

A young woman with blonde hair is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the left. She is surrounded by white cherry blossoms on dark branches. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

**'Clever, moving,
and incredibly addictive'
*Heat on Delirium***

Hana

A Delirium Short Story

from the author of *Before I Fall*

LAUREN OLIVER



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Before I Fall
Delirium

For younger readers
Liesl & Po

HANA

A Delirium Short Story

Lauren Oliver



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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

Ebook ISBN 978 1 444 73992 3

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

one

When I was a little kid, my favorite thing about winter was sledding. Every time it snowed, I would convince Lena to meet me at the bottom of Coronet Hill, just west of Back Cove, and together we would trek through soft mounds of new powder, our breath coming in clouds, our plastic sleds sliding soundlessly behind us while hanging icicles refracted the sunlight and turned the world new and dazzling.

From the top of the hill, we could see all the way past the smudgy line of low brick buildings huddled together by the wharves and across the bay to the white-capped islands just off the coast--Little Diamond Island; Peaks Island, with its stiff-necked guard tower--past the massive patrol boats that trudged through the sleet-gray water on their way to other ports; all the way to open ocean, distant flashes of it winking and dancing close to the horizon.

"Today I'm going to go to China!" I'd trumpet out into the quiet.

And Lena would go as pale as the snow clinging to her faded jacket and say, "Shhh, Hana. Someone will hear you." We weren't supposed to talk about other countries, or even know their names. All these distant, diseased places were as good as lost to history--they had imploded, turned chaotic and riotous, ruined by *amor deliria nervosa*.

I had a secret map, though, which I kept underneath my mattress; it had been stuffed in with a few books I had inherited from my grandfather when he died. The regulators had gone through his possessions to make sure there was nothing forbidden among them, but they must have missed it: folded up and wedged inside a thick nursery-school primer, a beginner's guide to *The Book of Shhh*, was a map that must have been circulated in the time Before. It showed no border wall around the United States, and it featured other countries too: more countries than I had ever imagined, a vast world of damaged, broken places.

"China!" I would say, just to bug her, and to show her I wasn't afraid of being overheard, by the regulators or patrols or anyone else. Besides, we were all alone. We were always all alone at Coronet Hill. It was very steep, and situated close to the border and to Killians' House, which was supposedly haunted by the ghosts of a diseased couple who had been condemned to death for resistance

during the blitz. There were other, more popular sledding spots all over Portland. "Or maybe France. I hear France is lovely at this time of year."

"Hana."

"I'm just kidding, Lena," I would say. "I'd never go anywhere without you." And then I'd flop down onto my sled and push off, just like that, feeling a fine spray of snow on my face as I gathered speed, feeling the frigid bite of the rushing air, watching the trees turn to dark blurs on either side of me. Behind me, I could hear Lena shouting, but her voice was whipped away by the thundering of the wind and the whistling of the sled across the snow and the loose, breathless laughter that pushed itself out of my chest. Faster, faster, faster, heart pounding and throat raw, terrified and exhilarated: a sheet of white, an endless surf of snow rising up to meet me as the hill began to bottom out . . .

Each time I made a wish: that I could take off into the air. I would be thrown from my sled and disappear into that bright, dazzling, blank tide, a crest of snow that would reach up and suction me into another world.

But each time, instead, the sled would begin to slow. It would come bumping and crunching to a halt, and I would stand up, shaking the ice from my mittens and from the collar of my jacket, and turn around to watch Lena take her turn--slower, more cautiously, letting her feet drag behind her to slow her momentum.

Strangely enough, this is what I dream about now, the summer before my cure, during the last summer that will ever be truly mine to enjoy. I dream about sledding. That's what it's like to barrel forward toward September, to speed toward the day when I will no longer be troubled by *amor deliria nervosa*.

It is like being on a sled in the middle of a cutting wind. I am breathless and terrified; I will soon be engulfed by whiteness and suctioned into another world.

Good-bye, Hana.

"Perfect." My mother dabs her mouth primly on her napkin and beams across the table at Mrs. Hargrove. "Absolutely exquisite."

"Thank you," Mrs. Hargrove says, inclining her head graciously, as though she, and not her cook, has been the one to prepare the meal. My mom has a housekeeper who comes in three times a week, but I have never known a family with an actual staff. Mayor Hargrove and his family have real servants. They pass through the dining room, pouring water from sterling silver pitchers, refilling the bread plates, pouring out the wine.

"Didn't you think so, Hana?" My mother turns to me, widening her eyes so I can read the command in them.

"Absolutely perfect," I reply obediently. My mother narrows her eyes at me slightly, and I can tell she's wondering whether I'm making fun of her. *Perfect*

has been her favorite word this summer. Hana's performance at the evaluations was *perfect*. Hana's score was practically *perfect*. Hana was paired with Fred Hargrove--the mayor's son! Isn't that *perfect*? Especially since, well . . . There was that unfortunate situation with his first match . . . but everything always works out in the end. . . .

"Mediocre at best," Fred puts in casually.

Mayor Hargrove nearly chokes on his water. Mrs. Hargrove gasps, "Fred!"

Freyorjustifyd winks at me. I duck my head, hiding a smile.

"I'm kidding, Mom. It was delicious, as usual. But maybe Hana is tired of discussing the quality of the green beans?"

"Are you tired, Hana?" Mrs. Hargrove has apparently not understood that her son is joking. She turns her watery gaze to me. Now Fred is concealing a smile.

"Not at all," I say, trying to sound sincere. It is my first time having dinner with the Hargroves, and my parents have impressed on me for weeks how critical it is that they like me.

"Why don't you take Hana out to the gardens?" Mayor Hargrove suggests, pushing away from the table. "It'll take a few minutes to get coffee and dessert on."

"No, no." The last thing I want is to be alone with Fred. He is nice enough, and thanks to the information packet I received about him from the evaluators, I'm well prepared to discuss his interests (golf; movies; politics), but nevertheless, he makes me nervous. He is older, and cured, and has already been matched once before. Everything about him--from the shiny silver cuff links to the neat way his hair curls around his collar--makes me feel like a little kid, stupid and inexperienced.

But Fred is already standing up. "That's a great idea," he says. He offers me his hand. "Come on, Hana."

I hesitate. It seems strange to have physical contact with a boy here, in a brightly lit room, with my parents watching me impassively--but of course, Fred Hargrove is my match, and so it is not forbidden. I take his hand, and he draws me up to my feet. His palms are very dry, and rougher than I expected.

We move out of the dining room and into a wood-paneled hall. Fred gestures for me to go first, and I am uncomfortably aware of his eyes on my body, his closeness and smell. He is big. Tall. Taller than Steve Hilt.

As soon as I think of the comparison, I'm angry with myself.

When we step onto the back porch, I move away from him, and am relieved when he doesn't follow. I press up against the railing, staring out into the vast, dark-draped landscape of gardens. Small, scrolled-iron lamps illuminate birch trees and maples, trellises neat with climbing roses, and beds of blood-red tulips.

The crickets are singing, a throaty swell. The air smells like wet earth.

"It's beautiful," I blurt.

Fred has settled onto the porch swing, keeping one leg crossed over the opposite knee. His face is mostly in shadow, but I can tell he's smiling. "Mom likes gardening. Actually, I think she just likes weeding. I swear, sometimes I think she plants weeds just so she can yank them up again."

I don't say anything. I've heard rumors that Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove have close ties to the president of *Deliria-Free America*, one of the most powerful anti-*deliria* groups in the country. It makes sense that she likes to weed, to uproot the nasty, creeping growth that blemishes her perfect garden. That is what the DFA wants too: total eradication of the disease, of the nasty, dark, twisting eify, twistmotions that cannot be regulated or controlled.

I feel as though something hard and sharp is stuck in my throat. I swallow, reach out, and squeeze the porch railing, taking comfort in its roughness and solidity.

I should be grateful. That's what my mother would tell me. Fred is good-looking, and rich, and he seems nice enough. His father is the most powerful man in Portland, and Fred is being groomed to take his place. But the tightness in my chest and throat won't go away.

He dresses like his father.

My mind flashes to Steve--his easy laugh, his long, tan fingers skating up my thigh--and I will the image away quickly.

"I don't bite, you know," Fred says lightly. I'm not sure whether he means it to be an invitation to move closer, but I stay where I am.

"I don't know you," I say. "And I'm not used to talking to boys." This is no longer exactly true--not since Angelica and I discovered the underground, anyway--but of course, he can't know that.

He spreads his hands. "I'm an open book. What do you want to know?"

I look away from him. I have many questions: *What did you like to do before you were cured? Do you have a favorite time of day? What was your first match like, and what went wrong?* But none are appropriate to ask. And he wouldn't answer me anyway, or he would answer the way he has been taught.

When Fred realizes I'm not going to speak, he sighs and climbs to his feet. "You, on the other hand, are a complete mystery. You're very pretty. You must be smart. You like to run, and you were president of the debate team." He has crossed the porch toward me, and he leans against the railing. "That's all I got."

"That's all there is," I say forcefully. That hard thing in my throat is only growing. Although the sun went down an hour ago, it is still very hot. I find myself wondering, randomly, what Lena is doing tonight. She must be at home--

it's nearly curfew. Probably reading a book, or playing a game with Grace.

"Smart, pretty, and simple," Fred says. He smiles. "Perfect."

Perfect. There's the word again: a locked-door word--stifling, strangling.

I'm distracted by movement in the garden. One of the shadows is *moving*--and then, before I can cry out or alert Fred, a man emerges from the trees, carrying a large, military-style rifle. Then I do cry out, instinctively; Fred turns around and begins to laugh.

"Don't worry," he says. "That's just Derek." When I continue to stare, he explains, "One of Dad's guards. We've beefed up security recently. There have been rumors. . . ." He trails off.

"Rumors about what?" I prompt him.

He avoids looking at me. "It's probalf 8217;s bly overblown," he says casually. "But some people believe that a resistance movement is growing. Not everyone believes that the Invalids"--he winces when he says the word, as though it hurts him--"were eradicated during the blitz."

Resistance movement. Invalids. A prickly feeling starts to work its way through my body, as though I've just been plugged into an electrical outlet.

"My father doesn't believe it, of course," Fred finishes flatly. "Still, better to be safe than sorry, right?"

Once again, I stay quiet. I wonder what Fred would do if he knew about the underground, and knew that I had spent the summer at forbidden, unsegregated beach parties and concerts. I wonder what he would do if he knew that only last week, I let a boy kiss me, let him explore my thighs with his fingertips--actions reviled and forbidden.

"Would you like to go down into the gardens?" Fred asks, as though sensing the topic has disturbed me.

"No," I say, so quickly and firmly he looks surprised. I inhale and manage to smile. "I mean--I have to use the bathroom."

"I'll show you where it is," Fred says.

"No, please." I can't keep the urgency from my tone. I toss my hair over one shoulder, tell myself to get a grip, and smile again, wider this time. "Stay here. Enjoy the night. I can find it."

"And self-sufficient, too," Fred says with a laugh.

On the way to the bathroom, I hear the murmur of voices coming from the kitchen--some of the Hargroves' servants, I assume--and am about to keep walking when I hear Mrs. Hargrove say the word *Tiddles* quite clearly. My heart seizes. They're talking about Lena's family. I inch closer to the kitchen door, which is partially open, certain at first that I've only imagined it.

But then my mother says, "Well, we never wanted to make little Lena feel

ashamed because of the rest of her family. One or two bad apples . . ."

"One or two bad apples can mean the whole tree is rotten," Mrs. Hargrove says primly.

I feel a hot flash of anger and alarm--they *are* talking about Lena. For a second I fantasize about kicking open the kitchen door, right into Mrs. Hargrove's simpering face.

"She's a lovely girl, really," my mother insists. "She and Hana have been inseparable since they were little."

"You're much more understanding than I am," Mrs. Hargrove says. She pronounces *understanding* as though she's really saying *idiotic*. "I would never have allowed Fred to run around with someone whose family had been so . . . tainted. Blood tells, doesn't it?"

"The disease doesn't carry through the blood," my mother says softly. I feel a wild urge to reach through the wood and hug her. "That's an old idea."

"Old ideas are often based in fact," Mrs. Hargrove responds stiffly. "Besides, we simply don't know all the factors, do we? Certainly an early exposure--"

"Of course, of course," my mother says quickly. I can tell that she's eager to mollify Mrs. Hargrove. "It's all very complicated, I admit. Harold and I just always tried to allow things to progress naturally. We felt that at some point the girls would simply drift apart. They're too different--not well matched at all. I'm actually surprised their friendship lasted as long as it did." My mother pauses. I can feel my lungs working painfully in my chest, as though I've been plunged into icy water.

"But after all, it seems we were right," my mother continues. "The girls have barely spoken at all this summer. So you see, in the end, it all worked out."

"Well, *that's* a relief."

Before I can move or react, the kitchen door is opening, and I am caught frozen, standing directly in front of the door. My mother lets out a small cry, but Mrs. Hargrove doesn't look either surprised or embarrassed.

"Hana!" she chirps, smiling at me. "What *perfect* timing. We were just about to have dessert."

Back at home, locked in my room, I can breathe normally for the first time all night.

I draw a chair up to my window. If I press my face nearly to the glass, I can just make out Angelica Marston's house. Her window is dark. I feel a pulse of disappointment. I need to do something tonight. There's an itch under my skin, an electric, jumpy feeling. I need to get out, need to *move*.

I stand up, pace the room, pick up my phone from the bed. It's late--after

eleven--but for a moment I consider calling Lena's house. We haven't spoken in exactly eight days, since the night she came to the party at Roaring Brook Farms. She must have been horrified by the music and the people: boys and girls, uncureds, together. She looked horrified. She looked at me like I was already diseased.

I open the phone, type in the first three digits of her number. Then I snap the phone shut again. I've left messages with her already--two or three, probably, and she has returned exactly none of my calls.

Besides, she's probably sleeping, and I'll no doubt wake up her aunt Carol, who will think something is wrong. And I can't tell Lena about Steve Hilt--I don't want to frighten her, and for all I know she would report me. I can't tell her about what I'm feeling now, either: that my life is slowly squeezing closed around me, as though I'm walking through a series of rooms that keep getting smaller. She'll tell me how lucky I should feel, how grateful I should be for my scores at evaluations.

I throw my phone on the bed. Almost immediately, it buzzes: A new text message has come in. My heart leaps. Only a few people have my number--only a few people even have cell phones. I grab the phone again, fumble it open. The itch in my blood makes my fingers shake.

I knew it. The message is from Angelica.

Can't sleep. Weird nightmares--was on the corner of Washington and Oak, and fifteen rabbits were trying to get me to join a tea party. I can't wait to get cured!

All our messages about the underground must be carefully coded, but this one is easy enough to decipher. We're meeting on the corner of Washington and Oak in fifteen minutes.

We're going to a party.

two

To get to the Highlands I have to go off peninsula. I avoid taking St. John, even though it will lead me directly to Congress. There was an outbreak of the *deliria* there five years ago--four families affected, four early cures imposed. Since then, the whole street has been tainted and is always targeted by regulators and patrols.

The itch under my skin has swollen to a steady, thrumming force, a need in my legs and arms and fingers. I can barely pedal fast enough. I have to force myself not to push it. I need to stay alert and pay attention, just in case there are regulators nearby. If I'm caught out after curfew, I'll have a lot of questions to answer, and this--my last summer as me, my last summer of freedom--will come abruptly to a halt. I'll be thrown into the labs by the end of the week.

Luckily, I reach the Highlands without incident. I slow down, squinting at the street signs as I pass, trying to decipher letters in the dark. The Highlands is a mess of different roads and cul-de-sacs, and I never remember all of them. I pass Brooks and Stevens; Tanglewild and Crestview Avenue, and then, confusingly, Crestview Circle. At least the moon is full and floats almost directly above me, leering. Tonight the man in the moon looks as though he's winking, or smirking: a moon with secrets.

Then I spot Oak. Even though I'm barely rolling along now, my heart is going so hard in my throat, I feel like it'll burst out through my mouth if I try and say a word. I've avoided thinking about Steve all night, but now, as I get closer, I can't help it. Maybe he'll be here tonight. Maybe, maybe, maybe. The idea--the thought of him--cascades into consciousness, into being. There is no repressing it.

As I climb off my bike, I instinctively fumble in my back pocket and feel for the note I've been carrying everywhere for the past two weeks, after I found it folded neatly on top of my beach bag.

I like your smile. I want to know you. Study session 2nite--earth sciences. You have Mr. Roebing, right?

--SH

Steve and I had seen each other at some of the underground parties earlier in the summer, and once we almost talked after I bumped into him and splashed some soda on his shoe. And then, during the day, we began to pass each other: in the street, at Eastern Prom. He always lifted his eyes to mine and, just for a second, flashed me a smile. That day--the day of the note--I thought I saw him wink. But I was with Lena, and he was with friends in the out>boys' section of the beach. No way for him to come and speak with me. I still don't know how he managed to sneak the note into my bag; he must have waited until the beach was pretty much empty.

His message, too, was in code. The "study session" was an invitation to a concert; "earth sciences" meant that it would be held on one of the farms--Roebing Farm, to be exact.

That night we ditched the concert and walked out to the middle of an empty field, and lay side by side in the grass with our elbows touching, looking up at the stars. At one point, he traced a dandelion from my forehead to my chin, and I fought the desperate, nervous urge to giggle.

That was the night he kissed me.

My first kiss. A new kind of kiss, like the new kind of music still playing, softly, in the distance--wild and arrhythmic, desperate. Passionate.

Since then, I have managed to see him only twice, and both times were in public and we could do no more than nod at each other. It is worse, I think, than not seeing him at all. That, too, is an itch--the desire to see him, to kiss him again, to let him put his fingers in my hair--is a monstrous, constant, crawling feeling in my blood and bones.

It's worse than a disease. It's a poison.

And I like it.

If he is here tonight--*please let him be here tonight*--I'm going to kiss him again.

Angelica is waiting for me on the corner of Washington and Oak, as promised. She is standing in the shadow of a towering maple, and for a second, as she steps out of the darkness--dark hair, dark shadow-eyes--I imagine that she is Lena. But then the moonlight falls differently on her face, and Lena's image goes skittering away into a corner of my mind. Angelica's face is all sharp angles, especially her nose, which is just slightly too long and tilted upward. That's the reason, I think, I disliked her for so long--her nose makes it look as though she's always smelling something nasty.

But she understands me. She understands what it's like to feel penned in, and she understands the need to break out.

"You're late," Angelica says, but she's smiling.

Tonight there is no music. As we cross the lawn toward the house, a stifled giggle disturbs the silence, followed by the sudden swell of conversation.

"Careful," Angie says as we step onto the porch. "Third stair's rotten."

I dodge it, like she does. The wood of the porch is old, and it groans under our weight. All the windows are boarded up, and the faint outlines of a large red X are still visible, faded by weather and time: This house was once home to the disease. When we were little, we used to dare one another to walk through the Highlands, dare each other to stand for as long as possible with our hands on the doors of houses that had been condemned. The rumor was that the tortured spirits of people who had died from *amor deliria nervosa* still walked the streets and would strike you down with d fa down wisease for trespassing.

"Nervous?" Angie asks, sensing me shiver.

"I'm fine," I say, and push open the door before she can reach for it. I enter ahead of her.

For a second, as we pass into the hallway, there is a sudden stillness, a moment of tension, as everyone in the house freezes; then they see that it is okay, that we are not regulators or police, and the tension ebbs away again. There is no electricity, and the house is full of candles--set on plates, stuffed into empty Coke cans, placed directly on the ground--which transform the walls into flickering, dissolving patterns of light, and turn people into shadows. And they, the shadow-people, are everywhere: massed in corners and on the few remaining pieces of furniture in the otherwise empty rooms, pressed into hallways, reclining on the stairs. But it is surprisingly quiet.

Almost everyone, I see, has coupled off. Boys and girls, intertwined, holding hands and touching each other's hair and faces and laughing quietly, doing all the things that are forbidden in the real world.

A mouth of anxiety yawns open inside of me. I have never been to any party like this. I can practically *feel* the presence of disease: the crawling of the walls, the energy and tension--like the nesting of a thousand insects.

He has to be here.

"This way." Angie has instinctively dropped her voice to a whisper. She draws me toward the back of the house, and from the way she navigates the rooms, even in the dim and changing light, I can tell that she has been here several times before. We move into the old kitchen. More candles here illuminate the outlines of bare cupboards, a stove, and a dark fridge with its door missing and its shelves black with spotted mold. The room smells stale, like sweat and mildew. A table in the center of the room holds a few dusty bottles of alcohol, and several girls are standing awkwardly against one counter while across the room a group of boys is pretending not to notice them. Obviously they have never been

to a party like this either and are unconsciously obeying the rules of segregation.

I scan the boys' faces, hoping that Steve will be among them. He isn't.

"Do you want something to drink?" Angelica asks.

"Water," I say. My throat feels dry, and it's very hot in the house. I almost wish that I had never left home. I don't know what I should do now that I'm here, and there is nobody I want to talk to. Angie is already pouring herself something to drink, and I know that she will soon disappear into the darkness with a boy. She does not seem out of place or anxious at all, and for a second I feel a flash of fear for her.

"There is no water," Angie says, passing me a glass. I take a sip of whatever she has poured me and make a face. It's sweet but has the dull, stinging aftertaste of gasoline.

"What is it?" I say.

"Who knows?" Angie giggles and takes a sip from her own glass. Maybe she is nervous. "It'll help you loosen up."

"I don't need to--" I start to say, but then I feel hands on my waist, and my mind goes still and blank, and I find myself turning without intending to.

"Hi," Steve says to me.

In the second it takes me to process that he is here, and real, and speaking to me, he leans in and puts his mouth on mine. This is only the second time I've ever been kissed, and I have a momentary panic where I forget what I am supposed to do. I feel his tongue pressing into my mouth and I jerk, surprised, spilling a bit of my drink. He pulls away, laughing.

"Happy to see me?" he asks.

"Hi to you, too," I say. I can still taste his tongue in my mouth--he has been drinking something sour. I take another sip of my drink.

He leans in and puts his mouth right up to my ear. "I was hoping you would come," he says in a low voice. Warmth breaks across my chest.

"Really?" I say. He doesn't respond; he takes my hand and draws me out of the kitchen. I swivel around to tell Angelica I'll be back, but she has disappeared.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying to sound unconcerned.

"It's a surprise," he says.

The warmth from my chest has made it into my head now. We move through a vast room full of more shadow-people, more candles, more flickering shapes on the wall. I place my drink on the arm of a ratty sofa. A girl with short, spiky hair is curled there on the lap of a boy; he is nuzzling her neck and his face is concealed. But she glances up at me as I pass, and I am momentarily startled: I recognize her. She has an older sister at St. Anne's, Rebecca Sterling, a girl I was kind-of friends with. I remember Rebecca told me that her younger sister had

chosen to go to Edison because it was bigger.

Sarah. Sarah Sterling.

I doubt she recognizes me, but she drops her eyes quickly.

At the far end of the room is a rough wooden door. Steve leans into it and we emerge onto a porch even sadder than the one out front. Someone has placed a lantern out here--maybe Steve?--illuminating the yawning gaps between wood slats, places where the wood has rotted away completely.

"Careful," he says as I nearly miss my footing and go plunging through a bad patch.

"I've got it," I say, but am grateful that he tightens his grip on my hand. I tell myself that this is it--what I wanted, what I had hoped for tonight--but somehow the thought keeps skittering away. He grabs the lantern before we step off the porch and carries it, swinging, in his free hand.

Across an overgrown stretch of lawn, the grasses shin-high and covered with moisture, we reach a small gazebo, painted white and lined with benches. In places, wildflowers have begun to push their way up through the floorboards. Steve helps me into it--it is elevated a few feet above the ground, but if there were stairs at one point, they are gone now--and then follows me.

I test one of the benches. It seems sturdy enough, so I sit down. The crickets are singing, tremulous and steady, and the wind carries the smell of damp earth and flowers.

"It's beautiful," I say.

Steve sits next to me. I'm uncomfortably aware of every part of our skin that is touching: knees, elbows, forearms. My heart starts beating hard, and once again I am having trouble breathing.

"You're beautiful," he says. Before I can react, he finds my chin with his hand and tilts me toward him, and then we're kissing again. This time, I remember to kiss back, to move my mouth against his, and I am not so surprised when his tongue finds the inside of my mouth, although the feeling is still foreign and not totally pleasant. He is breathing hard, twisting his fingers through my hair, so I think he must be enjoying himself--I must be doing it correctly.

His fingers graze my thigh, and then, slowly, he lowers his hand, begins massaging my thigh, working up toward my hips. All my feeling, all my concentration, flows down to that spot and to the way my skin feels, as though it is burning in response to his touch. This has to be *deliria*. Doesn't it? This must be what love feels like, what everyone has warned me about. My mind is spinning uselessly, and I'm trying to remember the symptoms of *deliria* listed in *The Book of Shhh*, as Steve's hand moves higher and his breathing gets even more desperate. His tongue is so deep in my mouth, I'm worried I might choke.

Suddenly all I can think about is a line from the Book of Lamentations: *What glitters may not be gold; and even wolves may smile; and fools will be led by promises to their deaths.*

"Wait," I say, pushing away from him.

"What's wrong?" Steve traces his finger from my cheekbone to my chin. His eyes are on my mouth.

Preoccupation--difficulty concentrating. A symptom comes back to me finally. "Do you think about me?" I blurt. "I mean, have you thought about me?"

"All the time." His answer comes quickly, easily. This should make me happy but I feel more confused than ever. Somehow I always imagined that I would know if the disease was taking root--that I would feel it instinctively, a shift deep in my blood. But this is simply tension, and shredding anxiety, and the occasional burst of good feeling.

"Relax, Hana," he says. He kisses my neck, moves his mouth to my ear, and I try to do as he says and let go of the warmth traveling from my chest to my stomach. But I can't stop the questions; they surge, pressing closely in the dark.

"What's going to happen to us?" I say.

He pulls away, sighing, and rubs his eyes. "I don't know what you--" he begins, and then breaks off with a small exclamation. "Holy shit! Look, Hana. Fireflies."

I turn in the direction he is looking. For a moment, I see nothing. Then all at once, several flares of white light burst in midair, one after another. As I watch, more and more of them float out of the blackness--brief sparks circling dizzily around one another, then sinking once again into the dark, a hypnotic pattern of illumination and extinguishment.

Out of nowhere, I feel a strong surge of hope, and I find myself laughing. I reach for his hand and tighten my fingers around his. "Maybe it's a sign," I say.

"Maybe," he says, and leans in to kiss me again, and so my question--*What's going to happen to us?*--goes unanswered.

three

I wake to blinding sunshine and a searing pain in my head; I forgot to draw the shades last night. There's a sour taste in my mouth. I move clumsily to the bathroom, brush my teeth, and splash water on my face. As I straighten up, I see it: a blue-purple blemish on my neck just below my right ear, a tiny constellation of bruised and broken capillaries.

I don't believe it. He gave me a Devil's Kiss.

We always got checked for kisses at school; we had to stand in a line with our hair pulled back while Mrs. Brinn examined our chests, necks, collarbones, shoulders. Devil's Kisses are a sign of illegal activity--and a symptom, too, of the disease taking root, spreading through your bloodstream. Last year, when Willow Marks was caught in Deering Oaks Park with an uncured boy, the story was that she'd been under surveillance for weeks, after her mom had noticed a Devil's Kiss on her shoulder. Willow was taken out of school to get cured a full eight months before her scheduled procedure, and I haven't seen her since.

I rummage through the bathroom cabinet, and luckily manage to find an old tube of foundation and some yellowish concealer. I layer on the makeup until the kiss is no more than a faint blue spot on my skin, then arrange my hair in a messy side-bun knotted just behind my right ear. I'll have to be very careful over the next few days; I'm sporting a mark of the disease. The idea is both thrilling and terrifying.

My parents are downstairs in the kitchen. My father is watching the morning news. Even though it's Sunday, he is dressed for work and eating a bowl of cereal standing up. My mother is on the telephone, working its cord around her finger, making the occasional noise of assent. I know immediately that she must be talking to Minnie Phillips. My father watches the news; my mother calls Minnie for information. Mrs. Phillips works at the records bureau, and her husband is a policeman--between the two of them, they know everything that happens in Portland.

Almost everything, that is.

I think of the twisting, darkened rooms of uncureds last night--all of them touching, whispering, breathing one another's air--and feel a rush of pride.

"Morning, Hana," my dad says without taking his eyes off the television screen.

"Good morning." I'm careful to keep the left side of my body angled toward him as I slide into a chair at the kitchen table and shake a handful of cereal into my palm.

Donald Seigal, the mayor's minister of information, is being interviewed on TV.

"Stories of a resistance are vastly overblown," he is saying smoothly. "Still, the mayor is responsive to the concerns of the community . . . new measures will be effectuated . . ."

"Unbelievable." My mother has hung up the phone. She takes the remote and mutes the television. My father makes a noise of irritation. "Do you know what Minnie just told me?"

I fight the urge to smile. I knew it. That is the thing about people once they're cured: They're predictable. That is, supposedly, one of the procedure's benefits.

My mom continues, without waiting for a response, "There was *another* incident. A fourteen-year-old girl this time, and a boy from CPHS. They were caught sneaking around the streets at three in the morning."

"Who was it?" my dad asks. He has given up on the news and is now rinsing his bowl in the sink.

"One of the Sterling girls. The younger one, Sarah." My mother watches my dad expectantly. When he doesn't react, she says, "You remember Colin Sterling and his wife. We had lunch with them at the Spitalnys' in March."

My father grunts.

"So terrible for the fam--" My mother stops abruptly, turning to me. "Are you all right, Hana?"

"I--I think I swallowed the wrong way," I gasp. I stand up and reach for a glass of water. My fingers are shaking.

Sarah Sterling. She must have been caught on her way back from the party, and for a second I have the worst, most selfish thought: *Thank God it wasn't me.* I take long, slow sips of water, willing my heart to stop pounding. I want to ask what happened to Sarah--what *will* happen--but I don't trust myself to speak. Besides, these stories always end the same way.

"She'll be cured, of course," my mother finishes, as though reading my mind.

"She's too young," I blurt out. "There's no way it'll work right."

My mother turns to me calmly. "If you're old enough to catch the disease, you're old enough to be cured," she says.

My father laughs. "Soon you'll be volunteering for the DFA. Why not operate on infants, too?"

"Why not?" My mother shrugs.

I stand up, bracing myself against the kitchen table as a rush of blackness sweeps through my head, clouding my vision. My father takes the remote and turns the volume up on the television again. Now it is Fred's father, Mayor Hargrove, whose image comes into focus.

"I repeat, there is no danger of a so-called 'resistance movement,' or any significant spread of the disease w the di," he is saying. I walk quickly out into the hall. My mom calls something to me, but I'm too focused on the drone of Hargrove's voice--"Now, as ever, we declare a zero-tolerance policy for disruptions and dissidence"--to hear what she says. I take the stairs two at a time and shut myself into my room, wishing more than ever that my door had a lock.

But privacy breeds secrecy, and secrecy breeds sickness.

My palms are sweating as I pull out my phone and dial Angelica's number. I'm desperate to talk to someone about what happened to Sarah Sterling--I need Angelica to tell me it's okay, and we're safe, and also that the underground won't be disrupted--but we'll have to speak carefully, in codes. All our phone calls are regulated and recorded, periodically, by the city.

Angelica's cell phone goes straight to voice mail. I dial her house number, which rings and rings. I have a flash of panic: For a second, I worry she must have been caught too. Maybe even now, she's being dragged down to the labs, strapped down for her procedure.

But no. She lives a few doors down from me. If Angelica had been caught, I would have heard about it.

The urge is there, sudden and overwhelming: I need to see Lena. I need to talk with her, to spill everything, to tell her about Fred Hargrove, who has already had and given up one match, and his mother's obsessive weeding, and Steve Hilt, and the Devil's Kiss, and Sarah Sterling. She will make me feel better. She will know what I should do--what I should *feel*.

This time, when I go downstairs, I make sure to tiptoe; I don't want to have to answer my parents' questions about where I'm heading. I get my bike from the garage, where I stashed it after riding home last night. A purple scrunchie is looped around its left handle. Lena and I have the same bike, and a few months ago we started using the scrunchies to differentiate them. After our fight I pulled the scrunchie off and shoved it in the bottom of my sock drawer. But the handlebars looked sad and naked, and so I had to replace it.

It is just after eleven, and the air is full of shimmering, wet heat. Even the seagulls seem to be moving more slowly; they drift across the cloudless sky, practically motionless, as though they are suspended in liquid blue. Once I make it out of the West End and its protective shelter of ancient oaks and shaded,

narrow streets, the sun is practically unbearable, high and unforgiving, as though a vast glass lens has been centered over Portland.

I make a point of detouring past the Governor, the old statue that stands in the middle of a cobblestone square near the University of Portland, which Lena will attend in the fall. We used to run together past the Governor regularly, and made a habit of reaching up and slapping his outstretched hand. I always made a wish simultaneously, and now, although I don't stop to slap his hand, I reach out with a toe and skim the base of the statue for good luck as I ride past. *I wish*, I think, but don't get any further. I don't know exactly what to wish for: to be safe or to be unsafe, for things to change or for things to stay the same.

The ride to Lena's house takes me longer than usual. A garbage truck has broken down on Congress Street, and the police are redirecting people up Chestnut up Cut and around on Cumberland. By the time I get to Lena's street, I'm sweating, and I stop when I'm still a few blocks away from her house to drink from a water fountain and blot my face. Next to the fountain is a bus stop, with a sign warning of curfew restrictions--SUNDAY TO THURSDAY, 9 P.M.; SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, 9:30 P.M.--and as I go to chain my bike up, I notice the smudgy glass waiting area is papered with flyers. They are all identical, and feature the crest of Portland above bolded black type.

*The Safety of One Is the Duty of All
Keep Your Eyes and Ears Open
Report All Suspicious Activity to the Department of
Sanitation and Security
If You See Something, Say Something
**\$500 reward for reports of illicit or unapproved activity*

I stand for a minute, scanning the words over and over, as though they will suddenly mean something different. People have always reported suspicious behavior, of course, but it has never come with a financial reward. This will make it harder, much harder, for me, for Steve, for all of us. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money to most people these days--the kind of money most people don't make in a week.

A door slams and I jump, almost knocking over my bike. I notice, for the first time, that the whole *street* is papered with flyers. They are posted on gates and

mailboxes, taped to disabled streetlamps and metal garbage cans.

There is movement on Lena's porch. Suddenly she appears, wearing an oversized T-shirt from her uncle's deli. She must be going to work. She pauses, scanning the street--I think her eyes land on me, and I lift my hand in a hesitant wave, but her eyes keep tracking, drifting over my head, and then sweeping off in the other direction.

I'm about to call out to her when her cousin Grace comes flying down the cement porch steps. Lena laughs and reaches out to slow Grace down. Lena looks happy, untroubled. I'm seized by sudden doubt: It occurs to me that Lena might not miss me at all. Maybe she hasn't been thinking of me; maybe she's perfectly happy not speaking to me.

After all, it's not like she's tried to call.

As Lena starts making her way down the street, with Grace bobbing beside her, I turn around quickly and remount my bike. Now I'm desperate to get out of here. I don't want her to spot me. The wind kicks up, rustling all those flyers, the exhortations of safety. The flyers lift and sigh in unison, like a thousand people waving white handkerchiefs, a thousand people waving good-bye.

four

The flmonoyers are just the beginning. I notice that there are more regulators on the streets than usual, and there are rumors--neither confirmed nor denied by Mrs. Hargrove, who comes over to deliver a scarf that my mother left--that there will soon be a raid. Mayor Hargrove is insistent--both on television and when we once again dine with his family, this time at their golf club--that there is no resurgence of the disease and no reason to worry. But the regulators, and the offers of rewards, and the rumors of a possible raid, tell a different story.

For days there is not even a whisper of another underground gathering. Every morning I rub concealer into the Devil's Kiss on my neck, until at last it disperses and breaks apart, leaving me both relieved and saddened. I haven't seen Steve Hilt anywhere--not at the beach, not at Back Cove or by the Old Port--and Angelica has been distant and guarded, although she manages to slip me a note explaining that her parents have been watching her more closely since the news of Sarah Sterling's exposure to *deliria*.

Fred takes me golfing. I don't play, so instead I trail behind him on the course as he shoots a near-perfect game. He is charming and courteous and does a semi-decent job of pretending to be interested in what I have to say. People turn to look at us as we pass. Everyone knows Fred. The men greet him heartily, ask after his father, congratulate him on getting paired, although no one breathes a word about his first wife. The women stare at me with frank and unconcealed resentment.

I am lucky.

I am suffocating.

The regulators crowd the streets.

Lena still doesn't call.

Then one hot evening at the end of July, there she is: She barrels past me on the street, her eyes trained deliberately on the pavement, and I have to call her name three times before she will turn around. She stops a little way up the hill, her face blank--unreadable--and makes no effort to come toward me. I have to jog uphill to her.

"So what?" I say as I get closer, panting a little. "You're just going to walk by me now?" I meant for the question to come out as a joke, but instead it sounds like an accusation.

She frowns. "I didn't see you," she says.

I want to believe her. I look away, biting my lip. I feel like I could burst into tears--right there in the shimmering, late-afternoon heat, with the city spread out like a mirage beyond Munjoy Hill. I want to ask her where she's been, and tell her I miss her, and say that I need her help.

But instead what comes out is: "Why didn't you call me back?"

She blurts out at the same time: "I got my matches."

I'm momentarily taken aback. I can't believe that after days of abrupt and unexplained silence, this is what she would say to me first. I swallow back all the things I was going to say to her and make my tone polite, disinterested.

"Did you accept yet?" I say.

"You called?" she says. Again, we both speak at the same time.

She seems genuinely surprised. On the other hand, Lena has always been hard to read. Most of her thoughts, most of her true feelings, are buried deep.

"I left you, like, three messages," I say, watching her face closely.

"I never got any messages," Lena says quickly. I don't know whether she is telling the truth. Lena, after all, always insisted that after the cure we wouldn't be friends--our lives would be too different, our social circles too remote. Maybe she has decided that already the differences between us are too great.

I flash back to how she looked at me at the party at Roaring Brook Farms--the way she jerked away when I tried to reach out to her, lips curling back. Suddenly I feel as though I am only dreaming. I am dreaming of a too-colored, too-vivid day, while images pass soundlessly in front of me--Lena is moving her mouth, two men are loading buckets into a truck, a little girl wearing a too-big swimsuit is scowling at us from a doorway--and I am speaking too, responding, even smiling, while my words are sucked into silence, into the bright white light of a sun-drenched dream. Then we are walking. I am walking with her toward her house, except I am only drifting, floating, skating above the pavement.

Lena speaks; I answer. The words are only drifting too--they are a nonsense-language, a dream-babble.

Tonight I will attend another party in Deering Highlands with Angelica. Steve will be there. The coast is once again clear. Lena looks at me, repulsed and fearful, when I tell her this.

It doesn't matter. None of it matters anymore. We are sledding once again--into whiteness, into a blanket of quiet.

But I am going to keep going. I am going to soar, and soar, and break away--

up, up, up into the thundering noise and the wind, like a bird being sucked into the sky.

We pause at the beginning of her block, where I stood just the other day, watching her move happily and unself-consciously down the sidewalk with Grace. The flyers still paper the street, although today there is no wind. They hang perfectly, corners aligned, the emblazoned governmental seal running like a typographical error hundreds of times along the two sides of the street. Lena's other cousin, Jenny, is playing soccer with some kids at the end of the block.

I hang back. I don't want to be spotted. Jenny knows me, and she's smart. She'll ask me why I don't come around anymore, she'll stare at me with her hard, laughing eyes, and she'll know--she'll *sense*--that Lena and I are no longer friends, that Hana Trent is evaporating, like water in the noon sun.

"You know where to find me," Lena is saying, gesturing casually down the street. *You know where to find me.* Like that, I am dismissed. And suddenly I no longer feel as though I am dreaming, or floating. A dead weight fills me, dragging me back into reality, back into the sun and the smell of garbage and the shrill cries of the kids playing soccer in the street, and Lena's face, composed, neutral, as though she has already been cured, as though we have Chouthe ki never meant a thing to each other in our lives.

The weight is rising through my chest, and I know that at any second, I'm going to begin crying.

"Okay, then. See you around," I say quickly, concealing the break in my voice with a cough and a wave. I turn around and start walking quickly, as the world begins to spiral together into a wash of color, like liquid being spun down a drain. I jam my sunglasses down onto my nose.

"Okay. See you," Lena says.

The tide is pushing from my chest to my throat now, carrying with it the urge to turn around and call out to her, to tell her I miss her. My mouth is full of the sour taste that rises up with those old, deep words, and I can feel the muscles in my throat flexing, trying to press them back and down. But the urge becomes unbearable, and without intending to, I find that I am spinning around, calling her name.

She has already made it back to her house. She pauses with her hand on the gate. She doesn't say a word; she just stares at me blankly, as though in the time it has taken her to walk the twenty feet, she has already forgotten who I am.

"Never mind," I call out, and this time when I turn around, I do not hesitate or look back.

The note from Steve arrived earlier this morning inside a rolled-up

advertisement for *Underground Pizza--Grand Opening TONIGHT!*, which had been wedged into one of the narrow iron scrolls on our front gate. The note was only three words--*Please be there*--and included only his initials, presumably so in case it had been discovered by my parents or a regulator instead, neither of us would be implicated. On the back of the advertisement was a crudely drawn map showing only a single street name: Tanglewild Lane, also in Deering Highlands.

This time, there is no need to sneak out. My parents have gone to a fund-raiser tonight; the Portland Conservation Society is having their annual dinner-dance. Angelica's parents are attending too. This makes things far easier. Rather than sneak through the streets after curfew, Angelica and I meet in the Highlands early. She has brought a half bottle of wine and some bread and cheese, and she is red-faced and excited. We sit on the porch of a now-shuttered mansion and eat our dinner while the sun breaks into waves of red and pink beyond the tree line, and finally ebbs away altogether.

Then, at half past nine, we make our way toward Tanglewild.

Neither of us has the exact address, but it doesn't take us long to locate the house. Tanglewild is only a two-block street, mostly wooded, with a few peaked roofs rising up--just barely visible, silhouetted against the deepening purple sky--indicating houses set back behind the trees. The night is remarkably still, and it is easy to pick out the drumbeat thrumming underneath the noise of the crickets. We turn down a long, narrow drive, its pavement full of fissures, which the moss and the grass have begun to colonize. Angelica takes her hair down, then places it in a ponytail, then once again shakes it loose. I feel a deep flash of pity for her, followed by a squeeze of fear.

Angelica's cure is scheduled for next week.

As C"jujustiwe get close to the house, the rhythm of the drum gets louder, although it is still muffled; all the windows have been boarded up, I notice, and the door is closed tightly and stuffed around with insulation. The second we open the door, the music becomes a roar: a rush of banging and screeching guitar, vibrating through the floorboards and walls. For a second I stand, disoriented, blinking in the bright kitchen light. The music seems to get my head in a vise--it squeezes, it presses out all other thoughts.

"I said, close the *door*." Someone--a girl with flame-red hair--launches past us practically shouting, and slams the door behind us, keeping the sound in. She shoots me a dirty look as she goes back across the kitchen to the guy she has been talking to, who is tall and blond and skinny, all elbows and kneecaps. Young. Fourteen at most. His T-shirt reads PORTLAND NAVAL CONSERVATORY.

I think of Sarah Sterling and feel a spasm of nausea. I close my eyes and concentrate on the music, feeling it vibrate up through the floor and into my

bones. My heart adjusts to its rhythm, beating hard and fast in my chest. Until recently I had never heard music like this, only the stately, measured songs that get played endlessly on Radio One. This is one of my favorite things about the underground: the crashing of the cymbals, the screeching guitar riffs, music that moves into the blood and makes you feel hot and wild and alive.

"Let's go downstairs," Angelica says. "I want to be closer to the music." She's scanning the crowd, obviously looking for someone. I wonder if it's the same someone she went off with at the last party. It's amazing that despite all the things we've shared this summer, there's still so much that we don't and can't talk about.

I think of Lena and our strained conversation in the street. The now-familiar ache grips my throat. If only she had listened to me and tried to understand. If she could see the beauty of this underground world, and appreciate what it means: the music, the dancing, the feeling of fingertips and lips, like a moment of flight after a lifetime of crawling . . .

I push the thought of Lena away.

The stairs leading down to the basement are rough-hewn concrete. Except for a few thick pillar candles, pooled in wax and placed directly on the steps, they are swallowed in dark. As we descend, the music swells to a roar, and the air becomes hot and sticky with vibration, as though the sound is gaining physical shape, an invisible body pulsing, breathing, sweating.

The basement is unfinished. It looks as though it was hacked straight out of the earth. It's so dark I can just make out rough stone walls and a stone ceiling, spotted with dark mold. I don't know how the band can see what they are playing.

Maybe that's the reason for the screeching, careening notes, which seem to be fighting with one another for dominance--melodies competing and clashing and clawing into the upper registers.

The basement is vast and cavelike. A central room, where the band is playing, branches into other, smaller spaces, each one darker than the last. One room is nearly blocked off with heaps of broken furniture; another one is dominated by a sagging sofa and several dirty-looking mattresses. On one of them a couple is lying, with C lyken ing against each other. In the dark, they look like two thick snakes, intertwined, and I back away quickly. The next room is crisscrossed with laundry lines; from them, dozens of bras and pairs of cotton underwear--girls' underwear--are hanging. For a second, I think they must have been left by the family who lived there, but as a group of boys pushes roughly past me, snickering loudly, it occurs to me all at once that these must be trophies, mementos, of things that have happened in this basement.

Sex. A word that is difficult even to think.

I feel dizzy and hot already. I turn around and see that Angelica has once again melted into the darkness. The music is driving so fiercely through my head, I'm worried it will split apart. I start to move back to the central room, thinking that I will go upstairs, when I spot Steve standing in the corner, his eyes half-closed, his face lit up red by a small cluster of miniature lights that are coiled on the ground and connected, somehow, to a circuit--probably the same one that is powering the amps in the central room.

As I start toward him, he spots me. For a second, his face registers no change of expression. Then I step closer, into the limited circle of dim light, and he grins. He says something, but his face is swallowed by a crescendo of sound as the two guitar players bang furiously on their instruments.

We both step forward simultaneously, closing the last few feet between us. He loops his arms around my waist, and his fingers brush the exposed skin between my shirt and waistband, thrilling and hot. I go to rest my head against his chest at the same time as he bends down to kiss me, so he ends up planting his lips on my forehead. Then, as I tilt my face upward and he stoops to try again, I crack my head against his nose. He jerks back, wincing, bringing a hand to his face.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry." The music is so loud, I can't even hear my own apology. My face is flaming. But when he draws his hand away from his nose, he's smiling. This time, he bends down slowly, with exaggerated care, making a joke of it--he kisses me cautiously, slides his tongue gently between my lips. I can feel the music vibrating in the few inches between our chests, beating my heart into a frenzy. My body is full of such rushing heat, I'm worried it will go fluid--I'll melt; I'll collapse into him.

His hands massage my waist and then move up my back, pulling me closer. I feel the sharp stab of his belt buckle against my stomach, and inhale sharply. He bites down lightly on my lip--I'm not sure if it's an accident. I can't think, can't breathe. It's too hot, too loud; we're too close. I try to pull away but he's too strong. His arms tighten around me, keeping me pressed to his body, and his hands skate down my back again, over the pockets of my shorts, find my bare legs. His fingers trace my inner thighs, and my mind flashes to that room of crisscrossed underwear, all of it hanging limply in the dark, like deflated balloons, like the morning-after detritus of a birthday party.

"Wait." I place both hands on his chest and shove him forcibly away. He is red-faced and sweating. His bangs are plastered against his forehead. "Wait," I say again. "I need to talk to you."

I'm not sure if he hears me. The rhythm of the music is still drumming beneath my ribs, and m Cy r" width="y words are just another vibration skating

alongside of it. He says something--again, indecipherable--and I have to lean forward to hear him better.

"I said, I want to dance!" he yells. His lips bump against my ear, and I feel the soft nibble of his teeth again. I jerk away quickly, then feel guilty. I nod and smile to show him *okay*, we can dance.

Dancing, too, is new for me. Uncureds are not allowed to dance in couples, although Lena and I used to practice sometimes with each other, mimicking the stately, grave way we'd seen married couples and cureds dance at official events: stepping evenly in time with the music, keeping at least an arm's distance between their chests, rigid and strict. *One two-three, one two-three*, Lena would bellow, as I would practically choke from laughing so hard, and she'd nudge me with a knee to keep me on track, and assume the voice of our principal, McIntosh, telling me that I was a *disgrace, an absolute disgrace*.

The kind of dancing I have known is all about rules: patterns, holds, and complicated maneuvers. But as Steve draws me closer to the band, all I can see is a frenzied mass of seething, writhing people, like a many-headed sea snake, grinding, waving their arms, stamping their feet, jumping. No rules, just energy--so much energy, you could harness it; I bet you could power Portland for a decade. It is more than a wave. It's a tide, an ocean of bodies.

I let myself break apart on it. I forget about Lena, and Fred Hargrove, and the posters plastered all around Portland. I let the music drill through my teeth and drip out my hair and pound through my eyeballs. I taste it, like grit and sweat. I am shouting without meaning to. There are hands on my body--Steve's?--gripping me, pulsing the rhythm into my skin, traveling the places no one has ever touched--and each touch is like another pulse of darkness, beating softness into my brain, beating rational thoughts into a deep fog.

Is this freedom? Is it happiness? I don't know. I don't care anymore. It is different--it is being alive.

Time becomes a stutter--the space between drumbeats, splintered into fragments, and also endlessly long, as long as soaring guitar notes that melt into one another, as full as the dark mass of bodies around me. I feel like the air downstairs has gone to liquid, to sweat and smell and sound, and I have broken apart in it. I am wave: I am pulled into the everything. I am energy and noise and a heartbeat going *boom, boom, boom*, echoing the drums. And although Steve is next to me, and then behind me, drawing me into him, kissing my neck and exploring my stomach with his fingers, I can hardly feel him.

And for a moment--for a split second--everything else falls away, the whole pattern and order of my life, and a huge joy crests in my chest. I am no one, and I owe nothing to anybody, and my life is my own.

Then Steve is pulling me away from the band and leading me into one of the smaller rooms branching off from it. The first room, the room with the mattresses and the couch, is packed. My body still feels only distantly attached, clumsy, as though I am a puppet unused to walking on its own. I stumble against a couple kissing in the dark. The girl whips around to face me.

Angelica. My eyes go instinctively to the person she was kissing, and for a second time freezes, and then jump-cuts forward. I feel a seesawing in my stomach, like I've just watched the world flip upside down.

Another girl. Angelica is kissing another girl.

Angelica is an Unnatural.

The look on Angelica's face passes from irritation to fear to fury.

"Get the hell out of here," she practically snarls. Before I can say anything, before I can even say it's okay, she reaches out and shoves me backward. I stumble against Steve. He steadies me, leans down to whisper in my ear.

"You okay there, princess? Too many drinks?"

Obviously, he has not seen. Or maybe he has--he doesn't know Angelica; it wouldn't matter to him. It doesn't matter to me, either--it's the first time I've ever really thought about it, but the idea is there, immediate and absolute--it doesn't matter to me one tiny shred.

Chemicals gone wrong. Neurons misfiring, brain chemistry warped. That's what we were always taught. All problems that would be obliterated by the cure. But here, in this dark, hot space, the question of chemicals and neurons seems absurd and irrelevant. There is only what you want and what happens. There is only grabbing on and holding tight in the darkness.

I immediately regret what I must have looked like to Angelica: shocked, maybe even disgusted. I'm tempted to go back and find her, but Steve has already pulled me into another small room, this one empty except for the heaping pile of broken furniture, which over time has been split apart and vandalized. Before I can speak, he presses me against the wall and starts kissing me. I can feel the sweat on his chest, seeping through his T-shirt. He starts hitching up my shirt.

"Wait." I manage to wrench my mouth away from his.

He doesn't respond. He finds my mouth again and slides his hands toward my rib cage. I try to relax, but all that pops into my head is an image of the laundry lines heavy with bras and underwear.

"Wait," I say again. This time I sidestep him and manage to put space between us. The music is muffled here, and we'll be able to talk. "I need to ask you something."

"Anything you want." His eyes are still on my lips. It's distracting me. I edge

away from him even farther.

My tongue suddenly feels too big for my mouth. "Do you--do you like me?" At the last second, I can't bring myself to ask what I really want to know: *Do you love me? Is this what love feels like?*

He laughs. "Of course I like you, Hana." He reaches out to touch my face, but I pull away an inch. Then, maybe realizing the conversation won't be quick, he sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "What's this about, anyway?"

"I'm scared," I blurt. Only when I say it do I realize how true it is: Fear is strangling me, suffocating me. I don't know what's more terrifying: the fact that I will be found out, that I will be forced to go back to my normal life, or the possibility that I won't. "I want to know what's going to happen to us."

Abruptly, Steve gets very still. "What do you mean?" he asks cautiously. There has been a short gap between songs; now the music starts up again in the next room, frenzied and discordant.

"I mean how can we . . ." I swallow. "I mean, I'm going to be cured in the fall."

"Right." He's looking at me sideways, suspiciously, as though I'm speaking another language and he can identify only a few words at a time. "So am I."

"But then we won't . . ." I trail off. My throat is knotting up. "Don't you want to be with me?" I ask finally.

At that, he softens. He steps toward me again, and before I have a chance to relax, he has woven his hands in my hair. "Of course I want to be with you," he says, leaning down to whisper the words in my ear. He smells like musky aftershave and sweat.

It takes a huge effort for me to push him away. "I don't mean here," I say. "I don't mean like this."

He sighs again and steps away from me. I can tell I've started to annoy him. "What's the problem here?" he asks. His voice is hard-edged, vaguely bored. "Why can't you just relax?"

That's when it hits me. It is as though my insides have been vacuumed away and all that remains is a solid rock of certainty: He doesn't love me. He doesn't care about me at all. This has been nothing but fun for him: a forbidden game, like a child trying to steal cookies before dinner. Maybe he was hoping I'd let him shimmy me out of my underwear. Maybe he was planning to clip my bra alongside all the others, a sign of his secret triumph.

I've been fooling myself this whole time.

"Don't be upset." Steve must sense that he's made the wrong move. His voice turns soft again, lilting. He reaches for me again. "You're so pretty."

"Don't touch me." I jerk backward and accidentally knock my head against the wall. Starbursts explode in my vision.

Steve puts a hand on my shoulder. "Oh, shit, Hana. Are you okay?"

"I said, don't touch me." I push roughly past him, careening into the next room, which is now so packed with people I can barely force my way toward the stairs. I hear Steve call my name only once. After that, he either gives up or his voice is drowned in the coursing swell of sound. It is hot; everyone is slick with sweat, lost in shadow, as though they've been floundering in oil. Even when my vision clears, I feel unsteady on my feet.

I need air.

I need to get out of here. There's a roaring in my head, distinct from the throb of the music--a distant, high-pitched scream knifing me. I need to get out in two.

I stop moving. No. The scream is real. Someone is screaming. For a second I think I must have imagined it--it must have been the music, which continues screeching on--but then all at once the scream crests and becomes a huge surge, coasting over the sound of the band.

"Run! Raid! Run!"

I am frozen, paralyzed with fear. The music breaks off with a crash. Now there is nothing but screaming, and I am being pushed, shoved by the waves of people around me.

"Raid! Run!"

Out. Out. I need to get out. Someone elbows me in the back, and I barely manage to right myself. Stairs--I need to get to the stairs. I can see them from where I am standing, can see a surge of people fighting and clawing upward. Then suddenly there is a tremendous splinter of wood and a crest in the screaming. The door at the top of the stairs has been shattered; the people behind it are falling, tumbling into the people behind them, who are tumbling, tumbling down . . .

This isn't happening. It can't be.

A man is silhouetted huge in the great, gaping mouth of the shattered door. A regulator. He is holding a gun. From behind him, two giant shapes rocket forward into the crowd, and the screams swell in pitch and become the sounds of snarling and snapping.

Dogs.

As the regulators start forcing their way in, my body at last unfreezes. I turn around, away from the stairs, into the thick mass of people, all shoving and running in different directions: openmouthed, panicked. I'm hemmed in on all sides. By the time I force myself out of the main room, several regulators have made it down the stairs. I glance behind them and see them scything through the

crowd with their nightsticks.

A huge, amplified voice is booming, "This is a raid. Do not try to run. Do not try to resist."

There is a small ground-level window set high in the room with the dingy mattresses and the couch, and people are crowded around it, yelling at one another, fumbling for a latch or a way to open it. A boy springs onto the sofa and swings hard at the window with his elbow. It shatters outward. He stands on the arm of the sofa and hoists himself up and through it. Now people are fighting to get out this way. People are swinging at one another, clawing, fighting to be first.

I look over my shoulder. The regulators are drawing closer, their heads bobbing above the rest of the crowd, like grim-faced sailors pushing through a storm. I'll never make it out in time.

I struggle against the current of bodies, which is flowing strong toward the window, to the promise of escape, and hurtle into the next room. This is where I stood with Steve and asked him whether he liked me only five minutes ago, although it already seems like the dream from a different lifetime. There are no windows here, no doors or exits.

Hide. It's the only thing to do. Hide and hope that there are too many people to sniff out one by one. I pick my way quickly around the enormous pile of debris heaped against one wall, over broken-down chairs and tables and old strips of tattered upholstery.

"This way, this way!"

The regulator's voice is loud enough, close enough, to be heard over the chaos of other sounds. I stumble, catching my shin against a piece of rusted metal. The pain is sharp and makes my eyes water. I ease down into the space between the wall and the pile of junk and slowly adjust the metal sheet so that it blocks me from view.

Then there is nothing to do but wait, and listen, and pray.

Every minute is an hour and an agony. I wish, more than anything, that I could put my hands over my ears and hum, drown out the terrible soundtrack that's looping around me: the screaming, the thud of the nightsticks, the dogs snarling and barking. And the people begging, too, pleading as they are hauled away in handcuffs: *Please, you don't understand, please, let me go, it was a mistake, I didn't mean to . . .* Over and over again, a nightmare-song stuck on repeat.

Suddenly I think of Lena, lying safe somewhere in her bed, and my throat squeezes up and I know I'm going to cry. I've been so stupid. She was right about everything. This isn't a game. It wasn't worth it either--the hot, sweaty nights, letting Steve kiss me, dancing--it has all amounted to nothing.

Meaningless.

The only meaning that matters is the dogs and the regulators and the guns. That is the truth. Crouching, hiding, pain in my neck and back and shoulders. That is reality.

I squeeze my eyes shut. *I'm sorry, Lena. You were right.* I imagine her giving a fitful stir in her sleep, kicking one heel out of the blanket. The thought gives me some comfort. At least she's safe, away from here.

Hours: Time is elastic, gaping like a mouth, squeezing me down a long, narrow, dark throat. Even though the basement must be ninety degrees, I can't stop shivering. As the sounds of the raid begin to quiet, finally, I'm worried that the chattering of my teeth will give me away. I have no idea what time it is or how long I've been crouched against the wall. I can no longer feel the pain in my back and shoulders; my whole body feels weightless, outside my control.

At last it is silent. I edge cautiously out from my hiding place, hardly daring to breathe. But there is no movement anywhere. The regulators have gone, and they must have caught or chased out everyone who was here. The darkness is impermeable, a stifling blanket. I still don't want to risk the stairs, but now that I am free, and moving, the need to get *out*, to escape this house, is rising like panic inside me. A scream is pressing at my throat, and the effort of swallowing back makes my throat hurt.

I feel my way toward the room with the couch. The window high in the wall is just visible; beyond it, the sheen of dew on the grass glows slightly in the moonlight. My arms are shaking. I can barely manage to haul myself up onto the ledge, scooting forward with my face in the dirt, inhaling the smell of growth, still fighting the urge to scream, or sob.

And then, finally, I'm out. The sky glitters with hard-edged stars, vast and indifferent. The moon is high and round, lighting the trees silver.

The C"jurent. Tre are bodies lying in the grass.

I run.

five

The morning after the raids, I wake up to a message from Lena.

"Hana, you need to call me. I'm working today. You can reach me at the store."

I listen to it twice, and then a third time, trying to judge her tone. Her voice has none of its usual singsong, no teasing lilt. I can't tell whether she's angry or upset or just irritated.

I am dressed and on my way to the Stop-N-Save before realizing I've made the decision to see her. I still feel as though a great block of ice has been lodged inside me, in my very center, making me feel numb and clumsy. Somehow, miraculously, I managed to sleep when I at last made it home, but my dreams were full of screams, and dogs drooling blood.

Stupid: That is what I've been. A child, a fairy-tale chaser. Lena was right all along. I flash to Steve's face--bored, detached, waiting for me to finish my tantrum--to his silken voice, like an unwanted touch: *Don't be upset. You're so pretty.*

A line from *The Book of Shhh* comes back to me: *There is no love, only disorder.*

I've had my eyes closed all this time. Lena was right. Lena will understand--she'll have to, even if she's still angry at me.

I slow my bike as I pedal past Lena's uncle's storefront, where Lena works shifts all through the summer. I don't spot anyone but Jed, though, a huge lump of a man who can barely string a sentence together to ask you whether you'd like to buy a Big Gulp soda for a dollar. Lena always thought he must have been damaged by the cure. Maybe she's right. Or maybe he was just born that way.

I pull around to the narrow alley in back, which is crowded with Dumpsters and smells sickly sweet, like old, rotten trash. A blue door halfway down the alley marks the entrance to the storeroom in the back of the Stop-N-Save. I can't think of how many times I've come here to hang with Lena while she's supposed to be doing inventory, snacking on a stolen bag of chips and listening to a portable radio I snagged from my parents' kitchen. For a moment, I get a fierce ache underneath my ribs, and I wish I could go back--vacuum over this summer

and the underground parties and Angelica. There were so many years when I didn't think about *amor deliria nervosa* at all, or question *The Book of Shhh* or my parents.

And I was happy.

I prop my bike against a Dumpster and knock softly on the door. Almost immediately, it scrapes inward.

Lena freezes when she sees me. Her mouth falls open a little. I've been thinking about what I wanted to say to her all morning, but now--confronted by her shock--the words shrivel up. She was the one who told me to find her at the store, and now she's acting like she's never seen me before.

What comes out is, "Are you going to let me in, F"jures nor what?"

She starts, as though I've just interrupted a daydream. "Oh, sorry. Yeah, come in." I can tell she's just as nervous as I am. There's a jumpy, hopped-up energy to her movements. When I enter the storeroom, she practically slams the door behind me.

"Hot in here." I'm biding time, trying to shake loose all the words I planned on saying. *I was wrong. Forgive me. You were right about everything.* They're coiled like wires in the back of my throat, electric-hot, and I can't get them to unwind. Lena says nothing. I pace the room, not wanting to look at her, worried that I'll see the same expression I saw on Steve's face last night--impatience, or worse, detachment. "Remember when I used to come and hang out with you here? I'd bring magazines and that stupid old radio I used to have? And you'd steal--"

"Chips and soda from the cooler," she finishes. "Yeah, I remember."

Silence stretches uncomfortably between us. I continue circling the small space, looking everywhere but at her. All those coiled words are flexing and tightening their metal fingers, shredding at my throat. Unconsciously, I've brought my thumb to my mouth. I feel small sparks of pain as I begin ripping at the cuticles, and it brings back an old comfort.

"Hana?" Lena says softly. "Are you okay?"

That single stupid question breaks me. All the metal fingers relax at once, and the tears they've been holding back come surging up at once. Suddenly I am sobbing and telling her everything: about the raid, and the dogs, and the sounds of skulls cracking underneath the regulators' nightsticks. Thinking about it again makes me feel like I might puke. At a certain point, Lena puts her arms around me and starts murmuring things into my hair. I don't even know what she's saying, and I don't care. Just having her here--solid, real, on my side--makes me feel better than I have in weeks. Slowly I manage to stop crying, swallowing back the hiccups and sobs that are still running through me. I try to tell her that

I've missed her, and that I've been stupid and wrong, but my voice is muffled and thick.

Then somebody knocks on the door, very clearly, four times. I pull away from Lena quickly.

"What's that?" I say, dragging my forearm across my eyes, trying to get control of myself. Lena tries to pass it off as though she hasn't heard. Her face has gone white, her eyes wide and terrified. When the knocking starts up again, she doesn't move, just stays frozen where she is.

"I thought nobody comes in this way." I cross my arms, watching Lena narrowly. There's a suspicion needling, pricking at some corner of my mind, but I can't quite focus on it.

"They don't. I mean--sometimes--I mean, the delivery guys--"

As she stammers excuses, the door opens, and *he* pokes his head in--the boy from the day Lena and I jumped the gate at the lab complex, just after we had our evaluations. His eyes land on me and he, too, freezes.

At first I think there must be a mistake. He must have knocked on the wrong door. Lena will yell at him now, tell him to clear off. But then my mind grinds slowly into gear and I realize that no, he has just called Lena's name. This was obviously planned.

"You're late," Lena says. My heart squeezes up like a shutter, and for just a second the world goes totally dark. I have been wrong about everything and everyone.

"Come inside and shut the door," I say sharply. The room feels much smaller once he is in it. I've gotten used to boys this summer but never here, like this, in a familiar place and in daylight. It is like discovering that someone else has been using your toothbrush; I feel both dirty and disoriented. I feel myself swivel toward Lena. "Lena Ella Haloway Tiddle." I pronounce her full name, very slowly, partly because I need to reassure myself of her existence--Lena, my friend, the worried one, the one who always pleaded for safety first, who now makes secret appointments to meet with boys. "You have some explaining to do."

"Hana, you remember Alex," Lena says weakly, as though that--the fact of my remembering him--explains anything.

"Oh, I *remember* Alex," I say. "What I don't remember is why Alex is *here*."

Lena makes a few unconvincing noises of excuse. Her eyes fly to his. A message passes between them. I can *feel* it, encoded and indecipherable, like a zip of electricity, as though I've just passed too close to one of the border fences. My stomach turns. Lena and I used to be able to speak like that.

"Tell her," Alex says softly. It is as though I'm not even in the room.

When Lena turns to me, her eyes are pleading. "I didn't mean to" is how she starts. And then, after a second's pause, she spills. She tells me about seeing Alex at the party at Roaring Brook Farms (*the party I invited her to; she wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for me*), and meeting him down by Back Cove just before sunset.

"That's when--that's when he told me the truth. That he was an *Invalid*," she says, keeping her eyes locked on mine and forcing out the word, *Invalid*, in a normal volume. I unconsciously suck in a breath. So it's true; all this time, while the government denied and denied, there have been people living on the fringes of our cities, uncured and uncontrolled.

"I came to find you last night," Lena says more quietly. "When I knew there was going to be a raid . . . I snuck out. I was there when--when the regulators came. I barely made it out. Alex helped me. We hid in a shed until they were gone. . . ."

I close my eyes and reopen them. I remember wiggling into the damp earth, bumping my hip against the window. I remember standing, and seeing the dark forms of bodies lying like shadows in the grass, and the sharp geometry of a small shed, nestled in the trees.

Lena was there. It is almost unimaginable.

"I can't believe that. I can't believe you snuck out during a raid--f K ra0em">

For the first time in a long time, I actually *look* at her. I've always thought Lena was pretty, but now it occurs to me that at some point--last summer? last year?--she became beautiful. Her eyes seem to have grown even larger, and her cheekbones have sharpened. Her lips, on the other hand, look softer and fuller.

I've never felt ugly next to Lena, but suddenly I do. I feel tall and ugly and bony, like a straw-colored horse.

Lena starts to say something when there's a loud knock on the door that opens into the store, and Jed calls out, "Lena? Are you in there?"

Instinctively I shove Alex sideways so he stumbles behind the door just as it begins to open from the other side. Fortunately, Jed manages to get it open only a few inches before the door collides with a large crate of applesauce. I wonder, fleetingly, whether Lena placed it there for that purpose.

Behind me, I can *feel* Alex: He is both very alert and very still, like an animal just before bolting. The door muffles the sound of Jed's voice. Lena keeps a smile on her face when she replies to him. I can't believe this is the same Lena who used to hyperventilate when she was asked to read in front of the class.

My stomach starts twisting, knotted up with conflicting admiration and resentment. All this time, I thought we were growing apart because I was leaving Lena behind. But really it was the reverse. She was learning to lie.

She was learning to love.

I can't stand to be so close to this boy, this Invalid, who is now Lena's secret. My skin is itching.

I pop my head around the door. "Hi, Jed," I say brightly. Lena gives me a grateful look. "I just came by to give Lena something. And we started gossiping."

"We have customers," Jed says dully, keeping his eyes locked on Lena.

"I'll be out in a second," she says. When Jed withdraws again with a grunt, closing the door, Alex lets out a long breath. Jed's interruption has restored tension to the room. I can feel it crawling along my skin, like heat.

Perhaps sensing the tension, Alex kneels down and begins unpacking his backpack. "I brought some things for your leg," he says quietly. He has brought medical supplies. When Lena rolls up one leg of her jeans to her knee, she reveals an ugly wound on the back of her calf. I feel a quick, swinging sense of vertigo and a surge of nausea.

"Damn, Lena," I say, trying to keep my voice light. I don't want to freak her out. "That dog got you good."

"She'll be fine," Alex says dismissively, as though I shouldn't worry about it--as though it's none of my concern. I have the sudden urge to kick him Ke tissively in the back of his head. He is kneeling in front of Lena, dabbing antibacterial cream on her leg. I'm mesmerized by the way his fingers move confidently along her skin, as though her body is his to treat and touch and tend to. *She was mine before she was yours*: The words are there, unexpectedly, surging from my throat to my tongue. I swallow them back.

"Maybe you should go to the hospital." I direct the words to Lena, but Alex jumps in.

"And tell them what? That she got hurt during a raid on an underground party?"

I know he's right, but that doesn't stop me from feeling an irrational swell of resentment. I don't like the way he's acting as though he's the only one who knows what's good for Lena. I don't like the way she's looking at him like she agrees.

"It doesn't hurt that bad." Lena's voice is gentle, mollifying, the voice of a parent soothing a stubborn child. Once again I have the sense that I am seeing her for the first time: She is like a figure behind a scrim, all silhouette and blur, and I barely recognize her. I can't stand to look at her anymore--Lena, a stranger--so I drop to my knees and practically elbow Alex out of the way.

"You're doing it wrong," I say. "Let me."

"Yes, ma'am." He shuffles out of the way without protest, but he stays

crouched down, watching me work. I hope he won't notice that my hands are shaking.

Out of nowhere, Lena starts laughing. I'm so surprised, I almost drop the gauze right as I'm in the middle of tying it off. When I look up at Lena, she's laughing so hard, she has to double forward and put a hand over her mouth to try to muffle the sound. Alex watches her soundlessly for a minute--he's probably just as shocked as I am--and then he, too, lets out a snort of laughter. Soon they're both cracking up.

Then I start laughing too. The absurdity of the situation hits me all at once: I came here to apologize, to tell Lena she has been right to be cautious and keep safe, and instead I surprised her with a boy. No, even worse--an Invalid. After all this time and despite all her warnings, Lena is the one who has caught the *deliria*; Lena is the one with the biggest secrets--shy Lena, who has never even liked to stand up in front of the class, has been sneaking around and breaking every rule we have been taught. The laughter comes in spasms. I laugh until my stomach aches and tears are streaming down my cheeks. I laugh until I can't even tell if I'm laughing or whether I've started crying again.

What will I remember about the summer when it is over?

Twin feelings of pleasure and pain: oppressive heat, the frigid bite of the ocean, so cold it lodges in your ribs and takes your breath away; eating ice cream so fast a headache rises from the teeth to the eyeballs; endless, boring evenings with the Hargroves, stuffing myself with food better than any I have ever eaten in my life; and sitting with Lena and Alex at 37 Brooks in the Highlands, watching a beautiful sunset bleed out into the sky, knowing that we are one day closer to our cures.

Lena and Alex.

I have Lena back again, but she is changed, and it seems that every day she grows a little more different, a little more distant, as though I am watching her walk down a darkening hallway. Even when we are alone--which is rare now; Alex is almost always with us--there is a vagueness to her, as though she is floating through her life in the middle of a daydream. And when we are with Alex, I might as well not be there. They speak in a language of whispers and giggles and secrets; their words are like a fairy-tale tangle of thorns, which place a wall between us.

I am happy for her. I am.

And sometimes, just before going to sleep, when I am at my most vulnerable, I am jealous.

What else will I remember, if I remember anything at all?

The first time Fred Hargrove kisses my cheek, his lips are dry on my skin.

Racing with Lena to the buoys at Back Cove; the way she smiled when she confessed she'd done the same thing with Alex; and discovering when we got back to the beach that my soda had turned warm, syrupy, undrinkable.

Seeing Angelica, post-cure, helping her mother clip roses in their front yard; the way she smiled and waved cheerfully, her eyes unfocused, as though they were fixated on some imaginary spot above my head.

Not seeing Steve Hilt at all.

And rumors, persistent rumors: of Invalids, of resistance, of the growth of the disease, spreading its blackness among us. Every day, streets papered with more and more flyers. *Reward, reward, reward.*

Reward for information.

If you see something, say something.

A paper town, a paper world: paper rustling in the wind, whispering to me, hissing out a message of poison and jealousy.

If you know something, do something.

I'm sorry, Lena.

Lena's thrilling story continues in
pandemonium

now

Alex and I are lying together on a blanket in the backyard of 37 Brooks. The trees look larger and darker than usual. The leaves are almost black, knitted so tightly together they blot out the sky.

"It probably wasn't the best day for a picnic," Alex says, and just then I realize that yes, of course, we haven't eaten any of the food we brought. There's a basket at the foot of the blanket, filled with half-rotten fruit, swarmed by tiny black ants.

"Why not?" I say. We are lying on our backs, staring at the web of leaves above us, thick as a wall.

"Because it's snowing." Alex laughs. And again I realize he's right: It is snowing, thick flake Netlign="cents the color of ash swirling all around us. It's freezing cold, too. My breath comes in clouds, and I press against him, trying to stay warm.

"Give me your arm," I say, but Alex doesn't respond. I try to move into the space between his arm and his chest but his body is rigid, unyielding. "Alex," I say. "Come on, I'm cold."

"I'm cold," he parrots, from lips that barely move. They are blue, and cracked. He is staring at the leaves without blinking.

"Look at me," I say, but he doesn't turn his head, doesn't blink, doesn't move at all. A hysterical feeling is building inside me, a shrieking voice saying wrong, wrong, wrong, and I sit up and place my hand on Alex's chest, as cold as ice. "Alex," I say, and then, a short scream: "Alex!"

"Lena Morgan Jones!"

I snap into awareness, to a muted chorus of giggles.

Mrs. Fierstein, the twelfth-grade science teacher at Quincy Edwards High School for Girls in Brooklyn, Section 5, District 17, is glaring at me. This is the

third time I've fallen asleep in her class this week.

"Since you seem to find the Creation of the Natural Order so exhausting," she says, "might I suggest a trip to the principal's office to wake you up?"

"No!" I burst out, louder than I intended to, provoking a new round of giggles from the other girls in my class. I've been enrolled at Edwards since just after winter break--only a little more than two months--and already I've been labeled the Number-One Weirdo. People avoid me like I have a disease--like I have the disease.

If only they knew.

"This is your final warning, Miss Jones," Mrs. Fierstein says. "Do you understand?"

"It won't happen again," I say, trying to look obedient and contrite. I'm pushing aside the memory of my nightmare, pushing aside thoughts of Alex, pushing aside thoughts of Hana and my old school, push, push, push, like Raven taught me to do. The old life is dead.

Mrs. Fierstein gives me a final stare--meant to intimidate me, I guess--and turns back to the board, returning to her lecture on the divine energy of electrons.

The old Lena would have been terrified of a teacher like Mrs. Fierstein. She's old, and mean, and looks like a cross between a frog and a pit bull. She's one of those people who makes the cure seem redundant--it's impossible to imagine that she would ever be capable of loving, even without the procedure.

But the old Lena is dead too.

I buried her.

I left her beyond a fence, behind a wall of smoke and flame.

then

Some Vet8212;likeone is always sick in the Wilds. As soon as I am strong enough to move out of the sickroom and onto a mattress on the floor, Squirrel has to move in; and after Squirrel's turn, it is Grandpa's. At night, the homestead echoes with the sounds of coughing, heaving, feverish chatter: noises of disease, which run through the walls and fill us all with dread. The problem is the space and the closeness. We live on top of one another, breathe and sneeze on one another, share everything. And nothing and no one is ever really clean.

Hunger gnaws at us, makes tempers run short. After my first exploration of the homestead, I retreated underground, like an animal scabbling back into the safety of its lair. One day passes, then two. The supplies have yet to come. Each morning different people go out to check for messages; I gather that they have found some way to communicate with the sympathizers and resisters on the other side. That is all there is for me to do: listen, watch, stay quiet.

In the afternoons I sleep, and when I can't sleep, I close my eyes and imagine being back in the abandoned house at 37 Brooks with Alex lying next to me. I try to feel my way through the curtain; I imagine if I can somehow pull apart the days that have passed since the escape, can mend the tear in time, I can have him back.

But whenever I open my eyes I am still here, on a mattress on the floor, and still hungry.

After another four days, everyone is moving slowly, as though we're all underwater. The pots are impossible for me to lift. When I try to stand too quickly I get dizzy. I have to spend more time in bed, and when I'm not in bed I think that everyone is glaring at me, can feel the Invalids' resentment, hard-edged, like a wall. Maybe I'm just imagining it, but this is, after all, my fault.

The catch, too, has been poor. Roach traps a few rabbits and there is general excitement; but the meat is tough and full of gristle, and when everything is dished up there is barely enough to go around.

Then one day I am in the storeroom, sweeping--Raven insists we go through the motions, insists on keeping everything clean--when I hear shouts from aboveground, laughter and running. Feet pound down the stairs. Hunter comes

swinging into the kitchen, followed by an older woman, Miyako. I have not seen them--or anyone--so energetic in days.

"Where's Raven?" Hunter demands breathlessly.

I shrug. "I don't know."

Miyako lets out an exasperated sound, and both she and Hunter spin around, prepared to dart up the stairs again.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"We got a message from the other side," Hunter says. That's what people here call the bordered communities: the other side, when they're feeling generous; Zombieland, when they aren't. "Supplies are coming in today. We need help taking delivery."

"Can you help?" Miyako asks, sizing me up. She is broad through the shoulders, and very tall--if she had enough to eat, she would be an Amazon. As it is she is all muscle and sinew.

I [=] she shake my head. "I--I'm not strong enough."

Hunter and Miyako exchange a look.

"The others will help," Hunter says in a low voice. Then they pound up the stairs again, leaving me alone.

Later that afternoon they come back, ten of them, bearing heavy-duty garbage bags. The bags have been placed in half-full wooden crates in the Cochecho River at the border, and the crates have floated down to us. Even Raven can't maintain order, or control her excitement. Everyone rips the bags to shreds, shouting and whooping as supplies tumble onto the floor: cans of beans, tuna, chicken, soup; bags of rice, flour, lentils, and more beans; dried jerky, sacks of nuts and cereal; hard-boiled eggs, nestled in a bin of towels; Band-Aids, Vaseline, tubes of ChapStick, medical supplies; even a new pack of underwear, a bundle of clothes, bottles of soap and shampoo. Sarah hugs the jerky to her chest, and Raven puts her nose in a package of soap, inhaling. It's like a birthday party but better: ours to share, and just for that moment I feel a rush of happiness. Just for that moment, I feel as though I belong here.

Our luck has turned. A few hours later, Tack takes down a deer.

That night we have our first proper meal since I've arrived. We dish up enormous plates of brown rice, topped with meat braised and softened with crushed tomatoes and dried herbs. It's so good I could cry, and Sarah actually does cry, sitting and sobbing in front of her plate. Miyako puts her arm around her and murmurs into Sarah's hair. The gesture makes me think of my mother; a few days ago I asked Raven about her, with no luck.

What does she look like? Raven had asked, and I had to confess I didn't know. When I was younger she had long, soft auburn hair, and a full-moon face. But

after over ten years in Portland's prison, the Crypts--where she had been my whole life, while I believed her dead--I doubt she resembles the woman from my hazy childhood memories.

Her name is Annabel, I told her, but Raven was already shaking her head.

"Eat, eat," Miyako urges Sarah, and she does. We all do, ravenously: scooping up rice with our hands, lifting our plates to lick them clean. Someone from the other side has even thought to include a bottle of whiskey, wrapped carefully in a sweatshirt, and everyone cheers when that makes the rounds as well. I had alcohol only once or twice when I lived in Portland, and never understood its appeal, but I take a sip from the bottle when it makes its way to me. It burns hard going down, and I start coughing. Hunter grins and claps me on the back. Tack nearly tears the bottle out of my hands and says, curtly, "Don't drink it if you're just going to spit it up."

"You get used to it," Hunter leans in to whisper, almost an identical refrain to Sarah's remark a week ago. I'm not sure whether he's talking about the whiskey or Tack's attitude. But already there's a warm glow spreading through my stomach. When the bottle comes around again I take a slightly larger sip, and another, and the warmth spreads to my head.

Later: I'm seeing everything in pieces and fractions, like a series of photographs shuffled randomly together. Miyako and Lu in the corner, arms interlinked [s ig everyth, dancing, while everyone claps; Blue sleeping curled up on a bench, and then borne out of the room, still asleep, by Squirrel; Raven standing on one of the benches, making a speech about freedom. She is laughing, too, her dark hair a shimmering curtain, and then Tack is helping her down: brown hands around her waist, a moment of suspension when she pauses, airborne, in his arms. I think of birds and flying away. I think of Alex.

One day Raven turns to me and says abruptly, "If you want to stay, you have to work."

"I work," I say.

"You clean," she counters. "You boil the water. The rest of us haul water, look for food, scout for messages. Even Grandma hauls water--a mile and a half, with heavy buckets. And she's sixty years old."

"I--" Of course she's right, and I know it. The guilt has been with me every day, as heavy as the thickness of the air. I heard Tack say to Raven that I'm a waste of a good bed. I had to squat in the storeroom for almost half an hour afterward with my arms wrapped around my knees until I stopped shaking. Hunter's the only one of the homesteaders who's nice to me, and he's nice to everybody.

"I'm not ready. I'm not strong enough."

She watches me for a second, and lets the silence stretch uncomfortably between us so I can feel the absurdity of the words. If I'm not strong by now, that's my fault too. "We're moving soon. Relocation starts in a few weeks. We'll need all the help we can get."

"Moving?" I repeat.

"Going south." She turns away, starts retreating down the hallway. "Shutting up the homestead for the winter. And if you want to come, you're going to help."

Then she pauses. "You're welcome to stay here, of course," she says, turning around and raising an eyebrow. "Although winters are deadly. When the river freezes, we can't get any supplies. But maybe that's what you want?"

I don't say anything.

"You have until tomorrow to choose," she says.

The next morning, Raven shakes me awake from a nightmare. I sit up, gasping. I remember a fall through the air, and a mass of black birds. All the other girls are still sleeping, and the room is full of their rhythmic breathing. There must be a candle burning out in the hall, casting a tiny bit of light into the room. I can just make out Raven's shape, squatting in front of me, and register the fact that she is already dressed.

"What did you choose?" she whispers.

"I want to work," I whisper back, because it's the only thing I can say. My heart is still beating, hard, in my chest.

I can't see her smile, but I think I hear it: her lips cracking, a small exhalation that could be a laugh. "Good for you." She holds up a dented bucket. "It's water time."

Raven withdraws, and I fumble for my clothes in the dark. When I first arrived at the homestead, the sleeping room looked like a mess, an explosion of fabric and clothing and miscellaneous belongings. Over time I've realized it isn't actually so disorganized. Everyone has a little area, a space circumscribed for their things. We've drawn invisible circles around our little beds, or blankets, or mattresses, and people guard those spaces fiercely, like dogs marking out their territory. You must keep everything you own and need inside your little circle. Once it leaves, it is no longer yours. The clothes I've picked out from the store are folded at the very bottom of my blanket.

I fumble out of the room and feel my way down the hall. I find Raven by the kitchen, surrounded by empty buckets, coaxing last night's fire up with the blunt, charred end of a large stick. She hasn't turned on the lanterns here, either. It would be a waste of battery power. The smell of smoking wood, the low,

flickering shadows, Raven's shoulders touched by an orange glow: It makes me feel as though I haven't yet woken from my dream.

"Ready?" She straightens up when she hears me, loops a bucket over each arm.

I nod, and she jerks her head toward the remaining buckets.

We wind our way upstairs and then get coughed out into the outside world: The release from inside, from the air and the closeness, is just as startling and abrupt as it was the time I explored the rest of the homestead with Sarah. The first thing that strikes me is the cold. The wind is icy and drives right through my T-shirt, and I let out a gasp without meaning to.

"What's the matter?" Raven asks, speaking at a normal volume now that we're outside.

"Cold," I reply. The air smells like winter already, though I can see that the trees still have their leaves. At the very edge of the horizon, over the ragged and frayed skyline of the trees, there is a bare, golden glow where the sun is edging upward. The world is all grays and purples. The animals and birds are just beginning to stir.

"Less than a week until October," Raven says, shrugging, and then, as I trip over a piece of twisted metal siding half-embedded in the ground, she says, "Watch your step."

That's when it really hits me: I've been following the rhythm of the days, keeping mental track of the date. But really I've been pretending that while I stayed buried underground, the rest of the world stayed motionless as well.

"Let me know if I'm walking too fast," Raven says.

"Okay," I say. My voice sounds strange in the empty, thin air of this autumn world.

We pick our way down the old main street. Raven walks easily, avoiding the torn-up bits of concrete and the twisted metal litter almost instinctively, the way that Sarah did. At the entrance to the old bank vault, where the boys sleep, Bram is waiting for us. Bram has dark hair and mocha-colored skin. He's one of the quieter boys, one of the few who doesn't scare me. He and Hunter are always together; in Zombieland we would have called them Unnaturals, but here their [ut one relationship seems normal, effortless. Seeing them reminds me of pictures of Hana and me: one dark, one light. Raven passes him several buckets wordlessly, and he falls in next to us in silence. But he smiles at me, and I'm grateful for it.

Even though the air is cold, soon I'm sweating and my heart pushes painfully against my ribs. It has been more than a month since I've walked more than sixty feet at a time. My muscles are weak, and carrying even the empty buckets makes

my shoulders ache after a few minutes. I keep shifting the handles in my palms; I refuse to complain or ask Raven to help, even though she must see that I'm having trouble keeping up. I don't even want to think about how long and slow the way back will be, once the buckets are full.

We've left the homestead and the old main street behind, and veered off into the trees. All around us, the leaves are different shades of gold, orange, red, and brown. It is as though the whole forest is burning, a beautiful slow smolder. I can feel the space all around me, unbounded and unwalled, bright open air. Animals move, unseen, to our left and right, rustling through the dry leaves.

"Almost there," Raven calls back. "You're doing good, Lena."

"Thanks," I puff out. Sweat is dripping into my eyes, and I can't believe I was ever cold. I don't even bother to elbow or swat the stray branches out of my way. As Bram pushes through them ahead of me, they rebound and thwack me hard on my arms and legs, leaving tiny stinging lashes all over my skin. I'm too tired to care. I feel as though we've been walking for hours, but that's impossible. Sarah said the river was a little over a mile away. Besides, the sun has only just risen.

A little bit farther and we hear it, over the twittering of the birds and the rush of the wind in the trees: the low, babbling sound of moving water. Then the trees break apart, and the ground turns rocky, and we're standing at the edge of a wide, flat stream. Sunlight glints off the water, giving the impression of coins laid underneath its surface. Fifty feet to our left is a miniature waterfall, where the stream comes churning over a series of small, black, lichen-spotted rocks. All of a sudden I have to fight the desire to cry. This place has always existed: While cities were bombed and fell into ruins, while walls went up--the stream was here, running over the rocks, full of its own secret laughter.

We are such small, stupid things. For most of my life I thought of nature as the stupid thing: blind, animal, destructive. We, the humans, were clean and smart and in control; we had wrestled the rest of the world into submission, battered it down, pinned it to a glass slide and the pages of *The Book of Shhh*.

Raven and Bram are already wading into the stream, holding their buckets, crouching to fill them.

"Come on," Raven says shortly. "The others will be waking up."

They have both come barefoot; I crouch down to untie my shoes. My fingers are swollen from the cold, even though I can no longer feel it. Heat drums through my body. I have a hard time with the laces, and by the time I edge close to the water, Raven and Bram have their buckets full, lined up on the bank. Pieces of grass and dead insects swirl over their surface; we will pick them out later, and boil the wa [d b buter to sterilize it.

My first step into the stream nearly takes me off my feet. Even this close to the bank, the current is much stronger than it looks. I pinwheel my arms wildly, trying to stay upright, and drop one of the buckets. Bram, who is waiting on the bank, starts to laugh. His laugh is high and surprisingly sweet.

"All right." Raven gives him a push. "That's enough of a show. We'll see you at the homestead."

He touches two fingers obediently to his temple. "See you later, Lena," he says, and I realize it's the first time somebody other than Raven, Sarah, or Hunter has spoken to me in a week.

"See you," I say.

The streambed is coated in tiny pebbles, slick and hard on the underside of my feet. I retrieve the fallen bucket and crouch low, as Raven and Bram did, letting it fill. Lugging it back to the bank is harder. My arms are weak, and the metal handles dig painfully into my palms.

"One more to go," Raven says. She is watching me, arms crossed.

The next one is slightly larger than the first, and more difficult to maneuver once it's full. I have to carry it with both hands, half bent over, letting the bucket bang against my shins. I wade out of the stream and set it down with a sigh of relief. I have no idea how I'll make it back to the homestead carrying both buckets at once. It's impossible. It will take me hours.

"Ready to go?" Raven asks.

"Just give me a second," I say, resting my hands on my knees. My arms are already trembling a little. I want to stay here for as long as possible, with the sun breaking through the trees, and the stream speaking its own, old language, and the birds zipping back and forth, dark shadows. *Alex would love it here*, I think without meaning to. I've been trying so hard not to think his name, not to even breathe the idea of him.

On the far side of the bank there is a small bird with ink-blue feathers, preening at the edge of the water; and suddenly I have never wanted anything more than to strip down and swim, wash off all the layers of dirt and sweat and grime that I have not been able to scrub away at the homestead.

"Will you turn around?" I ask Raven. She rolls her eyes, looking amused, but she does.

I wiggle out of my pants and underwear, strip off my tank top and drop it on the grass. Wading back into the water is equal parts pain and pleasure--a cutting cold, a pure feeling that drives through my whole body. As I move toward the center of the stream, the stones underneath my feet get larger and flatter, and the current pushes at my legs more strongly. Even though the stream isn't very wide, just beyond the miniature waterfall there's a dark space where the streambed

bottoms out, a natural swimming hole. I stand shivering with the water rushing around my knees, and at the last second can't quite bring myself to do it. It's so cold: The water looks so dark, and black, and deep.

"I won't wait for you forever," Raven calls out, with her back to me.

"Five minutes," I call, and I spread my arms and dive forward into the deepness of the water. I am slammed--the cold is a wall, frigid and impenetrable, and tears at every nerve in my body--there's a ringing in my ears, and a rushing, rushing all around me. The breath goes out of me and I come up gasping, breaking the surface, as above me the sun rises higher and the sky deepens, becomes solid, to hold it.

And just as suddenly the cold is gone. I put my head under again, treading water, and let the stream push and pull at me. With my head underwater I can almost understand its accents, the babbling, gurgling sound. With my head underwater I hear it say the name I've tried so hard not to think--*Alex, Alex, Alex*--and hear it, too, carrying the name away. I come out of the stream shivering and laughing, and dress with my teeth chattering, my fingernails edged with blue.

"I've never heard you laugh before," Raven says, after I've pulled on my clothes. She's right. I haven't laughed since coming to the Wilds. It feels stupidly good. "Ready?"

"Ready," I say.

That first day, I have to carry one bucket at a time, lugging with both hands, sloshing water as I go, sweating and cursing. A slow shuffle; set one bucket down, go back and get the other bucket. Forward a few feet. Then pause, rest, panting.

Raven goes ahead of me. Every so often she stops, puts down her buckets, and strips willow bark from the trees, scattering it across the path so that I can find my way, even after I've lost sight of her. She comes back after half an hour, bringing a metal cup full of water, sanitized, for me to drink, and a small cotton cloth filled with almonds and dried raisins for me to eat. The sun is high and bright now, light cutting like blades between the trees.

Raven stays with me, although she never offers to help and I don't ask her to. She watches impassively, arms crossed, as I make my slow, agonizing way through the forest.

Final tally: Two hours. Three blisters on my palms, one the size of a cherry. Arms that shake so badly I can barely bring them to my face when I try to wash off the sweat. A raw, red cut in the flesh of one hand, where the metal handle of one of the buckets has worn away the skin.

At dinner, Tack gives me the biggest serving of rice and beans, and although I can barely hold my fork because of the blisters, and Squirrel accidentally charred

the rice so that it's brown and crispy on its underside, I think it is the best meal I have had since I came to the Wilds.

I'm so tired after dinner I fall asleep with my clothes on, almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, and so I forget to ask God, in my prayers, to keep me from waking up.

It's not until the following morning that I realize what day it is: September 26.

Hana was cured yesterday.

Hana is gone.

I have not cried since Alex died.

Alex is alive.

h="1em" align="justify">That becomes my mantra, the story I tell myself every day, as I emerge into the inky dawn and the mist and begin, slowly, painstakingly, to train again.

If I can run all the way to the old bank--lungs exploding, thighs shaking--then Alex will be alive.

First it's forty feet, then sixty, then two minutes straight, then four.

If I can make it to that tree, Alex will come back.

Alex is standing just beyond that hill; if I can make it to the top without stopping, he'll be there.

At first I trip and nearly twist my ankle about half a dozen times. I'm not used to the landscape of litter, can hardly see in the low, murky dawn light. But my eyes get better, or my feet learn the way, and after a few weeks my body gets used to the planes and angles of the ground, and the geometry of all those broken streets and buildings, and then I can run the whole length of the old main street without watching my feet.

Then it's farther, and faster.

Alex is alive. Just one more push, just a final sprint, and you'll see.

When Hana and I were on the track team together, we used to play little mental games like this to keep ourselves motivated. Running is a mental sport, more than anything else. You're only as good as your training, and your training is only as good as your thinking. If you make the whole eight miles without walking, you'll get 100 percent on your history boards. That's the kind of thing we used to say together. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Sometimes we'd give up, laughing, at mile seven, saying, *Oops! There goes our history score.*

That's the thing: We didn't really care. A world without love is also a world without stakes.

Alex is alive. Push, push, push. I run until my feet are swollen, until my toes

bleed and blister. Raven screams at me even as she is preparing buckets of cold water for my feet, tells me to be careful, warns me about the dangers of infection. Antibiotics are not easy to come by here.

The next morning I wrap my toes in cloth, stuff my feet into my shoes, and run again. If you can . . . just a little bit farther . . . just a little bit faster . . . you'll see, you'll see, you'll see. Alex is alive.

I'm not crazy. I know he isn't, not really. As soon as my runs are done and I'm hobbling back to the church basement, it hits me like a wall: the stupidity of it all, the pointlessness. Alex is gone, and no amount of running or pushing or bleeding will bring him back.

I know it. But here's the thing: When I'm running, there's always this split second when the pain is ripping through me and I can hardly breathe and all I see is color and blur--and in that split second, right as the pain crests and becomes too much, and there's a whiteness going through me, I see something to my left, a flicker of color (auburn hair, burning, a crown of leaves)--and I know then, too, that if I only turn my head he'll be there, laughing, watching me, holding out his arms.

I don't ever turn my head to look, of course. But one day I will. One day I will, and he'll be back, and everything will be okay.

And until then: I run.

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