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Opening extract from
Fragments

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Pete, Joe and Harry.
This one's for you.

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CHAPTER 1

puppet

Everyone says, 'It's so quiet here.'
Like that's a good thing.

But it just makes the noise inside my head louder.

I'm sitting halfway up the hill, under the shade of some big old tree, thinking and trying not to. I wish I could switch my brain off. Or forget for even a minute.

Forget that I've lost my best friend. My brother. I guess you could say he was my whole family.

When they told me that Jax was dead it was too . . . *huge* to be true. Their mouths were flapping away and this white noise was coming out. How could he be gone? I didn't believe it. Even now I keep expecting the daft lummoX to walk into the room and make one of his crap jokes.

But deep inside, in a raw, dark place, I know that he's gone. For good.

I bury my face in my arms. The rough bark of the tree scratches me through my top and I press myself a little harder against it. I want it to *hurt*, to distract me from crying again.

'Hey.'

I didn't hear anyone coming.

My head snaps up and I squint into the brightness. All I can make out is a shape haloed by sunlight. My spirits lift the tiniest bit.

Cal sits down next to me and stretches out his long legs.

We kissed earlier. It was nice. Really nice. But now I'm shy again. He clears his throat. Maybe he is too.

'So how is it?' I say. I try really hard to sound interested, the way I should be.

He hesitates and I sneak a glance. His eyes are full of happy wonder, as though he's seeing something too awesome to describe. His cheek kinks, like he's holding a smile inside.

'It's . . . amazing,' he says. Then, drily, 'And *really* bloody weird.'

'I bet.'

Weird probably doesn't even begin to cover it.

About two hours ago, Cal met his parents for the first time in, like, twelve years or something.

He was taken from them as a baby and kept in a

government research laboratory called the Facility. They experimented on him and put a chip in his brain. They also did something with brain tissue from a dead boy that meant some of his memories belonged to someone else. I'm fuzzy on the details. It makes me go a bit funny to think about it.

We've been staying with resistance people from the rebel group Torch, who want to bring our government, the Securitat, down. They call them 'terrorists' on the news but I know the truth. Torch are the good guys in this cruel, messed-up world we live in. They rescued Cal from that place and tried to rescue Jax too, but, well, he wasn't so lucky.

I glance at the boy next to me. He's gazing into the distance. I like that we can be still together; it's good to know he's there, even if I don't feel like talking.

But guilt twists inside me when I think about how I've kept out of the way today. I didn't want to see the big, happy reunion scene he had with his mum and dad. Don't need to be reminded that he now has people to love him and give him a home.

Yeah, I know how that sounds.

What kind of nasty person could resent Cal getting lucky? After everything he went through?

A person like me, that's who. And don't think I don't hate myself for it.

Cal makes another throat-clearing noise.

'So,' he says, all casual, 'they, um, want to meet you. Do you feel up to it?'

A feeling of total, overwhelming tiredness presses in on me. I wish I could make myself into the tiniest thing that would blow away on the wind, like dandelion fluff.

I picture the scene. Me going down there with a polite, friendly face. They'll be all, 'It's so good to meet you, Kyla,' and 'Cal has told us all about you, Kyla.' And then they'll go away with him, ready to start their life together. Cal will leave me, just like everyone else has.

God, I really am the worst.

So I force the sides of my mouth up and say, 'Yeah, course! You go on ahead and I'll come down in a little while . . .'

Cal looks at me and reaches over to take my hand in his warm, dry one. Then he leans over and gently presses his lips to mine. 'Thank you,' he murmurs and I feel the words as soft breath on my face. For a tiny second, the kiss ignites a weak flame inside me, like I can imagine being happy again, with him. Then it snuffs out. He'll be gone soon, won't he?

'Wait,' I say and fumble for my phone. He makes a quizzical face as I snap a photo. I shrug, feeling silly now.

'Help us remember a special day,' I mumble and force a grin. He grins back before walking down the hill. His hurry to get back shows in every long stride.

Letting the smile drop from my face is a relief, like putting down a heavy bag.

My vision blurs and wobbles and I know I can't stop the tears. All I've done is cry for days but somehow my stupid eyes keep on leaking.

I snuffle and sob for a bit until my chest starts to squeeze and cramp. Fumbling in my trouser pockets again, my fingers close around the breather stick. One of the Torch people at the farmhouse, Sam, is a doctor. She gave it to me for my asthma. I've never had anything that good before. I put the small Y-shaped pen to my nose and breathe the sweet drug into my lungs, which instantly start to relax.

I try to get myself together. I promised Cal I'd go meet the parents and I have to do it. But I can't go looking like this . . .

I rub under my eyes and try to pat my hair down a bit.

There's a bee somewhere nearby, buzzing away, and I look around. I don't want to get stung. Those things get infected and you're in trouble. It might even be one of those super-resistant malaria mozzies I've heard about. I squint into the bright sunlight, trying to see where the sound's coming from. My heartbeat seems too loud in my own ears too.

A cloud passes over my head.

And then icy shock fills my bones.

It's not a mosquito or a bee or a heartbeat I'm hearing . . .

Three helicopters fly in formation above, black and spiky with weapons, blades thumping a rhythm that vibrates in my chest and head. Buzz drones – evil, bug-like CCTV cameras – swarm around them, darting and dodging but flying in some sort of order. Recording every moment of the flight.

Why are they here? Maybe they're on their way somewhere else? There's nothing out here except farms and

sheep. I expect them to turn west towards Lancaster.

Please turn . . .

But they continue in a straight line. The engine sounds dip to a throaty rumble that turns my stomach over with dread.

They're heading for the farmhouse, the house that everyone said was so safe. Everyone is in there. Julia, Sam and Mo from Torch. Cal. Cal's mum and dad . . .

I'm on my feet, screaming pointless warnings, but I can't seem to move. I can't run down the hill to warn them. I know I'll die if I do.

All I can do is watch helplessly as the first missile explodes into the roof of the farmhouse. The other two helicopters peel away and blast the outbuildings of the farm. A plume of black and red spouts through the roof and then the whole farm goes up. Shockwaves slam into me and I fall, my face hitting the mud. I feel my cheek rip and taste blood and dirt.

I don't know how long I'm there, face down in the mud. I drift in and out of the world. After a while, things come into bright, painful focus again. Groaning, I sit up slowly. The side of my face hurts and when I put my fingers there, they come away smeared with blood and mud. Then, with what feels like a superhuman effort, I force myself to turn over and look at the farmhouse.

Except there is no farmhouse now. There's only a

blackened, smoking skeleton of a building. Time hangs around me as though the world has stopped. The air is bitter and smoky, hot and toxic. All I can hear are snapping sounds as flames eat the remains of the building. My throat burns and I bend double, coughing and wheezing.

Everything hurts but it all feels like it's on the surface. I can't seem to take in what has happened. I'm sort of numb. Everyone I've come to know in these past couple of weeks has been killed in one fell swoop. No one could have survived that blast. Why can't I feel anything? I should check inside. But I won't. I haven't got the courage to go down there and risk seeing burned bodies. Seeing Cal . . .

Cal.

OH GOD . . .

Reality slams into me then and I'm on my hands and knees, heaving bitterness onto the grass, my stomach cramping and aching with every spasm that passes through me.

I hear someone crying in a weird way, like a mewling cat, and then I realise it's me. I wish I could make my legs work but all my limbs are like jelly. I feel like one of those puppet things people used to have in old times. I wish someone else would make my strings work because I need to move. I don't know where to, but I can't go near the house. I've heard they booby trap the remains of places they've destroyed, to stop looters. But that's not why I don't go. I can't bear to see the bodies inside.

They're all I had left. And they're all gone.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know where to go.

All I know is that I'm in danger here. I don't want to die too. I don't want to be like those bodies. I have to get away.

Somewhere.

Anywhere.

CHAPTER 2

monster

Some time later, I don't know how long, I'm standing at the side of a road. I don't remember getting here. I think I just walked until I ran out of grass. My ears are funny from the blast. Maybe I'm deaf. I don't care. My face hurts and I wish I could stop this *shaking*.

I think about trying to get a lift but the first car that approaches me slows down and then speeds up again. I see the round, frightened eyes of a woman and a young boy as they accelerate away and I realise I must look bad. When you see someone covered in blood and bruises these days, you look the other way. You don't offer lifts, even if it's just a girl like me. No one wants to bring trouble to their door.

I need to get out of sight. If I could just find somewhere to lie down so I can think properly.

I cross the road and keep walking towards more fields. There are cows in one and high fences all round so I have to go a long way around, through scratchy grass-like stuff that itches and covers me in tiny pods. I don't know what it is. I hate the countryside.

This makes me laugh. Me, of all people, being stranded in the countryside! I'm laughing really hard, so hard that my sides actually hurt and I'm gasping for breath and then it's not funny and I'm scaring myself a bit.

When I was little and stropping about something Mum would poke me in the side and tickle me until I laughed and forgot why I was upset. *Give me a smile, Kylaboo*, she would say. Oh no. Big mistake to think about Mum. Mum is dead too. Everybody is dead . . .

Just keep walking.

Keep walking.

Don't think.

Eventually I can see buildings ahead. I think it's a farm because of the big barns in grey metal. But as I said, I'm not big on country things. There's a fence along the back here. A large, red-brick house stands just beyond this area.

The fence is high, covered in spiked coils of barbed wire. Bound to be CCTV-ed up too. No way I can get in there. But still I walk towards the buildings. If I can only curl up somewhere for a while and rest, maybe clean up my face. I can't think at the moment. I need to lie down

for a bit. If only I could lie down . . .

When I get close to the fence I see that there is a tree just outside, branches spreading over towards the curly, vicious wire. Hope flares in me like a struck match. If there's one thing I can do, it's climb. It was the only reason Zander let me stay. He was the crime lord me and Jax lived with when Cal came into our lives. I was good for shimmying up buildings and getting through difficult spaces to get to his pickings.

There are engine-y rumbles from inside the grey barns and shouts from men working in there. I do a quick check for cameras. There's one on the fence that moves slowly from side to side like an unblinking eye. I crouch low and wait for it to turn the other way. Then I run, gasping and wincing at the pains in my body – face, side, hands – all the way to the tree. Heart hammering, I hide behind it and begin to climb up, using the lower branches and knobbly places as footholds. I slip a little, though, and the inside of my arm scrapes down the bark. I have to bite my lip to stop myself from crying out.

Soon I'm inside the rich, glossy leaves at the heart of the tree. All the rain has made everything bright green. That's what someone once would have said, anyway. It hurts my eyes. There's no place for beauty now.

I've got a good view of the yard, though. A large lorry is open at the back and a couple of small, pick-up type vehicles are moving pallets around. Men in overalls are shouting things out to each other. There's only, what, five of them? I'm sure I can slip past them.

I don't have a plan once I get in. I just want to lie down.

I crawl along a sturdy branch of the tree, inching my sore body forward. The leaves camouflage my dirty, tattered clothes. Soon I'm over the barbed wire. I've done this so many times I know not to look at the metal teeth that could chew my skin open. I twist and jump, thumping to the ground. I land on my feet, though, like a cat. Maybe I have nine lives. Maybe I'm on my ninth.

I'm in-between two of the barns. I sidle up to the wall towards the front to peek out.

One of the pick-ups is whirring away down to the left, taking boxes from the lorry. A tall, fat man is talking into a headset and gesturing to the guy driving. I look left and right. Across the way there's a lower building with horses poking long snouts out of windows. Stables. That'll do.

I run across the dirt, out in the open. All my nerve endings seem to shriek at the certainty of being caught. The door is open and I hurl myself inside. Horses shift and toss their heads back, checking me out. Quickly scanning the stables I see one stall at the end that seems to be free and run to it, throwing myself inside and pulling the door closed.

It stinks of horse poo in here and I wrinkle my nose. Pain flares in my cheek again and tears prick my eyes. But for the moment, I think I'm safe.

Live moment by moment. That's the only way. I learned that when Mum died of the pig-flu epidemic that killed off about a quarter of the country.

I stayed in our flat for a few weeks until they started clearing them out. Said they had to beat the infection there. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I had nowhere to live. I'd heard what happened to kids in care. Either you got recruited into the army, or . . . well, I heard worse stuff too, about ending up as slaves one way or another.

I sort of gave up for a day or two. And then I bumped into Jax, who used to live on the same floor. Hadn't paid much attention to him before, I guess. He'd lived with a foster mum who ended up being carted off for terrorist offences. He looked as lost as I felt. So we sort of hooked up. Learned to live on the streets, stealing to stay alive. That was before we met Zander and he took us on.

Anyway, the point is that I have lost everything before and I found a way to live. If I can force myself to think only about *the very next thing I need*, and not look at the big, scary picture, I can stop myself from going completely crazy. I've been through bad times before and I somehow survived. Can I get through this? I don't know yet. All I can do is clean my face and try to rest for a bit.

There's a sort of open metal box on the wall and when I look into it, I can see a thin puddle of greenish water. No good. But horses need fresh water, don't they? So there must be some in one of the other stalls.

The thought of going into an enclosed space with one of those hot, snorting monsters fills me with dread. I'll get kicked to death. And do they bite? I don't know, do I?

But I'm suddenly so thirsty I think I'll die without some water to drink, let alone to clean my face up with. Decisively, I push open the door again and listen. I can hear a beep-beep-beep outside. I reckon it's the lorry reversing out of the yard. I slip into the next stall where a massive, conker-brown horse eyes me with a starey, mad expression.

Horses are weird. Its eyes are messing with my head a bit. Like it can see inside. *Don't be stupid, Kyla . . .*

'Hey, horse,' I say, dumbly. My voice is all croaky and doesn't sound like me at all. My cheek hurts when I talk. 'Good boy. Nice horsey. Gonna share a drink with me, yeah? Good horsey.'

The stall stinks of hot animal sweat and worse. For a second I'm overwhelmed by the size of this muscle machine. It seems to fill the space. The metal water container is on the side in this stall, rather than at the front. It's right by the bloody horse. I gently edge forwards. The horse makes a snorty-snuffly noise and its nostrils flare in a scary way. Its head is up and it shifts its big heavy feet. Maybe this is what horses do right before they charge at you . . .

'Nice horsey, nice horsey, just share a little drinkie with old Kyla, OK?' I'm mumbling all sorts of rubbish as I edge towards the water box. The horse snuffles again and steps back, away from me. Maybe it's scared of *me*? This gives me confidence for half a second until I realise what it would be like if this enormous, snorting monster panicked in such a small space. I picture myself trampled to death and my heart rate kicks up a few notches.

But I force myself to take another couple of steps before reaching a shaky hand into the metal box. There is water in there but it's warm and yucky. There's probably horse spit in it and the thought makes me gag. But I'm so thirsty I reach over anyway and splash some onto my face, never letting my eyes stray from the horse's. We're eyeballing each other now. The water doesn't smell or anything and I ignore the bits of straw in there, cupping my hands to slosh the warm wetness in the general direction of my mouth. It only makes me more thirsty and before I know what I'm doing, I've dipped my whole face in to drink, like I'm a horse too.

My face screams with pain. Maybe I'm really badly hurt. Oh God, what if the wound gets infected? Antibiotics are more precious than gold these days. The ones Cal gave me for my chest before have all gone now. I *have* to get my cheek clean. I plunge my face into the box and frantically rub until the water swirls pink.

After a bit I stop and edge slowly backwards from the stall. The horse dips its head and, for a crazy second, I think it's saying goodbye. This makes me want to cry and I have to bite down on my hand to stop myself.

I slip back out of the door and into the next stall. I bunch the straw up as high as it will go just inside the door, hoping that anyone giving a brief glance over won't see me unless they look carefully. Trembling all over, I drop down and cover myself.

It's like being jabbed with a thousand needles and all the

scratches I hadn't noticed before on my arms suddenly hurt like hell. I thought it would be sweet-smelling, soft and comfortable. Let me tell you, straw is nothing like that. Must have got the romantic view from those stories Mum used to read from her Bible, the one her own mum brought from Jamaica all those years ago.

I'm so tired that, even with the itching and the horse pooey smells and the pain in my face, I think I can sleep. I close my eyes and try to make myself small, drawing my knees up like I'm a baby again. The images rattle through my head straight away: the helicopters with the beating blades, the explosion, the feeling of the hard dirt against my face. They play over and over and I can't stop them coming.

'I'm so sorry,' I whisper through my dry, sore lips. Maybe I made it happen. I was jealous and now everyone's dead. This feels like poison inside me. I can never un-know it . . . I can never undo it . . .

Helicopter blades thump and then turn into wings flapping with a heartbeat rhythm. Black bird-like things closing in on me with their claws outstretched, with tattered, smoking wings.

But someone is here to help me now. A good angel. Blond, wavy hair curls around a small face with a pointy chin. Sparkly blue eyes with long sandy lashes. Freckles smattered across a cute, snub nose. A small pink tongue runs across pale, dry lips.

The face is right over mine.

Then I understand that I'm not dreaming. This is real.