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CHAPTER ONE

Rain has many uses.

Holly and beech trees like those around me need it to live and grow.

It washes away tracks, obscures footprints. Makes trails harder to follow, and that is a good thing today.

But most of all, it washes blood from my skin, my clothes. I stand, shivering, as the heavens open. Hold out my hands and arms, rub them again and again in the freezing rain, traces of scarlet long gone from my skin but I can't stop. Red still stains my mind. That will take longer to cleanse, but I remember how, now. Memories can be parcelled up, wrapped in fear and denial, and locked behind a wall. Brick walls, like Wayne built.

Is he dead? Is he dying? I shake, and not just from the cold. Did I leave him suffering? Should I go back, see if I can help him. No matter what he is, or what he has done, does he deserve to lie there alone and in pain?

But if anyone finds out what I've done, I'm finished. I'm not supposed to be able to hurt anyone. Even though Wayne attacked me, and all I did was defend myself. Slateds are unable to commit acts of violence, yet I did; Slateds are unable to remember any of their past, yet I do. The Lords would take me. Probably they'd want to dissect my brain to find out what went wrong, why my Levo failed to control my actions. Maybe they'd do it while I still lived.

No one must ever know. I should have made sure he was dead, but it is too late now. I can't risk going back. *You couldn't do it then, what makes you think you can now?* A voice that mocks, inside.

Numbness spreads through skin, into muscle, bones. So cold. I lean against a tree, knees bending, sinking to the ground. Wanting to stop. Just stop, not move. Not think or feel or hurt, ever again.

Until the Lords come.

Run!

I get up. And my feet stumble into a walk, then a jog, and finally they fly through the trees to the path, along the fields. To the road, where a white van marks the place Wayne disappeared: *Builders* painted down the side. And I panic that someone will see me coming out of the woods here by his van, the place they will eventually look when his absence is noted. But the road is empty under an angry sky, raindrops pounding so hard against the tarmac they bounce back up again as I run.

Rain. It has some other use, some other meaning, but it trickles and runs through my mind like rivulets down my body. It is gone.

The door opens before I get to it: a worried Mum pulls me inside.

She mustn't know. Just hours ago I wouldn't have been able to hide my feelings; I didn't know how to school my face, take the panic out of my eyes. Blank like a Slated should be.

'Kyla, you're soaked.' A warm hand on my cheek. Concerned eyes. 'Are your levels all right?' she says, grabs my wrist to see my Levo, and I look at it with interest. I should be low, even dangerous so. But things have changed.

6.3. It thinks I'm happy. Huh!

In the bath I get sent to have, I try again. To think. The water is steaming hot and I ease in, still num
Still shaking. As the heat begins to soothe my body, my mind is a jumbled mess.

What happened?

Everything before Wayne seems hazy, like looking through smudged glass. As if watching
different person, one who looks the same outside: Kyla, five foot nothing, green eyes, blond hair
Slated. A little different to most, maybe, a bit more aware and with some control issues, but I was
Slated: Orders wiped my mind as punishment for crimes I can no longer remember. My memories
and past should be gone forever. So what happened?

This afternoon, I went for a walk. That's it. I wanted to think about Ben. Waves of fresh pain rolled
through with his name, worse than before, so much so that I almost cry out.

Focus. Then what happened?

That lowlife, Wayne: he followed me into the woods. I force myself to think of what he did, what he
tried to do, his hands grabbing at me, and the fear and rage rise up again. Somehow he made me angry
so full of insane fury I lashed out without thought. And something inside *changed*. Shifted, feelings
realigned. His bloody body flashes in my mind, and I flinch: I did *that*? Somehow, a Slated – me – was
violent. And it wasn't just that: I could remember things, feelings and images from my past. From
before I was Slated. Impossible!

Not impossible. It happened.

Now I'm not just Kyla, the name given to me at the hospital when I was Slated, less than a year ago.
I am something – someone – else. And I'm not sure I like it.

Rat-a-tat-tat!

I half spin out of the bath, sloshing water on the floor.

'Kyla, is everything all right?'

The door. Someone – Mum – just knocked on the door. That is all. I force my fists to relax.

Calm down.

'Fine,' I manage to say.

'You'll turn into a prune if you stay in there any longer. Dinner is ready.'

Downstairs, along with Mum are my sister, Amy, and her boyfriend, Jazz. Amy: Slated and assigned
to this family like me, but different in so many ways. Always sunny, full of life and chatter, tall, her
skin a warm chocolate where I am small, quiet, a pale shadow. And Jazz is a natural, not Slated. Quiet
sensible apart from when he stares at gorgeous Amy all moonily. That Dad is away is a relief. I can do
without his careful eyes tonight, measuring, assessing, making sure no foot is put wrong.

Sunday roast.

Talk of Amy's coursework, Jazz's new camera. Amy babbles excitedly about getting asked to work
after school at the local doctor's surgery where she did work experience.

Mum glances at me. 'We'll see,' she says. And I see something else: she doesn't want me alone
after school.

'I don't need a babysitter,' I say, though unsure as I say it if it's true.

Gradually the evening fades into night and I go upstairs. Brush my teeth and stare in the mirror.
Green eyes stare back, wide and familiar, but seeing things they didn't before.

Ordinary things, but nothing is ordinary.

*Sharp pain in my ankle insists I stop running, demands it. Pursuit is faint in the distance but soon will
be closer. He won't rest.*

Hide!

I dive through trees and splash along a freezing creek to cover my steps. Then crawl on my belly deep under brambles, ignoring pulls on my hair, clothes. Sudden pain as one catches my arm.

I must not be found. Not again.

I scabble at the ground, pulling leaves, cold and rotting, from the forest floor over my arms and legs. Light sweeps through the trees above: I freeze. It drops, lower, right over my hiding place. I only start breathing again when it continues beyond without pause.

Footsteps now. They get closer, then carry on, faint and further away until they disappear from hearing.

Now, wait. I count out an hour; stiff, damp, cold. With every scurrying creature, every branch moving in the breeze, I start in fright. But the more minutes tick past, the more I start to believe. The time, I might succeed.

The sky is just brightening as I back out, inch by careful inch. Birds begin their morning songs and my spirits sing along with them as I emerge. Have I finally won at Nico's own version of hide and seek? Could I be the first?

Light blinds my eyes.

'There you are!' Nico grabs my arm, yanks me to my feet and I cry out in pain at my ankle, but doesn't hurt as much as this disappointment, hot and bitter. I failed, again.

He brushes leaves from my clothes. Slips a warm arm around my waist to help me walk back to camp, and his closeness, his presence, resonate through my body despite the fear and pain.

'You know you can never get away, don't you?' he says. He is exultant and disappointed in me, all at once. 'I will always find you.' Nico leans down and kisses my forehead. A rare gesture of affection that I know will in no way ease whatever punishment he devises.

I can never get away.

He will always find me...

CHAPTER TWO

A distant *rrrring* calls into deep nothingness. It pulls me to a moment of regret, half awake, half confusion, then a slow drift back to dreams.

The *rrrring* sounds again.

Wrongness!

Awake in an instant, I spring up, but something holds me and I almost scream, wrestle and throw myself to the ground and crouch in a fighting stance. Ready for attack. Ready for anything...

But not this. Alien, threatening shapes blur and change, become ordinary things. A bed. An alarm clock, still ringing, on top of a dresser. My restraints, blankets: most on the floor now. Carpet under bare feet. Dim light through an open window. And a grumpy, sleepy cat, meowing protests and caught up in blankets on the floor.

Get a grip.

I hit the stop button on the alarm. Force my breathing to slow – *in, out, in, out* – try to calm my pounding heart, but still my nerves scream.

Sebastian stares from the floor, fur bristling.

‘Do you still know me, cat?’ I whisper, reach a hand for him to sniff, then stroke his fur, as much to soothe myself as him. I pull the blankets back into order on the bed and he jumps up, eventually flopping down, but keeps his eyes half open. Watching.

When I woke, I thought I was *there*. Half asleep I knew every detail. Makeshift shelters, tents. Darkness and cold, wood smoke, the rustle of trees, predawn birds. Quiet voices. But the more awake I become the more it is gone. Details fall away. A dream, or a real place?

My Levo says mid-happy at 5.8, yet my heart still beats fast. After what just happened my level should have plummeted. I twist my Levo on my wrist, hard: nothing. It should at least cause pain. Slated criminals can’t do violence to self or others, not while a Levo keeps guard of every feeling. Not while it causes blackouts or death if the wearer gets too upset or angry. With what I did yesterday, I should be dead: zapped by the chip they put in my brain when I was Slated.

Echoes of last night’s nightmare fill my mind: *I can never get away. He will always find me...*

Nico! That is his name. He is not an insubstantial dream. He is real. Pale blue eyes gleam in my mind, eyes that can glint cold or hot in an instant. He’ll know what all this means. A living, breathing part of my past that has somehow appeared in this life: as my biology teacher, of all things. A strange transformation from...from...what? Slippery memory falls away. My fists clench in frustration. I had him there, clear, who and what he was; and then, nothing.

Nico will know. But should I ask? Whatever he was, or is now, one thing I do know: he is dangerous. Just thinking his name makes my stomach clench, both with fear, and with longing. To be close to him, no matter the cost.

He will always find me.

A knock on the door. ‘Kyla, are you up? You’re going to be late for school.’

‘Your chariot, ladies,’ Jazz says and bows. He puts one foot up on the side of the car to yank the door

open. I clamber into the back seat, Amy in the front. And though it has a feeling of ritual about it every morning the same, it is so *alien*. A safe sameness that rankles.

I stare out the window on the way: farms. Stubbled fields. Cows and sheep stare, chewing and placid as we go past. Herded to school, not questioning the forces that channel us into our prescribed lives. What is the difference?

‘Kyla? Earth to Kyla.’

Amy has turned in her seat.

‘Sorry. Did you say something?’

‘I was just asking if you mind if I work after school? It’s four days a week, Monday to Thursday. Mum isn’t sure you should be alone so much. She said to talk to you about it.’

‘Truly, it’s fine. I don’t mind. When do you start?’

‘Tomorrow,’ she says, with a guilty look.

‘You already told them you could, didn’t you,’ I say.

‘Busted!’ Jazz says. ‘But what about me? What about spending time with me?’ And they pretend to argue the rest of the way.

The morning is a fog. Scanning my ID into each lesson, sitting down, pretending to listen. Trying to channel my face into attentive and eager to learn, so no one will have reason to focus any closer. Scanning out again. Lunch, alone: being ignored, as usual, by most of the other students who keep clear of Slaters. Though they mostly liked Ben, me, not so much. Especially now he has vanished.

Ben, where are you? His smile, the warm certain feel of his hand in mine, the way his eyes light up from inside. It all twists like a knife in my gut, the pain so real I have to wrap my arms tight around myself to try to hold it in.

Some part of me is aware that I can’t contain this much longer. It has to come out.

Not here. Not now.

Then, finally, it is time for biology. A queasy unease grows in my stomach on the way to the lab. What if I’ve gone mental, and it isn’t Nico at all? Does he even exist?

What if it is him? Then what?

I scan my ID at the door, walk across to the back bench and sit down, all before I dare look: not trusting my feet to still work if my eyes see what they can’t stop imagining.

And there he is: Mr Hatten, biology teacher. I stare, but that is all right, all the girls do. It isn’t just that he is too young and good-looking for a teacher; there is something about him. And it’s not just those eyes, that wavy streaked blond hair, longer than you’d expect for a teacher, or that he is so tall and totally fit – it is more than that. Something about the way he holds himself: still, yet poised for attack. Like a cheetah waiting for the moment to pounce. Everything about him says *danger*.

Nico. It really *is* Nico; no question, no doubt. His eyes, unforgettable pale blue with darker rims, sweep across the room. They stop when they reach mine. As I stare back there is a warm touch inside a recognition, an almost physical shock that makes it *real*. When he finally looks away it is like being dropped from an embrace.

Not my imagination. Right now, across the room, it *is* Nico. No matter that I knew it, from memories of then and now, compared and held up close together. Until I saw him, myself, with those eyes that are new with understanding behind them, I didn’t *know* it in my guts.

Then I remember that although the girls in his classes may stare, I don’t; at least, not so much.

So through the lesson, I try not to, but it is a losing battle. His eyes flick to mine now and then. I

they hold curiosity? Questions? There is some dance of amused interest when they lightly touch mine

~~Take care. Until I can work out what he is and what he wants, don't let him know anything has~~
changed. I force my eyes down to the notebook in front of me; to the pen that skips across the page
leaving behind random blue swirls, half-formed sketches where notes should be. Hand on autopilot.

The pen; the hand...*left hand*. It is clasped, without thought, in my left hand.

But I am right-handed. Aren't I?

I must be right-handed!

Breath catches in my throat, my guts fill with terror. I start to shake.

Everything goes black.

She holds out her hand. Her right hand. Tears trickle down her face. 'Please help me...'

*She is so young, a child. With such pleading and fear in her eyes, I would do anything to help her
but I can't reach her. The closer I get, the harder I try, the more her hand isn't where it appears. With
some optical trick she is always turned to her right. It is always too far away to grasp.*

'Please help me...'

*'Give me your other hand!' I say, and she shakes her head, eyes wide. But I repeat the demand, until
finally she raises her left hand from where she held it beside her, out of sight.*

*The fingers are twisted, bloody. Broken. A sudden vision flashes in my mind: a brick. Fingers
smashed with a brick. I gasp.*

I can't grasp her hand, not when it is like that.

Her hands drop. She shakes her head, fading. Shimmering until I can see through her like mist.

I lunge for her, but it is too late.

She is gone.

'I'm all right now. I just didn't get enough sleep last night, that's all. I'm fine,' I insist. 'Can I go to
my last class?'

The school nurse doesn't smile. 'I'll be the judge of that,' she says.

She scans my Levo, frowns. My stomach clenches, afraid what it will show. My levels should have
dropped low after what happened: nightmares sometimes even made me black out when it was
functioning as it is meant to. But who knows what it is doing now?

'Looks like you just fainted; your levels have been fine. Good, even. Did you have any lunch?'

Give her a reason.

'No. I wasn't hungry,' I lie.

She shakes her head. 'Kyla, you need to eat.' She lectures on blood sugar, feeds me tea and biscuits
and, before she disappears out the door, tells me to sit quietly in her office until the final bell.

Alone, I can't stop my thoughts spinning around. The girl with the broken hand in my nightmare,
vision, or whatever it was...I know who she is. I recognise her as a younger version of myself: my
eyes, bone structure, everything. *Lucy Connor*: vanished years ago from her school in Keswick, aged
ten, as reported on MIA. Missing In Action, the highly illegal website I saw just weeks ago at Jazz
cousin's place. She was part of me before I was Slated. Yet even with my new memories, I cannot
remember being her, or anything about her life. I can't even think of her as 'I' or 'me'. She
different, other, separate.

How does Lucy fit in this mess in my brain? I kick the desk, frustrated. Things are there, half
understood. I feel I know them, but when I focus on details they slip away. Indistinct and
insubstantial.

And this was all brought on when I realised I was using my left hand. Did Nico see? If he saw I was writing with my left hand, he'll know something has changed. I'm supposed to be right-handed, and it's important, so important...but when I try to focus on *why* I am meant to be right-handed, why I was before, why I don't seem to be any more, I can't work it out. The memory goes all distorted, like fingers smashed with a brick.

CHAPTER THREE

Mum appears at the nurse's office as the final bell rings. 'Hello there.'

'Hi. Did they call you?'

'Obviously.'

'Sorry. I'm perfectly all right.'

'That must be why you passed out in the middle of a lesson and wound up here.'

'Well, I'm fine now.'

Mum tracks down Amy, and drives us both home. Once through the door I head for the stairs.

'Kyla, wait. Come talk to me for a minute.' Mum smiles, but it is one of those that is more on the lips than the whole face. 'Hot chocolate?' she asks, and I follow her into the kitchen. She doesn't chatter as she fills the kettle, makes our drinks. Mum isn't much of a talker unless she has something to say.

She has something to say. Unease twists in my stomach. Has she noticed I've changed? Maybe if I tell her, she can help, and...

Don't trust her.

After being Slated, I was a blank. It took nine months in hospital for me to learn to function: walk, talk, and cope with my Levo. Then I was assigned to this family. I grew to see her as a friend, someone I can rely on: but how long have I known her, really? Not even two months. It seemed long before because it was my whole life out of hospital, all I could remember. Now that I have a wider frame of reference, I know people should be viewed with suspicion, not trust.

She sets the drinks in front of us on the table, and I wrap my hands around the mug, soaking her into cold hands.

'What happened?' she asks.

'I guess I fainted.'

'Why? The nurse said you hadn't eaten, yet your lunchbox is mysteriously empty.'

I stay silent, sip my chocolate, focusing on the bitter sweetness. Nothing I can say about it makes much sense, even to me. Writing with my left hand made me *faint*? And that dream, or whatever it was. I shudder inside.

'Kyla, I know how hard things are for you right now. If you ever want to talk, we can, you know. About Ben, or anything. It is all right to wake me up if you can't sleep. I won't mind.'

My eyes start to fill with tears at Ben's name, and I blink furiously. If she only knew how hard things *really* are; if she only knew the other half of it. I long to tell her, but how would she look at me if she knew I may have killed someone? Anyhow, she might not mind being woken up, but Dad would.

'When is Dad getting back?' I say, suddenly aware of his continued absence. He always travels for work: installing and maintaining government computers all over the country. But he is usually home one night or two a week at least.

'Well, he may not be home so much for a while.'

'Why?' I say, careful to hide the relief I feel inside.

She stands, rinses our mugs.

‘You look like you need some sleep, Kyla. Why don’t you take a nap before dinner?’

Conversation over.

Late that night I am lost in confused dreams: running, chasing and being chased all at once. Awake for what must be the tenth time, I punch the pillow and sigh. Then my ears perk up at a slight sound, crunch, outside. Perhaps I wasn’t woken by dreams this time after all?

Crossing the room to the window, I pull the curtains to one side. The wind has picked up, whipping leaves across the garden. The trees seem bare all at once. Yesterday’s storm has littered the world orange and red spin in whorls through the air, and around a dark car out front.

The car door opens, and a woman steps out; long curly hair falls over her face. I gasp. Could it be? She pushes it back with one hand as she shuts the door, enough for me to be sure: it is Mrs Nix. Ben’s mother.

I grip the window ledge tight. Why is she here?

Excitement rushes through my body: maybe she has news of Ben! But almost as soon as the thought forms, it is gone. Her face, caught in the moonlight, is pinched and white. If she has any sort of news, it is not happy. Footsteps crunch on the shingle below, and there is a light knock on the front door.

Maybe she has come to demand to know what happened to Ben, what I did. Maybe she is going to tell Mum I was there before the Lords took him away. It flashes painfully in my mind: Ben’s agony; the rattle of the door when his mum came in. I’d told her I found him with his Levo cut off and—

The rattle of the door. She had to unlock the door to get in. I’d told her I found him like that, but she must know I lied. How else could it have been locked when she got there?

The door opens downstairs; there is a faint murmur of voices.

I have to know.

I slip quietly across the room and out to the landing, then take one careful step at a time down the dark stairs. I listen.

There is the faint whistle of the kettle, low voices; they are in the kitchen.

A step closer; another. The kitchen door is part open.

Something touches my leg, and I jump, almost cry out, until I realise it is Sebastian. He winds round my leg, purring.

Please be quiet, I beg silently, bend to scratch behind his ears. But as I do my elbow bumps the hallway table.

I hold my breath. Footsteps approach! I duck into the dark office opposite.

‘It’s just the cat,’ I hear Mum say, then there is movement, a faint ‘meow’. Footsteps retreat back to the kitchen; there is a click as she shuts the door. I creep back into the hall to listen.

‘I’m so sorry about Ben,’ Mum says. I hear chairs move. ‘But you shouldn’t have come here.’

‘Please, you must help.’

‘I don’t understand. How?’

‘We’ve tried everything to find out what happened to him. Everything. They won’t tell us a thing. I thought, maybe, you could...’ And her voice trails away.

Mum has connections. Political ones: her dad was Prime Minister before he was assassinated, on the Labour side of the Coalition. Can she help? I listen eagerly.

‘I’m so sorry. I’ve already tried, for Kyla’s sake. But it is a blank wall. There is nothing.’

‘I don’t know where else to turn.’ And there are faint noises, snuffling and hiccupping. She’s crying. Ben’s mum is crying.

'Listen to me. For your own good, you have to stop asking. At least for now.'

~~And there is no logic, no thought, no control: I can't help it. My eyes fill, my throat closes up tight~~
Mum tried to find out what happened to Ben. For me. She never told me, because she never found out anything. What a risk she took: asking questions where Lords are involved is dangerous. Potential lethal.

What a risk Ben's mum is taking, right now.

When they start saying goodbye, I sneak back up the stairs and into my room. Relief that Ben's mother never told Mum she found me with Ben that day mixes with sorrow. She feels like I do: the loss. Ben was their son for more than three years, since he was Slated. He'd told me they were close long to run to her so we can share this pain, together, but don't dare.

I wrap my arms around me, tight. *Ben*. I whisper his name, but he cannot answer. Pain hits me like being crushed. Trampled. Smashed into a million pieces. Before, I had to stop myself from feeling all, or my Levo would make me black out. Now that it's not working the hurt is so much, I gasp. Like surgery without anaesthetic: no dull ache, but the slash of a blade, deep inside.

Ben is gone. My brain is working better now, no matter the messed-up memories inside it. He is gone, and he is never coming back. Even if he lived through his Levo being cut off, there is no chance he survived the Lords. With my memories comes knowledge: once the Lords take someone, they never return.

It hurts so, I want to push it away, hide from it. But Ben's memory is one I must keep. This pain is all I have left of him.

His mum comes out of the front door moments later. She sits in her car a few minutes before leaving, hunched over the steering wheel. As she pulls out a light rain starts to fall.

Once she is gone from sight I open the window wide, lean out and stretch my arms into the night. Cold drops fall light on my skin, along with hot tears.

Rain. Something about it is important, itches in my memories, then slips away.

CHAPTER FOUR

I lean over my sketch, furiously drawing leaves, branches, remembering to use my right hand. The new art teacher the school has finally come up with doesn't look dangerous, or inspiring. He doesn't look much of anything. He isn't a patch on Gianelli, the man he replaces. But so long as I can draw anything, even just trees as instructed, I don't care how insipid the teacher.

He moves around the room, making bland comments now and then, until he stops at my shoulder. 'Hmmm...well...that's interesting,' he says, and moves on.

I look down at my sheet of paper. A whole forest of angry trees I've drawn, and in the shadow underneath, a dark shape with eyes.

What would Gianelli make of this? He'd say, slow down, and take more care, and he'd have a point. But he'd like the wildness just the same.

I start again, soothed by the scratch of charcoal on paper. The trees less angry. This time, Gianelli himself looks back at me from their shadows. No one but me would recognise it as him: I know what happens when you draw the missing, as he did. Instead, I draw him as I imagine he might have been, a young man lost in a sketch. Not the old man the Lords dragged away.

An hour later, I scan my ID in at the door to study hall, and step into the classroom. Start to walk the back...

'Kyla?'

I stop. *That* voice: here? I pause, and turn. Nico leans against the desk at the front of the room. He smiles, a slow, lazy smile. 'I hope you are feeling better today.'

'I'm fine, Sir,' I say, and manage to turn away, to walk to my seat without falling over.

His presence as bored teacher in charge of making sure we study silently shouldn't be that much of a surprise. They change all the time, so it was bound to be Nico sooner or later. Yet I wasn't expecting to be faced with him again, so soon. I have to hold my hands together on my lap for a moment to stop them from shaking.

I open algebra homework: something I can pretend to do without much effort. And I try to stare at the page, pencil carefully in my right hand. Nico has a red pen and papers to mark in front of him at the desk up front. Yet I can tell he is pretending as much as I am, glancing my way all the time.

Of course, I wouldn't know that if I wasn't watching *him*. I sigh, and attempt to solve an equation for x .

But the numbers swim, won't behave, and my mind wanders as the minutes tick away. I doodle around the borders of the page, then draw vines and leaves around the date I've written as usual at the top. But then the numbers jump into stark focus: 03/11. *It is the 3rd of November.*

Almost with an audible *click* inside, a chunk of knowledge falls into place.

Today is my birthday. I was born seventeen years ago today, but I'm the only one who knows.

Goose bumps trail on my arms. I know the date of my *real* birthday, not the one assigned at hospital when my identity was changed, my past stolen.

My birthday? I probe at the concept, but there is nothing else. No cake, no parties or presents; the

fact of the date is all there is. Memories that should go with it do not. Yet I sense there is more inside me, more I might find and learn, if I probe around.

Some of my recovered memories are like cold facts. As if I've read a file about myself, and remember certain bits of it and not others. There is no feeling in it.

I know from the missing children website that I was Lucy, that I disappeared when I was ten, but can't remember anything of that life. Then somehow I reappear in my teens with Nico. It is only from then on that memories are stealing back; there is nothing from before.

Nico is the one who might have answers. All I have to do is tell him I remember who he is. But do I really want to know?

When the bell goes, even though I tell myself to bolt out quick and leave this choice, whether to speak to him or not, until I can make sense of it, I dawdle. A shiver, of what – excitement? Fear? tracks down my spine. I walk slowly to the front of the room, where Nico stands by the door. The laughter of the other students have gone. We are alone.

Just go, I tell myself, and start walking past him.

'Happy birthday, Rain,' he says, voice low.

I turn back. Our eyes meet.

'Rain?' I whisper. Touching and tasting the name, owning it again. *Rain*. Another time and place rush back, vivid and clear: I chose this name for myself three years ago, on my fourteenth birthday. I remember! It is *my* name. Not Lucy, the name given at birth by parents. Not Kyla, the one chosen three years later by an indifferent nurse filling in a form at hospital after I was Slated. Rain is *mine*. And now it is as if the sound of my name said out loud, at last, explodes any final resistance or barrier inside.

His eyes widen and flash. He knows me, and more. He knows I know *him*.

Danger.

Adrenalin surges through my body, a burst of energy: fight, or flight.

But the look falls from his face as if it never was, and he steps back. 'Try to remember your biology homework for tomorrow, Kyla,' he says, his eyes glancing over my shoulder.

I turn and there is Mrs Ali. Hate flashes through me, and then fear: but it is Kyla's fear. I'm not afraid of her. Rain isn't afraid of anything!

'Try to remember,' Nico says again, this time leaving off the meaningless homework reference added for Mrs Ali's ears. He disappears up the hall.

Try to remember...

'We need to have a little chat,' Mrs Ali says, and smiles. She is at her most dangerous when she smiles.

Two can be so. I smile back. 'Of course,' I say, and try to still all that sings inside. My name! I am *Rain*.

'I won't be taking you between your classes any more; you obviously know your way around the school now,' she says.

'Well, thanks so much for your help so far,' I say, as sweetly as I can manage.

Her eyes narrow. 'I've heard you've been moping about classes, looking a misery and not paying attention. Yet you seem happy enough today.'

'Sorry about that. I'm feeling much better.'

'Now, Kyla, you know if anything is ever bothering you, you can talk to me.' She smiles again, and a shiver goes down my back.

Be careful. Her official job title may be teaching assistant, but she is so much more than that. She has been watching me for any sign, any deviation. Anything outside rigid, expected Slated behaviour – and

hint of returning to my criminal ways – and I could be returned to the Lords. Terminated.

‘Everything is fine. Really.’

‘Well, see that it stays that way. You must try your best in school, at home, and in your community to—’

‘Fulfil my contract. Take advantage of my second chance. Yes, I know! But thank you for reminding me. I’ll do my very best.’ I grin, happy enough with the world to even share my smile with a Lord spy. That Mrs Ali won’t be my shadow at school any more is an unexpected bonus.

Her features war between confusion and annoyance. Too much?

‘See that you do,’ she says, ice dripping from her voice, the smile gone. She obviously likes it better when I quake in her presence.

Shame that *Rain* doesn’t quake.

Red, gold, orange: the oak tree in our front garden has covered the grass with colour, and I fetch a rake from the shed.

I have a name.

I attack the leaves with the rake, pulling them into piles, then kick them about and start over.

I have a name! One that *I* chose; it is who *I* wanted to be. The Lords tried to take that away, but somehow, they failed.

A car pulls in over the road: one I haven’t seen before. A boy, about my age or a little older, gets out. Baggy jeans and T-shirt rumpled like he’s been driving for hours, or asleep – hopefully not both at the same time – yet the whole ‘I don’t care what I wear’ look suits him. He opens the boot. Takes out a box and carries it into a house. Comes out again, sees me watching and waves. I wave back. Ky wouldn’t; she’d probably blush or something. Rain has nerve. He takes in another box.

On the other side of the car he drops down as if going down a pretend escalator, and looks back to see if I’m watching. I roll my eyes to the sky. He carries on with various other tricks; I bag and carry the leaves round the back of the house, and go inside.

‘Thanks for doing the leaves,’ Mum says. ‘They were a mess.’

‘No bother. I felt like doing something.’

‘Keeping busy?’

I nod, then remind myself to tone down a little, before too many mood swings get her to take me to hospital for a check. That thought gives me a real sense of disquiet, and the smile falls away.

Mum puts a hand on my shoulder, gives it a squeeze. ‘We’ll have dinner as soon as—’

The door opens. ‘I’m home!’ Amy yells.

Before long we’re at the table listening to an in-depth report of her first day as after-school assistant at the doctor’s surgery.

And it turns out that working there is an amazing source of community gossip. Soon we know who is having a baby, who fell down the stairs after too much whisky, and that the new boy over the road – Cameron from up north, come to stay with his aunt and uncle for reasons as yet unknown.

‘I love working there. I can’t wait until I’m a nurse,’ Amy says for about the tenth time.

‘Did you see any good illnesses?’ Mum teases.

‘Or injuries?’ I add.

‘Oh! That reminds me. You’ll never guess.’

‘What?’ I say.

‘It happened this morning, so I didn’t see, but I heard ALL about it.’

‘Go on and tell us, then,’ Mum says.

‘A man was brought in with the most horrible injuries.’

‘Oh dear,’ Mum says. ‘What happened?’

And I start to get a bad feeling. A twist of unease deep inside my gut sort of very bad feeling.

‘Nobody knows. He was found in woods at the end of the village, beaten half to death. Head injury

and hypothermia, out there for days they think. It is a wonder he is alive at all.’

‘Did he say who did it?’ I ask, struggling to control my breathing, to look natural.

‘No, and he may never say anything. He’s been taken to hospital in a coma.’

‘Who is he?’ Mum asks, but I already know before Amy says another word.

‘Wayne Best. You know, the creepy builder who did the brick walls for the allotments.’

Mum tells us to stay out of the woods, away from the footpaths. She is worried about some maniac being on the loose.

But I am the maniac.

‘Can I be excused?’ I say, suddenly feeling ill.

Mum turns to me. ‘You’ve gone all pale.’ She puts a warm hand on my forehead. ‘You feel clammy.’

‘I’m a little tired.’

‘Go on: early to bed. We can wash up.’

Amy groans, and I head for the stairs.

I stare at the wall in the dark, Sebastian a welcome band of warmth stretched along my back.

I did that. Put a man in a coma. Or Rain did: she came back at the same time. Or what? Are we the same person, or two in one? Sometimes I feel I am her, as if her memories and who she was take over. Sometimes, like now, she slips away, as if she never was. But who was Rain, really? And somehow Lucy fits in with Rain’s past, but how?

The same birthday ties us all together: 3rd of November. I hug the knowledge, the secret, inside. However these bits of me fit together now, that is the day I started in this world.

My mind drifts, sleep on the way. But then the dates shift into sharp focus, and my eyes snap open.

Seventeen today. I got out of hospital in September: I’d been there for nine months. Slated, the day was less than eleven months ago. I was already sixteen. It is illegal to Slate anyone over the age of sixteen. Orders may break their own laws now and then if they have a reason, true enough. But why would they in my case?

There are still all these disconnections inside. I feel I almost understand it all, but if I look too closely, it vanishes. Like something I can only see sideways, out of the corner of my eye.

Nico might be able to explain, if he wants to; my past as Rain at least. But what would he want in return?

Perhaps Rain and all she was are best forgotten. I can take now, and tomorrow, and all the days after, make of them what I will. Stay out of trouble and leave Nico behind. Avoid him, pretend it never happened.

Either way, Wayne could spoil it all.

You should have killed him.

Hush.

CHAPTER FIVE

Next day in biology, there is a surprise: new boy, Cameron, appears at the door.

He spots me and goes straight for the empty stool to the left of mine. Smiles a silly grin as he sits down.

Ben's seat. I fold my arms in on myself, blink hard, don't look at him. The empty space next to me hurts, but having someone sit there feels worse.

Nico turns around to the whiteboard. Every girl has her eyes on him: on the way his trousers hug his backside, the outline of his back and shoulders, movement of muscles under a silky shirt as he raises his arm to write.

He turns back and faces the room, standing next to the board. 'What does this mean?' he asks, gesturing to the words he has written: 'Survival of the Fittest'.

'Only the strongest survive,' one student offers.

'That can be part of it. But you don't have to be the strongest to win, or the dinosaurs would have eaten all our ancestors for lunch.' He scans across the room until his eyes fall on me. 'To survive, you just have to be...the best.' His eyes hold mine as he says the words, slowly, drawing them out.

Finally he looks away. Starts going on about evolution and Darwin, and I try to take notes, pretend I am somewhere else. Or better, someone else. Just get through this lesson, and get out of here, and—

Something lands on my notebook. A square of paper? I unfold it.

With these words written on it: *And so, we meet again!*

I glance at Cameron. He winks.

I stifle a grin. *We haven't met yet*, I write underneath. Then, pretending to stretch, drop it on his book.

It flies back again moments later. I glance at Nico. No reaction. Still going on about dinosaurs. I unfold it.

Yes, we have: you are She Who Jumps on Leaves. I am He Who Hefts Heavy Boxes from Boot. Also known as Cam.

So it is Cam, not Cameron, as Amy found in community gossip. And he is every bit as mad as he appeared yesterday.

I chew my pencil for a while. Ignore, or...

A pen pokes my arm. Mad, and impatient. Yet I know what it is like to be the new one, to know nobody.

All right. I write on the square: *Leaf Lady, also known as Kyla.*

I fold it up, flick it back across.

'Congratulations!' a voice says to my right. It is Nico: standing next to our bench and looking straight at me. Along with every pair of eyes in the room.

'Ah...'

'You are the lucky winner of a lunchtime detention. Now try to pay attention for the rest of the class.'

Heat creeps up my face, but not from the embarrassment of a room full of eyes. Nico's say, *gotcha*. The cheetah has pounced. And there isn't a thing I can do about it.

Cam, to his credit, protests that it was his fault, but Nico ignores him. The class continues, and we stare at the clock as the minutes count down, hoping somebody else will get nabbed for some other misdemeanour, that we won't be alone. But there's no chance of that. Not with Nico in charge.

The bell goes and everyone starts packing up. Cam stands with a stricken look on his face. 'Sorry' he mouths, and follows the last students. The door swings shut behind them.

Alone.

Nico stares, face unreadable. Seconds stretch to more seconds, and inside I am...what: scared? But it feels more like something else. Like the fear that comes from something that is both terrifying, and a thrill: ridge walking in a storm, or abseiling down a cliff.

He flicks his head in a gesture that says *follow me*. We leave the lab, and go down the hall to a row of offices.

He looks both ways, takes a key out of his pocket, and unlocks one of the office doors.

'Come,' he says. No smile, nothing. Cold.

I follow him in, feet dragging; no choice, but dread is pooling inside. He locks the door, then in a sudden movement grabs my arm and twists it tight behind my back, pushing my face into the wall.

'Who are you?' he says, voice low. 'Who are you!' Again, louder this time, but controlled. No one would hear.

He pulls my arm tighter. As if the pain in my shoulder is a trigger, *I remember*. And I'm somewhere else. Some other time, place. Where Nico's sudden tests like this could bruise the unwary. But I know how to escape this one! With a flash of joy at memory, I jump up to loosen the arm grip, twist and plant a fist into the hard muscles of his stomach.

He lets go and starts to laugh, rubbing at his stomach. 'I had to be sure. I'm sorry. Is your arm all right?'

A smile takes over my face. I shrug my shoulder around in a circle. 'Fine. But if you'd really wanted to hold me you would have pulled my arm up higher. That was a test.'

'Yes. That manoeuvre was pure Rain.' And he laughs again, delight shining in his eyes. 'Rain!' he says again, holding out his arms, and I move closer until they are around me, warm and tight. And I feel a sense of coming back to a place I am meant to be, where I was always meant to be. Where I know who and what I am, because Nico does.

Then he holds me out at arm's length, studies my face, assessing.

'Nico?' I say, uncertain.

He smiles. 'You remember me. Good! I always knew you'd survive, my special Rain.' He sits me down on a chair, him perched on the desk above. Takes my hand and looks at my Levo. 'It worked, didn't it. This thing is just a thing.' And he spins it on my wrist: no pain, no nothing. Levels in my mind, happy.

I half smile, then it falls away. 'It worked? Nico, please. Explain to me. I remember pieces of things, but it is all such a mess. I don't understand what has happened to me.'

'Always serious. We should be laughing! Celebrating.' And because his smile is so infectious, so alive, mine follows. 'You have to tell me: what finally released your memories?'

And I shrink away from thinking of it. If he knows about Wayne, he'll deal with him, like any other threat to one of his own. *His own*. I hug the belonging inside.

'You were close a few times before, I could see it. I thought that whole thing with Ben would have done it.'

Ben. His name brings a twist of agony. The hurt must be on my face.

~~'Lose the pain: it makes you weak. Do you remember how, Rain? You march it to the door in your mind, and lock it up.'~~

I shake my head. I don't want to forget Ben. Do I? And some glimmer of my thoughts last night comes back to me: Nico and his ways are dangerous.

I say out loud the thing that was there all along, hidden in plain sight in my mind, yet unrecognised. 'You're with the AGT, the Anti Government Terrorists. Aren't you?'

He raises an eyebrow. 'You have been forgetting!' He takes my hands in his. 'Don't use the Lords name for us that way, Rain: we are Free UK. The teeth that Freedom UK was supposed to have in the Central Coalition, but never did. We are the splinter that hurts: I am, and so are you. The Lords feed us. They'll be on their way out, soon, and this great country will be free again. *We will win!*'

A chant from the past echoes in my mind: *Free UK today! Free UK today!*

And I remember Nico filling in what history lessons left out. After the UK pulled out of the EU and closed borders, and all the student riots and destruction of the 2020s, the Lords dealt harshly with rioters, gangs and terrorists the same way, no matter their age: imprisonment, or death. But then things settled down, they were forced to accept compromise with Freedom UK in the Central Coalition, and harsh penalties were banned for under-16s. Slating was brought in to give them a second chance, a new life. But Freedom UK became a puppet of the Lords, who abused their power more and more. Free UK rose up in response, wanting rid of Lord oppression by whatever means.

Whatever means.

The teeth *are* the terror. I shake my head, part of me rejecting what I know to be true. 'I'm not a terrorist. Am I?'

He shakes his head. 'None of us are. But you were with us in our fight for freedom, and you would be now, if Lords hadn't snatched you and Slated you, stole your mind away. Or so they thought.'

'Yet, here I am. And I know you. I remember some things. But I—'

'This is too much at once, isn't it? Listen to me, Rain. There is nothing you have to do if you don't want to. We're not like the Lords. We don't *make* anybody do anything.'

'Really?'

'Really. I'm just so happy you're all right. You're you, again.' And he smiles, and I'm back in for another hug.

More memory traces surface. Nico isn't known for his hugs, or smiles. They are so rare they are like a gift when you have shone enough in his eyes to get that much approval. We'd fight for his approval. We'd kill for it. All of us. We'd do anything to get half a smile.

'Listen. There is just one thing. I need to talk to you some more. I need to know how things have worked with you, so we know how we can help others survive Slating. You want that, don't you?'

'Of course.'

'I've got something for you,' he says, and reaches into a desk drawer. The back is false, and hidden behind is a small metal device, thin and flexible. He shows me. 'Look. It's a communicator: a com. See, you press this button here, and wait for me to answer. Then we can speak. You can call if you need me.'

Just as I'm wondering where I'm going to hide this highly illegal piece of kit, he shows me. It slips underneath my Levo, and clasps to it. The thin controls are not visible; they are barely there by feel.

'It is undetectable here. Even if you go through a metal scan, they'll just see it as picking up your Levo.'

I twist my Levo; I can't even tell it is there.

'Now, off you go. Have your lunch. We'll talk again when you are ready.' He touches my face. 'I'm just so happy you're with us,' he says. His hand, warm on my cheek, sparks electricity through my body.

He unlocks the door. 'Go,' he says. And I walk as if in a daze into the hall. After a few steps, I look back; he smiles, then shuts the door. Gone.

The further I am from Nico, the more the warmth and joy seep away, leaving cold and loneliness.

More bits and fragments are coming back. That training in my dream? *It was real*. Training with Nico: with Free UK. Hiding in the woods with others like me. Learning to fight. Weapons. Whatever we could do to strike at Lords, we learned. For freedom! And every one of the girls was in love with Nico; all the boys wanted to be him.

All it took was minutes alone with him today for me to feel the same as I did back then. Seeing myself through Nico's eyes made me sure who I am: it made me become the Rain that he knew. Part of me wants Nico to take over; to tell me what to think, what to do. So I don't have to try to work anything out for myself.

The further away I get from him, the more it terrifies me.

CHAPTER SIX

‘Kyla? You have a visitor,’ Mum calls up the stairs.

A visitor? I walk down, and there is Cam: a sheepish look on his face, and a plate clutched in his hands. His sandy hair is almost neat, he wears a collared shirt, and there is a distinct air of aftershave about the place.

‘Hi,’ he says.

‘Ah, hi.’

‘I just wanted to apologise,’ he says, and holds out the plate. Chocolate cake? And I’m thinking *don’t say anything* at him, really hard, but it doesn’t work. ‘That detention you got was totally my fault.’

‘Detention?’ Mum says.

I give Cam a glare.

‘Oh, sorry! You didn’t want her to know, did you.’

Thanks for spelling out the obvious. I sigh.

‘Kyla?’ Mum says.

‘Yes, I got a lunchtime detention today, and yes, it was Cam’s fault. Happy?’

Mum laughs. ‘I can see you will have no secrets with Cam about the neighbourhood.’

‘I’m really sorry,’ he says again, looking even more miserable.

‘It’s fine. Really. Thanks for the cake,’ I say, and take the plate, hoping he’ll do the same with the hint, and leave.

‘Come in,’ Mum says. ‘I think we need some tea with that.’

No such luck.

The word ‘cake’ tempts Amy away from the TV to join us. Luscious-looking dark chocolate cake, with butter icing.

‘This is really good,’ I say, starting to thaw once I begin to tackle a piece. And it is: gooey with delicious bitter dark chocolate and just enough sweet to balance. ‘Did you make it?’

‘Believe me, if I made it, you wouldn’t want to eat it. My uncle did.’

‘Why have you come to stay with them? Will you be here for long?’ Amy asks.

‘Amy!’ Mum says.

Cam laughs. Dimples appear when he smiles – one in each cheek. ‘It’s fine. I’m not sure how long my mum is off on a research platform in the North Sea. Depends how long it takes them to discover something important, I guess.’

‘What about your dad?’ Amy asks.

‘He split last year,’ Cam says, with no elaboration, and a look on his face that suggests Amy has ventured into no-go territory. Mum quickly changes the subject, asking after his aunt and uncle.

Eventually they leave the kitchen when Cam asks me what we’ve done so far in biology. Like I’ve been paying attention. But I go get my notes.

‘I’m sorry. I won’t be much help.’ I give him my notebook and Cam flicks through, but so

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