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Opening extract from
Crossed

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Published by
Puffin Books

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CHAPTER 1

KY

I'm standing in a river. It's blue. Dark blue. Reflecting the color of the evening sky.

I don't move. The river does. It pushes against me and hisses through the grass at the water's edge. "Get out of there," the Officer says. He shines his flashlight on us from his position on the bank.

"You said to put the body in the water," I say, choosing to misunderstand the Officer.

"I didn't say you had to get in yourself," the Officer says. "Let go and get out. And bring his coat. He doesn't need it now."

I glance up at Vick, who helps me with the body. Vick doesn't step into the water. He's not from around here, but everyone in camp knows the rumors about the poisoned rivers in the Outer Provinces.

"It's all right," I tell Vick quietly. The Officers and Officials want us to be scared of this river—of all rivers—so that we never try to drink from them and never try to cross over.

"Don't you want a tissue sample?" I call out to the Officer on the bank while Vick hesitates. The icy water reaches my

knees, and the dead boy's head lolls back, his open eyes staring at the sky. The dead don't see but I do.

I see too many things. I always have. Words and pictures connect together in my mind in strange ways and I notice details wherever I am. Like now. Vick's no coward but fear films his face. The dead boy's sleeves are frayed with threads that catch the water where his arm dangles down. His thin ankles and bare feet glow pale in Vick's hands as Vick steps closer to the bank. The Officer already had us take the boots from the body. Now he swings them back and forth by the laces, a sweep of black keeping time. With his other hand he points the round beam of the flashlight right into my eyes.

I throw the coat to the Officer. He has to drop the boots to catch it. "You can let go," I tell Vick. "He's not heavy. I can take care of it."

But Vick steps in, too. Now the dead boy's legs are wet and his black plainclothes sodden. "It's not much of a Final Banquet," Vick calls out to the Officer. There's anger in Vick's voice. "Was that dinner last night something *he* chose? If it was, he deserves to be dead."

It's been so long since I've let myself feel anger that I don't *just* feel it. It covers my mouth and I swallow it down, the taste sharp and metal as though I'm gnawing through foilware. This boy died because the Officers judged wrong. They didn't give him enough water and now he's dead too soon.

We have to hide the body because we're not supposed to die in this holding camp. We're supposed to wait until they

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send us out to the villages so the Enemy can take care of us there. It doesn't always work that way.

The Society wants us to be afraid of dying. But I'm not. I'm only afraid of dying wrong.

"This is how Aberrations end," the Officer tells us impatiently. He takes a step in our direction. "You know that. There's no last meal. There's no last words. Let go and get out."

This is how Aberrations end. Looking down I see that the water has gone black with the sky. I don't let go yet.

Citizens end with banquets. Last words. Stored tissue samples to give them a chance at immortality.

I can't do anything about the food or the sample but I do have words. They're always there rolling through my mind with the pictures and numbers.

So I whisper some that seem to fit the river and the death:

"For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place

The flood may bear me far,

I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crossed the bar."

Vick looks at me, surprised.

"Let go," I tell him, and at the same time we do.

CHAPTER 2

CASSIA

The dirt is part of me. The hot water in the corner wash-basin runs over my hands, turning them red, making me think of Ky. My hands look a little like his now.

Of course, almost everything makes me think of Ky.

With a piece of soap the color of this month, of November, I scrub my fingers one last time. In some ways I like the dirt. It works into every crease of my skin, makes a map on the back of my hands. Once, when I felt very tired, I looked down at the cartography of my skin and imagined it could tell me how to get to Ky.

Ky is gone.

All of this—faraway province, work camp, dirty hands, tired body, aching mind—is because Ky is gone and because I want to find him. And it is strange that absence can feel like presence. A missing so complete that if it were to go away, I would turn around, stunned, to see that the room is empty after all, when before it at least had something, if not *him*.

I turn away from the sink and glance around our cabin. The small windows along the top of the room are dark with evening. It's the last night before a transfer; this next work

detail will be my final one. After this, I've been informed, I will go on to Central, the biggest City of the Society, for my final work position in one of the sorting centers there. A *real* work position, not this digging in the dirt, this hard labor. I have worked in several camps; all of them here in Tana Province. I am no closer to Ky than I was when I began.

If I'm going to run to find Ky, it has to be soon.

Indie, one of the other girls in my cabin, pushes past me on her way to the sink. "Did you leave any hot water for the rest of us?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. She mutters something under her breath as she turns on the water and picks up the soap. A few girls stand in line behind her. Others sit expectantly on the edges of the bunks that line the room.

It's the seventh day, the day the messages come.

Carefully, I untie the small sack from my belt. We each have one of these little bags and we are supposed to carry them with us at all times. The bag is full of messages; like most of the other girls, I keep the papers until they can't be read anymore. They are like the fragile petals of the newroses Xander gave me when I left the Borough, which I have also saved.

I look at the old messages while I wait. The other girls do the same.

It doesn't take long before the messages yellow around the edges and turn to decay—the words meant to be consumed and let go. My last message from Bram tells me that he works hard in the fields and is an exemplary student

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at school, never late to class, and it makes me laugh because I know he's stretching the truth on that last count at least. His message also makes tears come to my eyes—he says he viewed Grandfather's microcard, the one from the gold box at the Final Banquet.

The historian reads a summary of Grandfather's life, and at the very end is a list of Grandfather's favorite memories, Bram writes. He had one for each of us. His favorite of me was when I said my first word and it was "more." His favorite of you was what he called "the red garden day."

I always meant to view Grandfather's microcard again—I didn't pay close attention on the day of the Banquet—but I never did, and I wish now that I had. Even more than that, I wish I remembered the red garden day. I remember *many* days sitting on a bench and talking with Grandfather among the red buds in the spring or the red newroses in the summer or the red leaves in the fall. That must be what he meant. Perhaps Bram left off an *s*—Grandfather remembered the *red garden days*, plural. The days of spring and summer and autumn where we sat talking.

The message from my parents seems full of elation; they had received the word that this next work camp rotation would be my last.

I can't blame them for being glad. They believed enough in love to give me a chance to find Ky, but they are not sorry to see that chance end. I admire them for letting me try. It is more than most parents would do.

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I shuffle the papers back behind each other, thinking of cards in games, thinking of Ky. What if I could get to him with this transfer, or stay hidden on the air ship and drop myself, like a stone from the sky, down into the Outer Provinces?

If I did, what would he think if he saw me after all this time? Would he even recognize me? I know I look different. It's not just my hands. In spite of the full meal portions, I've grown thinner from all the work. My eyes have shadows because I can't sleep now, even though the Society doesn't monitor our dreams here. Though it worries me that they don't seem to care very much about us, I like the new freedom of sleeping without tags. I lie awake thinking about old and new words and a kiss stolen from the Society when they weren't watching. I *try* to fall asleep, I really do, because I see Ky best in my dreams.

The only time we can see people is when the Society allows it. In life, on the port, on a microcard. Once there was a time when the Society let its citizens carry around pictures of those they loved. If people were dead or had gone away, at least you remembered how they looked. But that hasn't been allowed in years. And now the Society has even stopped the tradition of giving new Matches pictures of each other after their first face-to-face meeting. I learned that from one of the messages I *didn't* keep—a notification from the Matching Department sent out to all those who had chosen to be Matched. It read, in part: *Matching procedures are being streamlined for maximum efficiency and to increase optimal results.*

I wonder if there have been other errors.

I close my eyes again, wishing I could see Ky's face flash in front of me. But every image I conjure lately seems incomplete, blurring in different places. I wonder where Ky is now, what is happening to him, if he managed to hang onto the scrap of green silk I gave him before he left.

If he managed to hold on to me.

I take out something else, spread the paper open carefully on the bunk. A newrose petal comes out along with the paper, feeling like pages to my touch, its pink yellowing around the edges, too.

The girl assigned to the bunk next to me notices what I'm doing and so I climb back down to the bunk below. The other girls gather around, as they always do when I bring out this particular page. I can't get in trouble for keeping this—after all, it's not something illegal or contraband. It was printed from a regulation port. But we can't print anything besides messages here, and so this scrap of art has become something valuable.

"I think this might be the last time we can look at it," I say. "It's falling to pieces."

"I never thought to bring any of the Hundred Paintings," Lin says, looking down.

"I didn't think of it either," I say. "Someone gave this to me."

Xander did, back in the Borough, the day we said good-bye. It's #19 of the Hundred Paintings—*Chasm of the Colorado*, by Thomas Moran—and I gave a report on it once

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in school. I said then that it was my favorite painting and Xander must have remembered that all those years. The picture frightened and thrilled me in some vague way—the sky was so spectacular, the land so beautiful and dangerous, so full of heights and depths. I was afraid of the vastness of a place like that. At the same time, I felt sorrow that I would never see it: green trees clinging to red rocks, blue and gray clouds floating and streaming, gold and dark over all of it.

I wonder if some of that longing came through in my voice when I spoke of the painting, if Xander noticed and remembered. Xander still plays the game in a subtle way. This painting is one of his cards. Now, when I see the painting or touch one of the newrose petals, I remember the way he felt so familiar and knew so much, and I ache for what I've had to let go.

I was right about this being the last time we could look at the picture. When I pick it up, the last little pieces fall apart. We all sigh, at the same time, our combined exhalation moving the fragments on its breeze.

"We could go view it on the port," I tell them. The one port in camp sits humming over in the main hall, large and listening.

"No," says Indie. "It's too late."

It's true; we're supposed to stay in our cabin after dinner. "Tomorrow during breakfast, then," I say.

Indie makes a dismissive gesture, turns her face away. She's right. I don't know why it's not the same, but it isn't. At

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first, I thought it was *having* the picture that made it special, but it's not even that. It's looking at something without being watched, without being told how to see. That's what the picture has given us.

I don't know why I didn't carry around pictures and poems all the time before I came here. All that paper in the ports, all that luxury. So many carefully selected pieces of beauty and still we didn't look at them enough. How did I not see that the color of the green near the canyon was so new you could almost feel the smoothness of the leaf, the stickiness like butterfly wings opening for the first time?

In one swift motion, Indie brushes the pieces from my bed. She didn't even look to do it. That's how I know she cared about losing the picture, because she knew exactly where the pieces lay.

I carry them to be incinerated, my eyes blurring with tears.

It's all right, I tell myself. You have other, solid things left, hidden under the papers and petals. A tablet container. A silver box from the Match Banquet.

Ky's compass and the blue tablets from Xander.

I don't usually keep the compass and the tablets in the bag with me. They're too valuable. I don't know if the Officers search through my things but I'm sure the other girls do.

So, on the first day in each new camp, I bring out the compass and the blue tablets, plant them deep, and come for them later. Besides being illegal, they are both valuable gifts: the compass, golden and bright, can tell me which direction

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I need to go. And the Society has always told us that, with water, the blue tablet can keep us alive for a day or two. Xander stole several dozen for me; I could live for a long time. Together, their gifts are the perfect combination for survival.

If I could only get to the Outer Provinces to use them.

On nights like tonight—the night before a transfer—I have to find my way back to where I planted them and hope I remember the spot. This evening I was the last one inside, my hands stained dark with dirt from a different part of the field. It's why I hurried to wash my hands; what I hope Indie didn't notice with her sharp eyes as she stood behind me. I hope that no traces of soil fall out of the bag and that no one hears the musical chime, the sound of promise, as the silver box and the compass bump into each other and against the tablet container.

In these camps, I try to conceal the fact that I'm a Citizen from the other workers. Though the Society usually keeps knowledge of status confidential, I've overheard conversations between some of the girls about having to give up their tablet containers. Which means that somehow—through their own mistakes or those of their parents—some of these girls have lost their Citizenship. They're Aberrations, like Ky.

There's only one classification lower than Aberration: Anomaly. But you almost never hear of them anymore. They seem to have vanished. And it seems to me now that, once the Anomalies were gone, the Aberrations took their place—at least in the collective mind of the Society.

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No one talked about the Rules of Reclassification back in Oria, and I used to worry that I could cause the Reclassification of my family. But now I've figured out the rules from Ky's story and from listening to the other girls speak in unguarded moments.

The rules are this: If a *parent* becomes Reclassified, the whole family does, too.

But if a *child* becomes Reclassified, the family does not. The child alone bears the weight of the Infraction.

Ky was Reclassified because of his father. And then he was brought to Oria when the first Markham boy died. I realize now how truly rare Ky's situation was—how he could only come from the Outer Provinces because someone else was killed, and how Patrick and Aida might have been even higher up in the Society than any of us realized. I wonder what has happened to them now. The thought makes me cold.

But, I remind myself, leaving to find Ky will not destroy my family. I can cause my own Reclassification, but not theirs.

I cling to this thought—that they will still be safe, and Xander, too, no matter where I have to go.

"Messages," says the Officer as she enters the room. It's the one with the sharp voice and the kind eyes. She gives us a nod as she begins to read the names. "Mira Waring."

Mira steps forward. We all watch and count. Mira gets

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three messages, the same as usual. The Officer prints out and reads the pages before we see them to save the time of all of us lining up at the port.

There is nothing for Indie. And only one message for me, a combined one from my parents and Bram. Nothing from Xander. He has never missed a week before.

What happened? I tighten my hand on my bag and I hear the crumple of paper inside.

“Cassia,” the Officer says. “Please come with me to the main hall. We have a communication for you.”

The other girls stare at me in surprise.

And then a chill cuts through me. I know who it must be. My Official, checking in on me from the port.

I can see *her* face clearly in my mind, every icy line of it.

I don't want to go.

“Cassia,” the Officer says. Looking back at the girls, at the cabin that suddenly seems warm and cozy, I stand up to follow her. She leads me back along the path to the main hall and over to the port. I hear it humming all the way across the room.

I keep my eyes down for a moment before looking up toward the port. Compose your face, your hands, your eyes. Look out at them so they cannot see into you.

“Cassia,” someone else says, a voice I know.

And then I look up, and I don't believe what I see.

He's here.

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The port is blank, and he stands before me, real.

He's here.

Whole and healthy and unharmed.

Here.

Not alone—an Official stands behind him—but still,
he's—

Here.

I put my red, mapped hands over my eyes because it's
too much to see.

“Xander,” I say.