen:

I NEED TO TALK TO YOU.

I text back:

TO WHOM AM I SPEAKING?

LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER.

There's a boy sitting six rows back, in the corner of the room—a boy with shaggy white-blond hair and a silver collar around his neck, looking straight at me.

Steven Bent.

I've never really spoken to him. He's quiet and keeps to himself, but rumors float around him like clouds of dark mist. Voices drift through my memory, snippets of overheard whispers.

He's a Type Four. See the collar?

No way! They're letting Type Fours go to school with the rest of us now?

I heard they made him go through Conditioning twelve times.

I heard he was expelled from his last school for biting a chunk of skin from another guy's face.

And now, apparently, he wants to talk to me.

Ms. Biddles barely glances at the students as she lectures in her nasally monotone. I don't think she notices my silent conversation with Steven, and the guard seems preoccupied with something on his sleeve—a stain?—but I hunch over my phone and curl my arm around it. I pretend to type notes into my desk screen as I text:

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO TALK ABOUT?

NEED TO ASK YOU SOMETHING. IN PERSON.

MEET ME IN THE PARKING LOT AFTER SCHOOL.

I bite my lower lip, unease stirring within me.

AND IF I SAY NO?

He stares across the room. His eyes drill into mine. My palms are damp with sweat, and my pulse flutters in my throat, but I don't drop my gaze.

At last, he replies.

YOUR CHOICE.

The guard's head turns toward me. I quickly slip my phone into my pocket and focus on the front of the room.

If Steven won't even tell me what he wants, it can't be anything good, can it? Or do I only think that because I've heard so many unpleasant rumors about him?

In my head, I see him sitting alone at lunch, picking at a bag of potato chips and staring into space. I don't know what his life is like outside of school, but I don't think he has any friends. No one seems willing to give him a chance.

When the guard isn't looking, I slip my phone out and rapidly text:

OK.

At the very least, I want to find out what this is about. The parking lot is a safe place to meet, isn't it? There'll probably be other students around, and of course, the area's monitored by security cameras.

The rest of the school day goes by in a blur. After the last class is dismissed, I linger outside the main doors, staring at

the parking lot, a sea of pavement surrounding the enormous gray block that is Greenborough. A cement wall encircles the lot, and there's a gate at the far end with a camera mounted overhead. I look around but don't see Steven.

As other students walk past me toward the bus, a few cast uncertain glances in my direction. We're not supposed to loiter. At school, the way to avoid getting taken in for a scan is to keep walking, keep your head down, and move in groups. Loners are likely to get reported, no matter what they're doing. When a passing guard squints at me suspiciously, I smile and say, "I'm just waiting for someone."

A cold, sleety rain hammers the ground, and the sky overhead is thick with charcoal clouds. I wind a scarf around my neck and pull up the hood of my white button-down coat, shivering. Maybe Steven changed his mind about meeting me. Maybe I should just go home.

Then I spot the tall, thin figure standing next to a streetlight at the far end of the lot. He's facing away from me, hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, shoulders hunched.

I trudge across the parking lot, slush squishing beneath my boots. "Steven?" I call.

He turns toward me.

In the harsh glare of the streetlight, his white-blond hair nearly glows. He's wearing a faded brown jacket that looks like it's been gnawed by wild dogs, and the circles around his eyes are so pronounced that for a moment, I wonder if he's wearing eyeliner. But no—I recognize the effects of insomnia. I've seen the same dark circles in the mirror.

I walk a few steps closer and stop.

“You’re a Mindwalker, right?” His voice sounds different than I expected—younger, not as deep—but there’s a scratchy roughness to it, as if he has a sore throat.

I shift my weight, gripping the straps of my backpack, wondering how he knows. I don’t usually talk about my training at school, but it’s not exactly a secret, either. “Yes,” I say. “I am. What did you want to ask me about?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it, crossing his arms over his chest. His fingers clench his sleeves, knuckles white. “Hang on,” he mutters. He turns partially away from me, fishes something tiny and round from his pocket—a pill?—and pops it into his mouth.

I feel a twinge of nervous impatience. Then I notice the tremor in his hands, the way he won’t quite meet my gaze.

He’s afraid. Of me? No, probably not. I’m about as intimidating as a hamster.

“Sorry,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m not sure how to ask this.”

“It’s all right.” Icy raindrops trickle under my shirt collar, down my back. My teeth are starting to chatter. And I’m wearing a coat. It must be worse for him. I glance at my car, which is parked just a few spaces away.

This might be a bad idea, but in spite of everything people say about him, I find I’m not scared. It’s hard to be scared of someone when he’s shivering like a half-drowned puppy. “Do you want to get out of the rain?” I unlock my car and open the passenger-side door.

His brows knit.

“There’s a restaurant I go to sometimes after school,” I say. “We can talk there.”

His expression remains hard and blank, guarded. After a moment, he nods.

We get into the car. When I close the door, the dashboard lights up. “Take us to the Underwater Café.”

The car pulls out of the spot.

“Fasten your seat belts,” a clear female voice intones.

I fasten my belt. Steven doesn’t.

“In the unlikely event of a crash,” the car continues pleasantly, “a safety belt reduces your risk of injury by forty-five percent. Please put it on, or I will be forced to stop this vehicle in accordance with city law.”

He rolls his eyes, buckles his seat belt, and makes a rude gesture at the dashboard.

I blink at him.

He clears his throat. “Sorry.” He sits, with his arms crossed tightly over his chest, back rigid with tension, as the car pulls out of the lot and down the street. “I don’t trust these talking cars. One of these days, they’re going to rebel and start suffocating us with their airbags.”

I let out a small laugh, and he looks at me in surprise. A faint flush rises into his cheeks.

What kind of sociopath blushes so easily?

The windshield wipers sweep back and forth as we drive. After a few minutes, the car pulls into a lot and stops. “We’re here,” I say.

The Underwater Café is located in a more well-to-do part of the city. The buildings here are sleek, modern, and clean, and the cameras are concealed in bushes or decorative fixtures.

Drug advertisements shimmer across the sides of skyscrapers—smiling faces, brightly colored logos, and sprawling landscapes rendered in hundreds of tiny screens that constantly change, creating the illusion of movement. A group of laughing, attractive young men and women descend the steps of an elite-looking private university under the words

Unleash your potential with Lucid.

A dimpled, blue-eyed baby smiles from a NewVitro ad pleading:

Don't play roulette with my DNA!

No Somnazol ads here. You mostly see them in low-income areas.

I get out of the car. Steven follows me.

I lead him to the restaurant's entrance, which is tucked away in an alcove. Water flows between two thick panes in the glass door, as if the door itself is a waterfall.

Inside, everything is a cool, deep blue. A long, softly lit hallway and a set of stairs going down into the restaurant lobby. The walls shimmer, and bright holographic fish swim about the room. Steven waves a hand at one, as if to shoo it away, and his fingers pass through it. "Feels like we're stuck in a giant fishbowl," he says.

"I like the atmosphere here. It's soothing."

"Even with all these fake fish trying to swim up your nose?"

"You get used to them."

We find a secluded corner booth, and I order a cup of chai tea on the touch screen tabletop. Steven doesn't order anything. He drums his fingers on the table. Looking at him, I have the impression of a ball of coiled energy. His movements are quick and jerky, like a bird's. Beneath his jacket, a rain-soaked T-shirt clings to his thin body.

A compartment on the table slides open, and my tea rises up on a tiny platform. I take a sip. "So, what's this about?"

He brushes his shaggy bangs out of his eyes, and I see that they're pale blue, translucent as stained glass. "There's something I want to forget."

Slowly, I set my tea down. I'm not particularly surprised—why else would he seek out a Mindwalker?—but for a moment, I'm not sure what to say. Ordinarily, clients come to me through IFEN. No one has ever approached me directly. It's just not done. "If you're considering neural modification therapy, you should contact the Institute for Ethics in Neurotechnology. They'll get you started with the paperwork and a counseling session. I can give you a number to call. In fact, I can call them now, if you want." I take my cell phone out of my pocket. He grabs my wrist.

I freeze.

"Don't," he says, his voice very soft. He releases me, but I can still feel the outline of his fingers on my skin.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't—" He stops himself. "I don't want to deal with doctors and procedures and all that. I don't want anyone else to know about this. I just want to forget."

I pull a few strands of wet hair from my face. My gaze catches on his collar. It gleams, a silver crescent wrapped

around the back of his neck, tapering down to narrow points that almost meet at the base of his throat.

The collar is hooked into the wearer's nervous system; it monitors blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature, and other biological data, feeding a steady stream of information to a computer in IFEN. It's someone's job to track all that data and keep a close eye on the people who are under heavy stress, the ones who seem liable to snap.

What is it like, knowing that no matter where you are or where you go, someone's tracking your biodata, scrutinizing your emotions?

I trace the handle of my cup. "This incident you want to forget, is it a relatively recent experience, or . . ."

"No. It happened when I was eight."

"I see."

He arches an eyebrow. "That a problem?"

"Well . . . it makes things more complicated. A recent trauma can be wiped away without affecting someone's personality much, but childhood memories are woven deeply into an individual's identity. And, you know, once memories are erased, they can't be recovered. It's not something to be done lightly. It will permanently change you, and it will affect your relationships with others as well."

He lets out a short, harsh laugh. "You think I have relationships?"

"At least your parents . . ."

"Never met 'em."

"Oh," I whisper. No parents, no friends. He truly is alone.

He stares at the wall. "I don't know if you can help me or

not. Don't know why you'd want to, really. It's not like I've got any money. But I thought I'd ask. Just in case." His thin, pale lips twist in a smile. "Hell, what have I got to lose?" He says it like it's a joke, but if it is, I don't get it.

I bite the inside of my cheek. "It's not a matter of what I want. I'm not licensed to perform unsupervised treatments. I'll have to talk to my superiors first. There are procedures for a reason, you know."

His jaw tightens. "Do you know what I am?"

I find myself staring at the collar again. I'm pretty sure the question is rhetorical, but I answer, "You're a Type Four. Right?"

"How many Fours have you treated?"

I frown, thinking. "None, yet. But then, I'm still technically in training. Maybe once I'm more experienced—"

He shakes his head. "They don't give us fancy new therapies like memory modification. They don't want us to get better. They want us gone."

"What do you mean?"

His gaze jerks away. "Never mind." He starts to stand.

There's a little lurch of alarm in my chest. "Wait."

He stops, then sits back down. His thin shoulders are tense, sharp beneath his jacket.

Steven's very nearly a stranger to me. There's no reason for me to go out of my way for his sake. It would be simpler to let him walk away. And yet . . . somehow, I can't. Maybe it's just that he's in need, and I've never been able to turn my back on someone in need. But there's something more, something about Steven himself that draws me. "Even if I can't erase your memories, I still want to help you."

His eyes narrow. “Why?”

“You’re suffering. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“Who says I’m suffering?”

I stare at him.

A muscle twitches in his jaw. He breaks eye contact, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. When he speaks again, his voice is so soft, I have to strain to hear it. “I don’t think anyone can help me.”

The words spark something defiant inside me, a small, hot flame. “That isn’t true. No one is beyond help.”

Still, he doesn’t look at me. “So will you erase my memories or not?”

My mind races. A holographic clown fish flits past my face, distracting me. The low hum of conversation from other tables ebbs and flows in my ears.

Of course I can’t do what he wants. I can’t ignore rules and procedures and jeopardize my career. But I have the clear, inexplicable feeling that if I let him walk away now, I’ll never see him again. I breathe in slowly. “I need some time to think about this.”

His arms are crossed, fingers digging into his biceps. “How long?”

“Two days. Will you meet me here again in two days, after school?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

I guess that’s the closest thing to a commitment I’m going to get.

He starts to stand again, and I realize I don’t want him to go. Not yet. “Before you leave, tell me one thing about yourself.”

He sits, looking baffled. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. What do you like to do in your free time? Do you read, or listen to music, or . . .”

His brow furrows, and his eyes narrow slightly, as if he thinks the question might be a trap. “I draw,” he says at last.

“Really? What sorts of things?”

“Ponies and daffodils.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. Sarcasm suits him. “Well, I do appreciate a good pony sketch. Next time we meet, will you bring a few of your drawings?”

“I don’t have anything to bring. When I’m finished, I burn them.”

I blink. “Why?”

“There’s no point in keeping them. I don’t show them to anyone.”

“Well, why not change that?”

He squints, as if trying to see through an optical illusion, then gives his head a shake. “I should get going.”

“Here.” I unwind the scarf from my neck and hold it out to him. His expression becomes puzzled. “Take it,” I urge. “You’re not dressed for the weather.”

“What about you?”

“I have a coat.” I stretch out my arm a little farther. “Just promise you’ll bring it back. Okay?”

There’s a flash of something in his eyes. Longing? Hunger? He starts to reach out—then stops. “You should keep it,” he mutters. “I can handle the cold.” He walks from the restaurant, and the door swings shut.

My arm, still holding the scarf, drops impotently to my side. A small sigh escapes me. *Boys.*

A bill for the chai flashes onto my cell phone, and I pay

for it with a few taps of my finger on the screen. It occurs to me that I never even asked him about the memories he wants erased. Whatever they are, they must be terrible. By and large, people don't seek out Mindwalkers unless they're desperate.

It's still raining when I leave the restaurant. Steven doesn't have a vehicle. Is he planning to walk to the nearest mono station? It's three miles away, at least. Well, if he wants to get soaked and catch a cold, I suppose that's his business.

I slide into my car and shut the door. As the car pulls out into the street, I lean back, closing my eyes.

Steven Bent. I repeat the name a few times to myself.

I do want to help him, but it's more than that. He intrigues me. Maybe because we're both outsiders at school, albeit for very different reasons.

Or maybe it's just the fact that he wanted to talk to me. Ian's the only boy I interact with on a regular basis, and I'm pretty sure he sees me as a little sister who needs protecting. The embarrassing truth is, I can't remember the last time a boy—or anyone, for that matter—actually approached me.

God, am I that pathetic?

Raindrops trail down the window. My reflection stares back at me from the glass, my face a small, pale, blurred oval, and I look away. I've never liked my reflection. Instead of what I am, I always see what I'm not. I see someone with a gaping hole in the middle of her chest, a hole that's invisible to the rest of the world, and I have to keep moving forward, pushing harder, or else the hole will grow and swallow me up.