

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a bright red coat and dark pants, is running away from the viewer across a snowy field. In the background, there is a red barn and snow-covered mountains under a pale sky with bare tree branches hanging down.

THE LINE BETWEEN

A THRILLER

TOSCA LEE

"Everything you want in a thriller." —Alex Kava,
New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Breaking Creed*

PRAISE FOR

THE
LINE
BETWEEN

“VERDICT: Lee’s perfectly crafted dystopian thriller will keep readers up all night and have them begging for a sequel.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“A tight, fast-paced thriller, with a winding, twisty plot and an intrepid protagonist.

—*Booklist*

“A fast-paced and deeply human story. Tosca Lee has put together a terrifying apocalyptic scenario, made all the more real through the eyes of a protagonist who comes to life on the page.”

—Patrick Lee, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Runner*

“*The Line Between* blurs the line between science fiction and terrifying real science. Tosca Lee gives us a cautionary tale that is beautifully written and deeply unnerving!”

—Jonathan Maberry, *New York Times* bestselling author of *V-Wars*

“The perfect blend of spellbinding and heart stopping, *The Line Between* is an absolute must-read. Tosca whips up a thriller that is emotionally wrenching yet utterly believable, the kind of story that is sure to leave readers breathless and begging for more. This well-written, carefully plotted tale is apocalyptic fiction at its finest!”

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“Everything you want in a thriller: suspense, intrigue, and, best of all, a truly captivating protagonist to cheer on. Throw in a white-knuckled race from Chicago to Colorado over back roads that this author obviously and respectfully knows well. This one’s a slam-dunk that’ll keep you reading, non-stop until the very last sentence.”

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“Tosca Lee’s *The Line Between* is terrifyingly close to a future reality. An utterly immersive tale of apocalyptic cult manipulation and all-too-possible infectious epidemics, this story will have readers holding their breath on every page and dearly wishing for their own basement survivalist shelter. Perfect, chilling entertainment.”

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“An edge-of-your-seat, nonstop, apocalyptic rollercoaster of a thriller! As only she can, Tosca Lee pulls the reader in and refuses to let go until the final heart-pounding page!”

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The Fourth Monkey

“Wynter’s daring escape draws the reader into a maze of intrigue and false realities, as a bona fide apocalypse grips humanity. This frighteningly topical page-turner from Tosca Lee is a wild ride that will leave you breathless.”

—Maria Frisk, producer, Radar Pictures

“A tremendous thrill-ride that is sure to linger long after you turn the last page. With compelling and memorable characters, this is a true run-for-your-life, end-of-the-world, amazingly realistic tale full of twists and turns that will have your heart pounding.”

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“Shades of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Walking Dead* blend together in an epic novel of depth and power. Tosca Lee’s *The Line Between* is a breathtaking story of a woman who rises above her own dark past to stop civilization from descending into madness. Brilliant.”

—K.J. Howe, international bestselling author of *Skyjack*

“Smartly written, tautly paced, with an utterly irresistible protagonist, *The Line Between* is pure exhilaration on a page.”

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“*The Line Between* is a nail-biter . . . one horrific thriller fans will want to read. The conflicting urges rampant in the story resonate with our world today, making this both a great read as well as a cautionary tale.”

—Nancy Kilpatrick, award-winning author of the
Thrones of Blood series

“*The Line Between* by Tosca Lee had me captivated from page one! I give this book five stars and plan to keep it in my bug-out bag, along with my MREs, first aid kit and Swiss Army knife.”

—Merrie Destefano, author of *Valiant*

“A true wordsmith, Tosca has crafted another page-turner, a nonstop thrill ride that will leave you breathless.”

—Steven James, bestselling author of *Every Wicked Man*

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**THE
LINE
BETWEEN**



TOSCA LEE

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For Jimmy and Julie.

I waited half a lifetime for the chance to say I love you.

*I've got a lot of tattling, breaking your stuff, and embarrassing
you in front of your friends to catch up on.*

prion

noun pri·on \' pri -, ən\

An infectious agent that causes proteins to misfold, causing progressive deterioration of the brain and nervous system in mammals, including humans. It is always fatal.

ALASKAN INTERIOR, JUNE

The farmer moved into the woods looking for his pigs.

“Jilly! Jilly!” he called. He’d named the sow after his first wife, who’d grown about as fat as the woolly Hungarian blonde, if not quite as hairy. But unlike his ex-wife, Jilly usually came when called, which meant it must be time. The sow was expecting her third litter, and for some reason beyond his understanding, every pig in the sounder had to traipse off into the forest with her to make the farrowing a community event.

He stepped over fallen tree trunks and bent to duck several others. There wasn’t a single tree in this patch that was plumb. “Drunken forest,” the climate change people called it—a more subtle sign of melting permafrost than the sinkholes in town. Aside from the new buckles in his road, he didn’t mind much; warm weather meant more growing days for his new garden. Soon as the pigs got

done rooting up this patch, he planned to clear the fallen trees and plant some vegetables. Just enough to beat back the high cost of fresh produce a little, maybe even sell some at the Tanana Valley farmers' market. Who knew—maybe in a year or two he'd look into growing some midnight sun cannabis.

"Jilly girl!" he called, nearly tripping over what he thought was a root until he recognized it for what it was: a bone. He squatted down, tugged, and came away with half a shoulder blade. Caribou, by the size of it. Thing still had gristle on it, leathery and black except where a hunk had been freshly torn away. God only knew how long that thing had been buried in the mud.

He stood up and kicked around, unearthing what was left of the carcass, which wasn't much. One thing he'd learned, the Mafia legend held true: a dead body wouldn't stand a chance against pigs. Nor did living chickens that wandered too close to the pen. He'd learned that the hard way.

He wandered deeper, hacking at the fallen trees with the shoulder blade until he finally found Jilly—and Romeo and Petunia and Walter—nestled in the pine needles with a fresh litter of blond-haired piglets. Ten in all. Well above the European average and two more than her last litter.

He patted Walter when he pushed his snout into the farmer's hand and let him have the shoulder blade, already doing the math in his head.

It was going to be a good year.

TWO DAYS LATER, the farmer found Petunia milling around the yard with a bloody stump for a tail. She ran when he tried to inspect the wound, and only Romeo came when called. The farmer's first

thought was that someone—or something—had terrorized the animals. A wolf, maybe, or even a bear.

After retrieving his shotgun from inside the house, he struck out for the wood.

He found Walter sprawled near the base of a leaning tree, snout bloody, corpse bloated. Just beyond him lay his prized sow Jilly, belly torn open, her piglets savaged around her.

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CHAPTER ONE

IOWA, SEPTEMBER

Conventional wisdom dictates that there's an insurmountable divide—an entire dimension of eternity and space—between Heaven and Hell. Lucifer managed to make the trip in nine days, at least according to *Paradise Lost*. That equates to a distance of about 25,920 miles, assuming standard rules of velocity.

But I can tell you it's closer to a foot and a half. The distance of a step.

Give or take an inch.

Magnus stands near the gatehouse, shirtsleeves rolled up, collar unbuttoned beneath his brown vest. He nods to the Guardian in the booth and the industrial gate begins its mechanical slide. There's a small door to the side of it just large enough to admit a single person, but I won't be leaving by the Narrow Gate. My departure must be a spectacle, a warning to those assembled behind me.

I can feel their eyes against my back like hot iron. The glares mottled by anger and fear. Sadness, maybe, but above all gratitude that they are not me.

Two Guardians stand at my sides ready to forcibly walk me out in case I balk or my twenty-two-year-old legs give out beneath me. I glance at the one to my right and swear he looks impatient. Hungry, maybe; it's just before lunchtime. I'm crossing into eternal damnation, and all he's thinking about is an egg salad sandwich—and not even a good one. It's Wednesday, Sabbath by the solar calendar. Rosella is managing the kitchen, and that pious sandwich is full of chickpeas without a single real egg in it.

The gate comes to a stop with an ominous clang. The road beyond is paved with gravel, a gray part in a sea of native grass strewn with gold and purple flowers in stark contrast to the carefully and beautifully manicured grounds behind me. A meadowlark sings somewhere nearby as a combine rumbles in the distance.

I grip the plastic bag of my sparse belongings: a change of underwear, my baby book stripped of its photos, a stone the color of sea glass. Sweat drips down the inside of my blouse as I stare out at that feral scape. At that barren drive through untouched prairie that leads to the road half a mile away.

A car idles at the corner, waiting for me.

Don't look. Don't glance back. That's Pride talking, a voice so faint this last decade I wasn't aware it was still in there. Still, I turn. Not because I need a parting glance at the compound I called home for the last fifteen years or even Jaclyn, my sister. But because I need to see *her*.

My niece, Truly.

I scan the nearly five hundred Select assembled across the broad drive until I find her small form near the front, her hand in Jaclyn's, curls wafting around her head in the breeze.

I'd planned to mouth the words *I love you*. To tug my right earlobe in our secret sign so she'll remember me long after she's told she can never speak my name again. To fight back tears at the sight of hers, to combat her confusion with love.

Instead, my heart stops.

She's glaring at me, her face pink, growing redder by the instant. I open my mouth—to say what, I don't know—but before I can, she tears her hand from my sister's and runs away, disappearing into the assembly.

"Truly!" I gasp, and stagger a step after her. The Guardians grab my arms.

"No. Wait—Truly!" I twist against them, plastic bag swinging against my thigh. I can't leave her like this. Not like this. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

None of it was.

I shift my gaze to my sister, where she stands beside the six Elders. Her cheeks are hollow, features chiseled far beyond her twenty-seven years.

"What did you say to her?" I shout as I'm jerked back around and hauled toward Magnus, who stands before the open gate, this side of that invisible line.

"Wynter Roth," Magnus says, loudly enough for those behind us to hear. Which means he's basically shouting right at me. Gone, the brown-and-gray scruff that was on his chin yesterday. I can smell his aftershave from here.

"Please," I whisper in the space between us, trying to snag his gaze. But he stares past me as though I were a stranger.

"Because of your deliberate, prolonged disobedience . . ." His words carry to those behind me even as the breeze whisks mine away.

“Just let me say good-bye!”

“... including the sins of idolatry, thievery, and the willful desire to harm the eternal future of those most vulnerable among us . . . because you will not hear the pleas of the brethren and refuse repentance, you are hereby delivered to Satan for the destruction of your flesh.”

I hear the words as though from a distance. I’ve seen and heard them spoken before—I just never thought they’d be aimed at me. So this is it. There will be no good-byes. And I realize I hate him.

Magnus lifts up his hands. “And so we renounce your fellowship and cast you out of our holy number even as we pray for the restoration of your salvation, which you forfeit this day. Now, as it is bound on Earth, so let it be bound in Heaven.” He lowers his arms as the assembly echoes his words and says, more quietly as he meets my eyes at last, “You have broken our hearts, Wynter.”

He moves away before I can respond and the Guardians walk me to the line as I glance back one last time.

But Truly is gone.

I face the gravel drive before me.

One step. That’s all it takes to span the distance of eternity.

Welcome to Hell.

CHAPTER TWO

An eye in the corner blinked from above Jaclyn's bed. "Are people spying on us? Are they gonna watch us in our underwear?" Jaclyn asked, squinting at it skeptically. She was twelve—five years older than me—and worried about these things.

Now that she mentioned it, so was I.

"No, of course not," Mom said as she got down in front of us to take both our hands. "That camera is here for our protection, just like the big walls all around this place. Which is why you never need to be afraid of monsters ever again. Got it?"

Jaclyn looked unconvinced but kept her mouth shut as she reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind Mom's ear.

"Now, isn't this place cute?" Mom said, getting up. We followed her out of the bedroom and down the stairs past a picture of Jesus and some other guy as she admired the carved wooden railing, the doily on an end table in the living room below. "See? There's another

camera.” She pointed at the blinking light in the corner and waved at it. I did, too.

“This feels like a grandma house,” Jaclyn said, hugging herself.

“It’s part of the charm,” Mom said. “Look at these braided rugs. I bet someone here made these just for us. Did you know this is a working seed farm?”

Jaclyn plopped down in a wooden chair. “There’s no TV. And the toilets are weird.”

“I like it,” I said. Because it was bigger than our apartment. And I had my own bed.

“I do, too,” Mom said as I followed her into the tiny kitchen where she opened the only cupboard. “And look—homemade jelly!” She took out the jar and showed me the handwritten label. “Wild plum!”

I’d never seen her like this, so excited about jelly or the cloth bundle that turned out to be a loaf of bread. I didn’t like the look of it; it wasn’t sliced or even in a bag. But as she searched through the drawers for a knife, she was smiling. I couldn’t remember the last time she hadn’t looked sad.

That afternoon two girls Jaclyn’s age came over to hang out with her. They brought a girl my age named Ara, who was nicer that day than my best friend in Chicago had been my entire life.

That night when Mom made us kneel by our beds, I prayed we could stay forever.

NEXT MORNING, MOM put on her going-out clothes.

“Why are you dressed up?” Jaclyn asked, arms crossed.

“I’ve got a meeting with the Elders,” Mom said, tugging her denim skirt down until the hem covered her knees.

Ara, who had shown up with a little basket of brown eggs for our breakfast, stood silently by, a doll made out of a handkerchief in her hands. It bothered me a little, that it had no face.

“Better?” Mom asked, glancing at her.

Ara nodded.

“That looks dorky,” Jaclyn said.

Mom untucked her blouse, hiding the waistband hugging her hips. “There. Now, listen to your new friends while I’m gone. This place has rules and we don’t want to do anything wrong. You won’t let Wynter get into trouble, will you, Ara?”

Ara shook her head.

Mom kissed us both and left as Jaclyn’s new friends arrived.

The minute she did, Ara sat down on my bed near the nightstand I had set up to display my most treasured possessions: my *Fancy Nancy* and *Amelia Bedelia* books propped up by my pink piggy bank and a soup bowl from the kitchen containing my barrettes and hair ties in a happy riot of color. Leaning over the bowl, Ara reached in and started examining them, one at a time.

“You want me to put one in your hair?” I offered. Hers was braided the same way it had been yesterday, tied by a rubber band too tough for the fine strands falling down around her face like a halo. I plucked the pink butterfly from her palm. “How ’bout this?”

Ara shook her head.

“This one?” I asked, choosing another.

She shook her head again.

I went through them all. She refused each one.

“Okay . . .” I said, feeling slightly rebuffed at my offer of friendship. “Wanna read a book?”

She peered curiously at my piggy bank. But when I picked it up

and suggested we dump it out and count the coins in it, she pulled away.

“Let’s go to the Banquet Table,” she said, reaching for my hand. “Haven made ice cream.”

I didn’t know what the Banquet Table was but thought ice cream sounded good. I followed her downstairs, where one of the older girls was showing Jaclyn how to hold a guitar.

“Stay out of trouble,” my sister mumbled, barely looking at me.

Outside, we skipped all the way up the garden path toward the chapel. I’d already decided that this place was a cross between a farm and what I imagined church camp to be like, with long houses Ara called “barrows” and a church in the middle. I pointed to a large metal building in the distance.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Where they package the seed orders,” Ara said. “Children aren’t allowed. Come on.”

The Banquet Table turned out to be a big building filled with long tables and a giant stone fireplace. Ara took me straight into the kitchen where a lady with an accent smiled and wiped her hands on her apron before introducing herself like I was someone important.

“You two take a seat,” she said, glancing around as though it were a secret. We went out and sat across from each other, Ara’s faceless doll staring up at the ceiling as Haven brought out two little dishes of tan-colored ice cream and spoons.

I picked up the spoon and hesitated. I’d never seen ice cream that color.

“It’s pumpkin,” Haven said, beaming. “Well, go on.”

I thought it tasted weird—Jaclyn definitely wouldn’t like it—but decided it was delicious because I was eating it with my new best friend.

“There’s kittens in the barn,” Ara said when I finally finished. “Want to see them?”

I did, very much, having never had a pet in my life.

On the way there we passed yet another long barrow where a mom was singing with a group of little kids on the front porch. As I watched, she looked up and put her hands together like she was praying. I glanced at Ara for an explanation and noticed her doing it, too. But she was facing the other way.

Then I noticed the man walking past us. He was tall, with curly dark hair. His long shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow and he carried a laptop under one arm. When he saw me he stopped, and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled.

“Well, you must be Wynter,” he said, leaning down. I nodded. “Did you have some ice cream?”

I nodded again.

He glanced around as though to make sure no one was listening. “Say, did you leave any for me?”

I grinned and shook my head.

He chuckled and patted me on the shoulder. “Smart girl.” He gestured me closer. When I leaned in, he cupped his hand to my ear. “Be sure Ara shows you the rope swing, okay?”

I grinned and nodded.

He straightened, and Ara put her hands together again. And because Ara did it, I did it, too.

“Who’s that?” I asked when he was gone.

“That’s Magnus,” she whispered.

OUR THIRD MORNING at the Enclave we went to church even though it wasn’t Sunday, which Jaclyn said was weird. But she liked

her new friends, all of whom were homeschooled, and she had already learned to play a few chords on the guitar—a thing for which she was treated like some kind of genius, though I didn't think it looked so hard.

That day was the second time I saw Magnus, who I now understood was the preacher, except they didn't call him that. He read from the Bible about the Garden of Eden and talked about how special everyone here was, how bad the world was, and some other things I didn't understand.

What I did understand was that he looked strong. Like a baseball player, I thought. Like someone who knew how to fold perfect paper airplanes and have a job. Who smiled and talked to me like he was glad I was here. Like a man who wouldn't make Mom cry.

When he was finished he said our names and we stood up and everyone nearby hugged us.

We started going to morning service, which was led by a different man each day except on Sabbath Wednesday. None of them had eyes that sparkled like Magnus's—but by then Jaclyn had a crush on one of the boys and he attended service, so she wasn't any help convincing Mom to let us stay home. Jaclyn had become instantly popular, which she had never been back in Chicago. So had I. In fact, I had so many friends who came to our house after children's session to play or take turns braiding my hair like theirs that we could barely all sit on my bed at once.

We spent the last days of summer playing with the kittens, eating raw rhubarb straight from the garden and peaches right off the trees. I forgot about the cartoons I loved so much as I learned prayers and the songs that everyone clapped to at service, and never once missed the noise of the train that clacked by our apartment. Though I did miss pepperoni pizza—a confession that

caused Ara to wrinkle her nose and, I suspect, prompted the lesson in children's session the next morning about why we should never allow death to enter our bodies or eat the grains of the fallen world. How the eggs and wheat allowed to guests were forbidden to God's Select.

My cheeks burned as the teacher read a volume of the Testament written by Magnus himself about eating the flesh of animals. Humiliated tears welled in my eyes until Ara and the teacher both hugged me and said how very good it was that I was learning to live the way God intended.

And I did want it, more than anything. Because there had been no safe walls in Chicago except those that kept the monsters inside.

A month after our arrival at the Enclave, Mom cleaned and tidied the house all morning, saying we were going to have a visitor. And I thought it must be someone really special since everyone else just showed up whenever they wanted.

I hoped it was Magnus and said so.

"It's his wife, Kestral," Mom said, fussing with the braid she, too, had begun to wear. But I was strangely disappointed to learn Magnus was married.

When Kestral showed up, I was surprised to recognize her as the woman I had seen singing in service onstage. Every time I thought she looked like an angel. From her white skirt and blouse to her blond hair, I thought she was magical. She moved like a princess, as though she had never worried about anything in her life—a look I had never seen in my mom until recently.

"Sylvia," Kestral said, kissing Mom on the cheek. "Girls." She smiled, her blue eyes shining. "I have something very exciting to talk to you about."

She slipped out of her shoes and came to sit down on the sofa, holding Mom's hand.

"I'm so happy. Do you know why?" she asked, looking from Jaclyn to me. "Because here at New Earth we are a very special family. And we want *you* to be part of our family. We want you to stay!"

Jaclyn sat up straight and looked at Mom, who held a finger to her lips so Kestral could finish.

"This is a very special decision. Because if you say yes, the girls you play with will be your sisters. Would you like that?"

"And you'd be like our mom, too?" Jaclyn asked.

Kestral laughed. "Something like that. Or a big sister."

But all I heard was that if Kestral would be like another mom to us, then Magnus would be like our dad.

"And one day"—Kestral gave that beatific smile of hers—"if we are obedient to the Testament of our Interpreter, Magnus, we will all be together forever."

"In Heaven?" I asked.

"In the new Earth, which is what Heaven will be."

"But aren't we already in New Earth?" Jaclyn said, looking confused. I was, too. Because I'd seen the sign outside the gate when we got here.

"That's a very good question! And the answer is that we call our home New Earth because we know that it is coming. Girls, this sick and ruined world is ending very soon and only a select number of people will get to live in the new one. Do you understand?"

No. I didn't. But as I watched Kestral's fingers tighten around Mom's and the hope brimming in Mom's eyes, I understood enough.

"I want to stay," Jaclyn said. "Mom, can we?"

Kestral raised a finger. "One thing you need to know about our family," she said soberly, "is that we choose to lay down things of the

old world that might keep us from entering that new place. We don't do it because of rules—I don't like rules, do you?"

We shook our heads.

"We do it because we want to be ready. Because on the day that this world ends, it will be too late. So you see why this is such an important decision. The most important one you'll ever make in your life."

"I want to stay, too," I whispered.

"All right," Kestral said as Mom wiped her eyes with a smile on her face. "I need you to show me you no longer want to be a part of the dying world."

"How?" Jaclyn said.

"Let's go upstairs," Kestral said, reaching out to take me by the hand.

We all went up together to the bedroom with the blinking eye where Kestral walked to the closet and lifted one of Jaclyn's Star Wars T-shirts from the shelf.

"Jaclyn, we don't wear clothes that glorify worldly entertainment," Kestral said. "Nor do we wear clothing that is immodest or tempts our brothers. Nor do we dress like a man. We're honored to be women and for our brothers to treat us with respect. See how pretty your mother looks?"

That's when I realized Mom had quit wearing her denim skirt that she had to tug down to her hips to cover her knees. Or her jeans. I didn't know where she got the skirt she was wearing now, but I thought she looked a little like Kestral in it.

"If you want to be part of our family," Kestral said, "you can take all these things out to the salvage pile yourself . . . or you can give them to your mother to take there for you."

Jaclyn lowered her head and walked into the closet and slowly started pulling things from the shelves.

I couldn't believe it. Jackie loved Star Wars—had been obsessed with it as long as I could remember. But a moment later she somberly handed over an armful of clothes that amounted to nearly everything she had brought in her duffle.

Kestral leaned over and kissed Jaclyn on the forehead. "Bless you for choosing the way of life," she said.

They went through all of Jaclyn's belongings. Her sixth-grade yearbook, which she no longer needed because she had new friends who were real family now. A girl wouldn't keep a picture of an old boyfriend around once she got married, would she? It had to go. Her headphones and iPod, because we were called to make holy music. Her tennis shoes, because they weren't feminine.

"For all of these things, you'll receive so much more," Kestral said as Mom got out a trash bin and helped pile the things in.

When it was my turn, Kestral looked at my nightstand. "Wynter, how does *Fancy Nancy* fit into our heavenly family?"

"It doesn't?" I guessed.

No, Kestral said, because dresses and jewelry did not make us beautiful. And wasn't that a nice thought?

I wasn't so sure, but I handed over the book and *Amelia Bedelia* as well, because I figured there was something wrong with it, too.

"And this," Kestral said, pointing to my piggy bank. "Do you know what this is?"

I frowned. "My piggy bank."

"That's what the world wants you to think. But the world is an evil place that lies to children."

"My mom gave it to me."

"And to moms," Kestral said with a glance at Mom.

"If it isn't a piggy bank, what is it?" Jaclyn said.

“Magnus has taught us that this is an altar. But not to God. To Mammon, the false god of greed.”

My books, clothes, hair things, and shoes had filled a second trash bin by the time I carried my piggy bank outside to smash it with a hammer Kestral gave me from the kitchen.

Now I understood why Ara had never wanted to wear my barrettes or play with my things. And even though I knew it was a small price to pay to see Mom happy, I couldn’t stop my lower lip from trembling as I turned over the coins to Kestral to be given to the Important Work.

Afterward, Kestral knelt down and took our hands. “It’s never easy to cut worldly ties in our journey to be worthy,” she said, brushing the tears off my cheeks. “But the *good* news is that it will never be this hard again. Your new sisters will bring you fresh clothes and new toys. Because we share everything we have, you never have to feel jealous of anyone ever again—especially those living in destruction. But more than that, and above everything else . . . it means you’re *home*.”

At that, Jaclyn started crying uncontrollably. I was embarrassed for her and then for myself. But even then I sensed Jaclyn was coming from a place I was not old enough to understand.

Kestral got up and clasped Jaclyn tight, her cheek against my sister’s hair. “Everything is going to be perfect. And one day, so will you. Thank you,” she said, though I didn’t know what she was thanking us for.

Kestral let me keep the tissues, saying that when they were gone I’d have a nice clean handkerchief to keep in my pocket. Which meant I’d be carrying my boogers in there as well, though I didn’t say so. If it kept us safe and Jaclyn from crying those horrible, broken tears, I could do that, too.

That night we said our prayers on the upstairs landing beneath the picture of Jesus and the man I now knew to be Magnus.

Three weeks later, we moved into the barrows. The guest cottage was needed to house a new family. When they showed up—a mom and dad and three boys—the ice cream, which had gone away after our decision, resurfaced again for a few days. But only for the kids who went to play with them, which is why I welcomed the youngest boy with open arms.

That fall, Jaclyn was relocated to the young women's dormitory and I to the girls'. Mom moved to a barrow for single women that everyone called the Factory. We weren't allowed to visit.

Which is why I didn't know when Mom got sick.

CHAPTER THREE

The meadowlark is still singing as my soles crunch against the gravel. The wildflowers look the same as they did ten minutes ago or on any of my rare excursions into Ames while I was still protected by the invisible bubble of my salvation. The sun is shining, promising temperatures in the seventies. By all accounts, it's a beautiful day.

Of course it is. The world is filled with deceptive beauty.

Magnus's words.

But the only beautiful thing I know is trapped behind those walls.

I stop and turn as the gate begins to grind shut. Watch as that nondescript wall cuts off my view of the parking lot and the admin building behind it, traveling across the assembled brethren like an iron curtain. Until there's just Magnus, his back to me as he walks up the drive to put an arm around Jaclyn, my sister.

His wife.

Others come to embrace them both and someone starts up a hymn as they head up the hill to lunch.

The gate rumbles shut with the finality of a vault. I stare at it for a long minute. Wait for the earth to swallow me. Lightning to fry me from the inside.

My stomach grumbles. The meadowlark sings.

I start down the drive toward the road where a woman is getting out of that car. As I get closer, I falter and then break into a run, the plastic bag crinkling with every beat against my thigh.

Mom's former best friend, Julie, grabs me into a hug. "Got you," she says. "I got you."

I shudder a sob I didn't know I had in me. It sounds like a strangling person trying to breathe.

". . . told your mom she was making a huge mistake," she whispers fiercely against my hair. "Argued with her the whole time she was driving to that crazy place . . ." She holds me away from her and looks me up and down. "Never mind. You're safe now. God, you look so much like her. Are you all right?"

I nod numbly.

"Let's get out of here," she says, hustling me toward the car with a glance over her shoulder. "I don't trust those people not to change their minds. Can't believe your sister—no, sit up front. Are you hungry? You look hungry."

I get in and realize there's a teenage girl slouched behind the driver's seat in a tank top and shorts, tapping at her phone. She's wearing a big pair of headphones over a sloppy grass-green ponytail. When she glances up, she tugs them down to her neck.

"Hey," she says.

I glance back at that wall as the car pulls away. Some invisible cord between Truly and me is pulling tight, tighter, until I think I might scream.

"Wynter, this is Lauren, the boys' half sister. She's sixteen."

The boys. Half sister. I parse her words as though through a fog until I realize she's talking about *her* boys, with whom Jackie and I used to play on weekends—or any other time Mom could shuttle us out of the apartment to Julie's house, which had everything we did not. Video games. The Cartoon Network. Popsicles and smoke bombs on the Fourth of July—a holiday I haven't celebrated since the summer they moved away and my world went dark a year before we arrived at the Enclave.

"Lauren was born in Atlanta, where we moved with Ken, her dad, after my divorce. You remember Ken? We've been married for fifteen years."

I can't help it. I keep hearing what Magnus would say about Lauren's shorts, the tank top, the hair. About Julie's divorce and remarriage, Lauren's birth before that marriage. The charm bracelet dangling from Julie's wrist as she drives. About the charms themselves.

Tinny music drifts from Lauren's headphones. I strain to listen, if only to shut Magnus up.

Or is this what it means to be in Hell—having to hear and see Magnus in everything?

"So what's it like?" Lauren says.

"What's what like?" I ask.

"Being in a cult."

"Lauren!" Julie says, glancing in the rearview mirror.

"What? That's what you called it," Lauren says.

Julie holds up her hand. "Lauren Zandt. Not another word."

Cult.

I know the word. Had been warned one of the few times I helped out at the farmers' market I might hear this worldly lie. That I ought to count the derision of anyone not one of us as a badge of

honor. It hadn't kept my cheeks from burning when I saw the way other teenagers looked at us—as Lauren is now.

I turn in the seat, but when I look back, the walls are gone, swallowed by the horizon.

Several miles later Julie pulls into a diner. There's a TV on in the corner and the red booths remind me of the times we went to Denny's when I was little. How we'd stopped there on the drive to Iowa for a "nice" dinner, Mom saying, "Better have a cheeseburger. Who knows when we'll get one again." Which I did.

The thought nauseates me now. The smell of the kitchen—all greasy meat and frying potatoes—does, too.

I stare at the laminated menu on the table, but all I see is the last look on Truly's face.

"Wynter, hon?" Julie says. "What would you like?"

I realize the waitress is there, that everyone's waiting on me.

"Do you have anything without grain or dairy?" I ask the waitress, noting her pierced nose, the tattoo on her inner wrist. Her pink lipstick.

She squints up at the ceiling. "Pot roast, roasted chicken . . ."

"Or meat?"

"Salad?" She shrugs.

"Salad, please."

"Hold on. Give us a minute, will you?" Julie says to the waitress. When she's gone, Julie leans across the table and says, quietly, "Sweetie, you have to eat more than that. You're skin and bones the way it is."

"Are you like vegan or something?" Lauren asks.

"Look!" Julie points at the menu. "Soup. How 'bout soup? Right here: black bean and rice."

But something else has caught my eye. "Can I have some ice cream?" I ask.

“Yes!” Julie says and slaps the menu. “Thank God. All right, we’re ready.” She waves the waitress over. I watch her as she orders; she’s changed. She’s prettier than I remember, the hollows around her eyes gone despite the fact that she used to be heavier. Her hair’s lighter, practically blond. Sunglasses perch on the top of her head and I think, for a minute, that she looks like some kind of movie star.

A beautiful deception . . .

Shut up.

I excuse myself to wash my hands. Inside the bathroom, I hesitate before drying them on a paper towel. And then, when I do, I take a second and then a third. Stuff a fourth in my pocket, just because I can.

I cover my fingers with my sleeve before opening the door.

Over a lunch of chocolate ice cream—I try not to stare at Julie’s grilled cheese—I ask how they got here so fast from Atlanta.

“Oh, we moved back five years ago,” Julie says. “We’re in Naperville now, just a half hour from Chicago.”

“It sucks,” Lauren says.

Julie levels a look at her before turning to me. “So. Tell me about your mom.”

I poke at the ice cream, which is a lot sweeter than I remember. I keep looking around, I don’t know what for. Black-clad Guardians come to drag me back, maybe. Given how sideways this whole thing went, I’m not sure I wouldn’t let them take me.

“She got sick,” I say.

“When was this?”

“I was twelve. So ten years ago, I guess.”

Julie pushes her fries toward me. I take one, nibble the end of it, and then drag it through my melted ice cream like I used to do when

I was a kid. And for a minute, I swear I can smell cherry Popsicles and bean burritos.

“What did she have? Did they tell you?”

“They said her spirit was sick from the time she’d spent in the world before we got there.”

Julie puts down her fork with a loud clang and a call on Jesus Christ that is not a prayer.

“Wynter, listen to me. People get sick. Period. It just happens. It’s germs, not the Devil. Or stress. God only knows how much of that she’s endured in her life. Did they even take her to a doctor?”

“I don’t know.”

I remember the morning Mom was missing from service. I asked my dorm warden and then Jaclyn where she was. No one would tell me. I finally went to the administrative office looking for answers—only to be hauled out by a Guardian and marched to Percepta Hall, where I spent the rest of the night in Penitence.

Three days later one of the girls whispered that Mom was back. But I wasn’t allowed to see her.

“Did they treat her with anything at all? Did they even give her the choice?” Julie asks angrily.

You shall not take the sick to the sick to be healed, but they will live among the well and be restored.

Suddenly I’m no longer hungry. “They said I had to pray that she’d confess whatever was keeping her from getting better and search my own heart for sin. That if I did that, I could save her.”

Lauren gapes and Julie closes her eyes for a brief moment before saying, “Honey, you know that’s not possible. Right?”

I nod. I don’t say that I turned myself over to Penitence and fasted there for a week in solitude, combing through each detail

of my life until I had written down every possible thing I had ever done wrong—from the time I drew a face on Ara's doll to the time I rigged it with a bunch of thread I filched from one of the older girls' tatting baskets and casually told her it looked possessed. After which I'd disappeared around the corner from where it was perched on Ara's bed to pull the little threads like a demonic puppet master. Ara's scream had brought both of the girls' wardens running for the dorm at full speed—until one of them tripped and went sprawling across the floor and cut her chin. The whole thing landed me my first night in Penitence, during which I screamed and kicked the door and had not prayed once, which I also duly noted.

I had confessed that I missed cake with icing, hated learning to can tomatoes, and daydreamed during service about kissing boys, whom I listed in order.

I confessed that I had taught one of the other girls a Bon Jovi song and reenacted scenes from *Pinky and the Brain* when we were supposed to be cleaning and had covertly farted on Ara's pillow—numerous times—for making it her mission in life to report any infraction of mine she could ever since the Satanic doll incident.

I don't say that I declared it all before the six Elders upon my reemergence: twenty-three pages of sins—in deed, thought, or imagined—read with shaking hands and shameful tears. And though I knew it would lose me the friendship of those implicated in the process, I did it, convinced I had completed the work that would save my mother's life.

I don't say that the moment I finished, I knew my mother would be healed. That I felt reborn by the experience and fasted an extra day, I was so light and full of gratitude afterward.

I couldn't wait to see my mother, tell her that she was going to be fine. Which is why I waited so patiently when they told me she was resting. I believed she was recovering her strength.

"So what happened?" Julie asks.

"She died." Short, insufficient words.

Julie looks away, her chin quivering as Lauren's eyes dart between us. A few seconds later Julie dabs at her lashes with the crease of her napkin, and then reaches across the table to take my hands.

She hasn't washed hers in all this time. Not even once.

"Now, you listen to me," she says. "It isn't your fault. None of it. If it's anyone's fault, it's your mom's for taking you all to that place—no. Forget I said that. That's not fair, no matter how much I disagreed with her decision. She didn't want to go to a shelter and wouldn't come to Atlanta. She said it was the first place Nate would look, which was probably true. But I kick myself all the time for not just driving up to get you girls and telling her to get her ass in the car."

Nate.

It's the first time I've heard my father's name in fifteen years.

"Which reminds me," Julie says, squeezing my fingers, "I need to tell you something. Your father passed away a couple years ago."

"How?" I hear myself ask.

"Shot himself in the head."

Suicide. A damning offense. As though Nate hadn't committed enough already.

"I wish I could say I'm sorry, but I'm not," Julie says, her lips set in a tight line. "The minute one of your old neighbors emailed me I tried to get a message to your mom. I was hoping once she knew she'd have the courage to start over on her own. You can imagine my shock when they said she had passed away."

She lets me go to swipe at an eye, smudging her mascara. “And no one would let me talk to either one of you girls. Said you didn’t want any contact with anyone from your past.” She lets out an angry, ragged breath. “Which I knew wasn’t true!”

But she’s wrong. Two years ago, I wouldn’t have taken that call. Because even though I missed Julie, I still believed. Could still chalk up the inconsistencies around me to my own lack of understanding or misguided nature. Because it was far easier to rationalize what didn’t make sense than accept the truth glaring me in the eye.

And because Jaclyn—and Truly—were all I had left.

“I even consulted an attorney who specializes in this kind of thing,” Julie says. “But of course neither one of you was a minor anymore.”

My head snaps up. “Jackie has a daughter.”

Julie blinks. “She does? How old?”

“Four. Can the lawyer get her out?”

Julie sighs. “Honey, no one’s going to take her from her parents without some proof of endangerment or abuse. Has anyone hurt her? Has she been molested? You know—touched inappropriately?”

But no one would dare harm the daughter of Magnus. I shake my head.

“What’d you do, anyway?” Lauren asks.

“About what?”

“To get kicked out.”

I feel their gazes—Lauren’s, watching me as though I might sprout a second head, Julie’s sharp curiosity primed for outrage.

But I can’t talk about the last four weeks. “I quit believing.”

“Well, thank God you’ve always been able to think for yourself. We’ll just have to pray Jackie comes to her senses. Meanwhile, you’re lucky you got out.”

Lucky. It's a forbidden word. Am I lucky?

No. I'm free, with no sense of up or down. With no money to my name and everything I own in a plastic bag on the front seat of Julie's car. Without family, a home, or any idea how to function in the outside world.

Not so lucky then.

The waitress pauses at the booth across from ours, coffeepot forgotten in her hand as she stares at the TV. I follow her gaze to live footage of three people standing on top of a parking garage.

"Turn that up?" she calls to another waitress.

A younger woman in an identical black apron grabs the remote from the counter and punches up the volume until the announcer's voice reaches our booth.

"... in downtown Chicago where a couple and their unidentified nanny have told authorities they're teaching their children to fly," the announcer says, clearly baffled. "A truly bizarre and horrifying scene . . ."

"What is *wrong* with people?" Julie says, shaking her head.

"Probably drugs," Lauren mutters.

I cannot make sense of anything I'm seeing, even as a family photo flashes across the screen—of the couple on the garage, I assume. They're smiling and wearing matching white, from the blond mom and darker-skinned, laughing dad to the adolescent girl and younger boy—who's got his arm around a German shepherd.

All of a sudden, the announcer's voice raises in pitch. The picture disappears and returns to live feed—just in time to show one of the figures soaring out from the ledge of the garage in a swan dive. Julie gasps and the waitress screams, coffee splashing in the pot as the feed cuts back to the anchor.

"Oh, my God!" Lauren says, yanking her headphones off.

“Excuse me, miss?” Julie says, trying to get the attention of the waitress as a few patrons come over to get a better view of the TV. “Can you turn the channel? My girls don’t need to see this.”

The waitress turns. “Is that what they said? They’re trying to teach their children to fly?”

Behind her, the TV abruptly goes dark—along with all the lights in the restaurant. The waitress glances up, curses, and strides off toward the kitchen.

“What happened?” Lauren says, looking around.

“Who knows,” Julie murmurs, pulling her wallet from her purse. “But we’re leaving.” She plops down some bills on the table.

I slide from the booth, palms sweaty, my fingers cold.

“Does—does stuff like that happen often?” I ask when we’re back inside the car. I can’t not see the image of that swan dive, playing over and over again in my mind.

What kind of world have I returned to?

“The power?” Julie asks, glancing at the screen on her dash as we back out.

“No,” I say. I’ve been accustomed to power outages at the Enclave during storms, though right now the sun is streaming through the window. “The people on the news.”

“More and more, it seems. If it’s not some crazy idiot, it’s a nut job with a gun.”

“Or terrorists,” Lauren volunteers from the back seat.

“Like I said,” Julie says. “Nut job with a gun.”

“Or someone trying to dance in traffic,” Lauren adds.

“What?” I say.

Julie chuffs and rolls her eyes. “Some lunatic decided to moonwalk down highway 59 and got run over. Not by me—thank God—but it happened while I was out buying things for the guesthouse.

Shut traffic down for an hour, and of course the car was on empty because someone didn't fill it up when she used it to drive to a concert"—she glances in the rearview mirror—"and I ran out of gas and had to call AAA . . ."

"I said I'm sorry!" Lauren says.

"And I said you're not borrowing the car for a week."

I glance between them. Someone got killed on the highway and, according to all I've been taught, is writhing in Hell this very moment . . . and they're bickering about how inconvenient it was?

But that was horror on their faces back at the diner. Which means this kind of thing can't be normal.

"Wait," I say slowly. "How did you make it to Iowa by noon?"

"That was yesterday, or we wouldn't have," Julie says.

"But I only called this morning." It was the first time I'd dialed a phone in fifteen years, and I hadn't even known who'd be on the other end of the number written in my file.

Julie glances at me and then back at the road, brows drawn together. "Hon, I got a voicemail three days ago that you were going to need a place to stay for a while."

"What?" Three days ago I hadn't even been turned in yet. "From who?"

"Your sister, Jaclyn."

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